

TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED THEORY OF ACTOR
TRAINING: *CONJUNCTIO OPPOSITORUM* AND
THE IMPORTANCE OF DUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

by

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Signed: Rufus Swart

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Dedicated to the memory of my father

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and to my mother,
as always.

Abstract

The proliferation of Western actor training methods in the past century had mainly been derived from the groundbreaking research undertaken by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Constantin Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre, as well as their students Michael Chekhov, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Evgeny Vakhtangov. Poor translations of their original Russian texts have however meant that many of the principles they discovered were compromised due to misinterpretations. Yet, the ‘system’ of Stanislavski, a veritable repository of these theories, served as a template for acting teachers ranging from former American Group Theatre members such as Stella Adler, Morris Carnovsky, Robert Lewis, Sanford Meisner and Lee Strasberg, and the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, to formulate their own distinctive techniques. The result has been a challenge to traditional notions of actors as impersonators to a more holistic view of actor-performers; versatile, multi-skilled artists willing to reveal themselves through sincere disclosures to an audience, as the theatre poet Antonin Artaud advocated they should. Although this interrogation of the essential nature of the 2,600 year old art of Thespis was necessary, there is a danger that its core tenets may have been marginalised in the process, a setback which might further delay the formulation of its own science. This research was undertaken to identify the core principles of the actor’s art that distinguish it from the other performing arts, as well as to determine how these might best be conveyed to student actors in a contemporary context.

Employing the ‘system’ as a guide, in particular its ‘work on oneself’ process, which refers to an actor’s personal training, as opposed to ‘work on a role’, which relates to characterisation and performance, the theories of the abovementioned practitioners were examined and compared to Stanislavski’s to ascertain if they contributed to the further evolution of the art. Once an integrated theory of training emerged it was then tested in praxis, working with different groups of students during a three year period. This thesis documents the findings of both the literary research, based on an analysis of texts related to actor training, and those derived from ‘real-world’ applications of these theories in an Higher Education environment. A key aim of the study was thus to determine whether a ‘work on oneself’ form of training could be offered in the formal education sector, despite its psychological implications, and how this might be approached in a ‘healthy’ manner. A selection of audio-video recordings done during the empirical investigation accompanies the thesis in order to substantiate its theory.

Abstrak

Die verspreiding van opleidingsmetodes vir Westerse akteurs in die afgelope eeu het hoofsaaklik ontstaan uit die baanbrekers-navorsing van Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko en Constantin Stanislavski aan die Moskou Kunsteater, sowel as dié van hul studente Michael Tsjechov, Vsevolod Meyerhold en Evgeny Vakhtangov. Swak vertalings van die oorspronklike Russiese tekste beteken egter dat van die beginsels wat hulle ontdek het weens misverstande gekompromiteer is. Tog het die 'stelsel' van Stanislavski, as neerslag van hierdie teorieë, as 'n templaar vir toneelspelopleiders gedien wat wissel van voormalige lede van die Amerikaanse Groep Teater soos Stella Adler, Morris Carnovsky, Robert Lewis, Sanford Meisner en Lee Strasberg, sowel as die Poolse regisseur Jerzy Grotowski, om hul eie kenmerkende tegnieke te formuleer. Die gevolg was 'n uitdaging van tradisionele sienswyses van akteurs as nabootsers tot 'n meer holistiese sienswyse van akteurs as veelsydige, multi-bekwame kunstenaars wat gewillig is om hulself opreg te onthul voor 'n gehoor, soos die teater-digter Antonin Artaud voorgestel het hul moet. Alhoewel hierdie bevraagtekening van die essensiele aard van die 2,600 jaar oue kuns van Thespis nodig was, is daar 'n gevaar dat sy kern-beginsels in die proses gemarginaliseer is, 'n terugslag wat die formulering van die kunsvorm se eie wetenskap verder mag vertraag. Hierdie navorsing is onderneem om hierdie kernbeginsels van die akteur se kuns te identifiseer wat dit van die ander uitvoerende kunste onderskei, asook om te bepaal hoe hulle die beste oorgedra kan word aan student-akteurs in 'n kontemporêre konteks.

Deur die 'stelsel' as 'n gids aan te wend, in besonder die 'werk aan jouself' proses wat verwys na 'n akteur se persoonlike opleiding in teenstelling met 'werk aan 'n rol' wat verwys na karakterisering en *performance*, is die teorieë van die bogenoemde praktisyns ondersoek en vergelyk met Stanislavski s'n om te bepaal of hul bygedra het tot die kunsvorm se verdere ontwikkeling. Toe 'n geïntegreerde teorie van opleiding te voorskyn gekom het, is dit prakties getoets met verskeie groepe studente oor 'n tydperk van drie jaar. Hierdie tesis dokumenteer die bevindinge van beide die literêre navorsing, gebaseer op 'n ontleding van tekste wat verband hou met akteuropleiding, en die bevindinge wat uit die toepassing van die teorieë in 'n Hoër Onderwys omgewing gegroei het. 'n Belangrike doel van die studie was dus om te bepaal of 'werk aan jouself' as opleiding in die formele onderwys sektor aangebied kan word, ten spyte van die sielkundige implikasies, en hoe dit dalk op 'n 'gesonde' wyse benader kan word. 'n Seleksie van klank-en-video opnames wat tydens die empiriese ondersoek gedoen is, word dus by die tesis ingesluit om sekere teorieë te ondersteun.

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Chapter One Introduction

It is utterly obvious that the actor is at the center of his or her character. The playwright may provide the words, the director the staging and the costume designer the apparel, but it is the actor who implements the role with her voice, body, phrasings, timings, inflections, modulations, movements, expressions, emotions, authority, appeal and charisma [...]. Getting the „best of oneself“ onto the stage ... is therefore the actor’s fundamental job. (Cohen 2013: 17)

1.1 Background to the study

In many respects this investigation is a continuation of an enquiry that began in 2003 at an Australian university where I conducted extracurricular workshops with twenty first year drama students over a five month period. Since the early 1980s I had worked as an actor, director and occasional writer in film, radio, television and theatre, but in the late 1990s I began giving workshops to members of a young ensemble I formed in England and found the experience fulfilling. The Australian study was thus to determine whether I could teach in a more formal environment, and I employed an Action Research strategy to improve my classroom manner on a weekly basis, given the model’s cyclic nature. To assist my transformation from practitioner to teacher-trainer I had a cameraperson video the workshops, and conducted regular interviews with individual participants. They also kept personal journals which they submitted to me at the end of the training, just as I too engaged in extensive reflexive writings throughout. At the study’s conclusion I realised that my grasp of an actor’s creative processes mainly stemmed from personal experience, a subjective perspective that limited my pedagogic outlook. I therefore felt compelled to examine the methods and techniques of other teacher-trainers in order to develop a more objective viewpoint so that I might better position my own thinking about the actor’s art.

In 2005 I conducted a similar study with first year drama students at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England (UKC), again employing an Action Research strategy and associated methods. The aim of this particular investigation, besides continuing to refine

my pedagogic approach, was to ascertain if the Meisner technique,¹ which I had studied in Los Angeles in the late 1980s, would be a suitable training vehicle for student actors in Higher Education (HE). My findings formed the basis of an MA Practice as Research thesis entitled: *Basal Training for Adolescent Actors: Grotowski, Meisner, Stanislavsky and the state of „I am“* (2008). Although my knowledge increased, and I was therefore able to convey more universal acting principles without resorting to personal examples, I realised I had merely touched the surface of a deep reservoir comprised of the theories of various practitioners. This posed a problem. Either I had to favour a particular „school“ of training, or else make sense of these theories for myself if I hoped to provide my students with a holistic technique. The latter option held more appeal, which meant I had to try to integrate these theories as a basis for my praxis; the motive prompting this investigation.

During the UKC research, which also entailed extracurricular workshops and devising a production entitled *Scenes in Corridor 666*, I realised that the Meisner approach, which emphasised instinctive behaviour, no longer satisfied my emerging ideas. After watching films of the Actions created at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards in Pontedera, Italy,² it became clear that structure was equally necessary in performance, and that both aspects had to be integrated during training. This concept, which Grotowski termed “*conjunctio oppositorum* – the contradiction between spontaneity and discipline” (Kumiega 1987: 134), became a central question in my investigation; namely how “the whole problem of spontaneity and discipline, this **conjunction of opposites** which gives birth to the total act” (Grotowski 1991: 93, his emphasis), might be resolved.

I was not convinced that Grotowski had solved the conundrum in his own work however, which I found too insular; a form of active meditation akin to martial arts *katas* in which structure dominated the individual’s expression. In addition, he dismissed the actor’s art, instead calling himself (*in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 376*) “a *teacher of Performer*,”

¹ A contemporary of Stella Adler (1901-1992), Robert Lewis (1909-1997) and Lee Strasberg (1901-1982), Sanford Meisner (1905-1997) was one of the foremost American actor teacher-trainers of the 20th century.

² Grotowski (1933-1999) is widely considered one of the most significant theatre practitioners of the latter half of the 20th century, especially insofar as his research into training for performers is concerned. In his final years he named Richards his “essential collaborator” (*in Richards 2003: ix*), effectively his successor. The Workcenter engaged in an outreach programme called „Tracing Roads Across“ between April 2003 and April 2006, visiting UKC in 2005. During a three day seminar I met Richards, Mario Biagini and Lisa Wolford. They screened films of the opuses created under Grotowski’s guidance, namely *Main Action*, *Downstairs Action*, filmed by Mercedes Gregory in 1989, *Action*, filmed in 2000 by A.C.C.A.A.N. (Atelier Cinéma de Normandie and Centre Dramatique National de Normandie), and a documentary entitled *The Twin: an action in creation*. „Action“ means “a precise performative structure, an opus” (Richards 2008: 3).

which he defined as “a man of action ... a doer, a priest, a warrior ... not somebody who plays another.” In my view acting equated with impersonation, which meant I had to find or try to develop a training vehicle that would assist a psychophysical transformation of the self into an other. Everything therefore pointed towards a two-tier investigation. First I had to examine the dominant Western acting theories, and then I had to experiment with the methods and techniques of key practitioners to determine if they were transposable to my own pedagogic circumstances. In this manner I hoped to formulate an approach that would not only suit my own situation, but could be adopted by others, elsewhere, as well.

To provide a conceptual framework for the research I elected to begin by first thoroughly analysing Stanislavski’s „system”³ as it provided most twentieth century Western teacher-trainers with an ideological basis to conduct their own explorations. To gain a balanced perspective I decided to examine the influences of Nemirovich-Danchenko,⁴ Meyerhold,⁵ Vakhtangov,⁶ and M. Chekhov⁷ on his thinking, hoping that it would provide me with a comprehensive template for evaluating the derivative theories, methods and techniques of the former American Group Theatre members, Adler, Lewis, Meisner, Strasberg and Carnovsky.⁸ This I hoped would in turn grant me an insight into the training approaches that evolved in the USA after this seminal Western ensemble disbanded in 1940.

³ Konstantin Sergeevich Alekseev (1863-1938), stage name Stanislavski, “the most significant and most frequently quoted figure in the history of actor training” (Benedetti 2008: vii). Although he used various terms to describe his approach to acting and training over the 32 years he spent developing it, he finally realised words like „method” and „technique” implied a fixed way of doing rather than encouraging ongoing experimentation. According to his most prolific contemporary English translator Jean Benedetti (2008: x), it was for this reason that he chose the term „system”, always with a small „s” and in quotes, “[to stress] the provisional nature of his findings.”

⁴ Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943) co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre with Stanislavski in 1898. A highly respected playwright, stage director and teacher-trainer in his own right, his ideas are often eclipsed by those of his more famous partner, even though he inspired many of them.

⁵ A student of Nemirovich-Danchenko and a member of the Moscow Art Theatre, Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) left the company in 1902 and became one of the most influential theatre directors of the 20th century. He developed a training system which he called Biomechanics, as an antithesis to Stanislavski’s psychologically-orientated approach.

⁶ Evgeny Vakhtangov (1883-1922) was an important contributor to the early „system” and in the final years of his life tried to synthesise Meyerhold’s formalist acting approach with Stanislavski’s psychotechnique to create a hybrid he called „imaginative (or fantastic) realism”.

⁷ The nephew of the playwright Anton Chekhov, Michael Chekhov (1891-1955) was also an important contributor to the early „system” along with his close friend Vakhtangov, before he began to develop his own form-driven approach which embodied the principles of imaginative realism.

⁸ Morris Carnovsky (1897-1992) is not as well known for his pedagogic activities as the other four teacher-trainers who emerged from the Group Theatre, but he trained under Michael Chekhov and evolved a highly theatrical approach based on imaginative realism which was particularly suited to performing Shakespeare.

I also decided to include the Russian-born Sonia Moore⁹ in the study due to her attempts to introduce Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions to Western theatre practitioners during the 1960s, the revolutionary approach to characterisation and performance which he developed in the 1930s but was little-known outside the Soviet Union.¹⁰ In this respect none of the books attributed to him that were published in English, namely *My Life in Art* (1923), *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *Building A Character* (1950) and *Creating A Role* (1961) mention this method, which I considered a question that needed to be addressed. Tracing the evolution of his thinking from 1905, when he envisioned "actors able to kill or hide the materiality of their bodies so as to increase their spiritual creativeness" (Stanislavski 1980: 435), to 1938, when he (*in* Toporkov 2001: 115) defined the actor as "a master of physical actions," therefore seemed a logical through-line for my enquiry. In this regard I realised that if I was unable to grasp his thinking, then attempting to derive a holistic theory that integrated his ideas with those of others was most likely unattainable.

The fact that none of the former Group Theatre teachers specifically referred to the Method of Physical Actions, whereas Grotowski (*in* Richards 2003: 30) "[stressed] that the work on physical actions is the key to the actor's craft,"¹¹ suggested that I also had to evaluate his interpretation of Stanislavski's „system“ as an offset to their psychologically-orientated views and to provide a European perspective; especially given his influence on notable practitioners such as the Italian theatre anthropologist Eugenio Barba (b. 1936), the acclaimed British director Peter Brook (b. 1925), and the director and performance theoretician Richard Schechner (b. 1934).

Having outlined a roadmap for conducting a literary investigation I was still faced with the challenge of how these theories and the methods derived from them might be tested

⁹ Born Sophie Evzarovna Shatzov (1902-1995) in Gomel, Belarus, she and her husband Lev Borisovich, a former Soviet ambassador in Italy, defected to the USA in 1940 when he was recalled to the USSR, and adopted the surname Moore on arrival. She purportedly trained under Vakhtangov in the early 1920s.

¹⁰ This new method, which favoured a physical rather than a psychological approach to creating an actor's performance „score“, was a radical departure from his former theories, and first came to light in the 1950s with the publication of Vasili Toporkov's (1889-1970) book *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*. When a German translation appeared in 1955, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), who had conflated Strasberg's Method with the „system“, "wrote to Toporkov describing his book as the best source he had on Stanislavski's working method," and went as far as to say that he "had, in fact, been testing out aspects of the Method of Physical Actions since 1953" (Benedetti *in* Toporkov 2001: x). Brecht passed on soon afterwards however, and the first English edition of Toporkov's book only appeared in the early 1980s, translated by Christine Edwards.

¹¹ According to Richards (2003: 30), Grotowski considered Toporkov's book "to be the most important document – or description – of Stanislavski's way of working on the „method of physical actions“"

in actual praxis. In this regard I realised that a practical learning process was imperative, because, as Richard Hornby (1992: 252, his italics) rightly pointed out: “Actor training is a *heuristic* activity, which means that although you know the methods by which to proceed, you do not know what the outcome will be until you achieve it.” Conveying the results of a purely theoretical investigation would therefore be of little benefit to trainee actors without pragmatic experimentation, yet these cognitive and experiential learnings had to somehow be conjoined if they were to be mutually complimentary in terms of a student actor’s overall development. This integration of praxis with theory, engaging both the body and mind in a unified learning process, seemed a logical basis for a holistic acting approach, as impulsive, instinctive behaviours could potentially be combined with disciplined, predetermined actions; substance and form in short.

An important question that also needed addressing once the „what“ and „how“ had been determined, was *where* this form of actor training might best be offered. Although reason dictated it should be an HE environment, as a result of my former studies¹² I was aware that there were limited contact hours available for practical work of this nature in a predominantly academic curriculum. A further challenge was therefore to determine how the systematic training process Stanislavski envisioned¹³ could be adapted to the typical two semester, four-term academic year of most HE institutions. I considered this to be an integral aspect of the enquiry as my previous work with young actors had shown that they were most receptive to a „work on oneself“ process, which Stanislavski and all of his followers considered to be an imperative initial phase of training, during their late teens, namely between seventeen and nineteen. This effectively meant during their final years of secondary and first years of tertiary education. In this respect I realised that unless an integrated theory of actor training and its supporting processes could accommodate these „real-world“ considerations, it would negate any practicable value my investigation might produce.

¹² Besides the Australian and UKC studies I had worked with first year drama students at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa in 1990, after returning from Los Angeles where I’d studied the Meisner technique over two years. I had tried to convey it and other methods that I acquired at the Herbert Berghoff (HB) Studio in New York during the mid-1980s to them during extracurricular workshops.

¹³ In Stanislavski’s training approach the first two years are devoted to „work on oneself“, as outlined in *An Actor Prepares* and *Building A Character*, when students acquire the psychophysical elements comprising the „system“. They then begin a further two year training process he termed „work on the role“, as outlined in *Creating A Role*, when they work on actual plays. It was thus a four year training programme in total.

1.2 Problem statement

Our acting is still amateur, because we have no theory. We don't know its laws, we don't even know the elements of which it is composed. Take music, for example. It has a precise theory and a musician has everything at his disposal to develop his technique. [...] And it is the same in the other arts. But show me one actor who does anything to perfect his technique outside performance and rehearsal. You can't, he doesn't exist, for the simple reason it is acting, he wouldn't know where to begin. We don't know the basic elements of our own art. (Stanislavski in Toporkov 2001: 159-160).

Despite its long history, the art of Thespis, the first actor, has yet to evolve a coherent theory. Given the global popularity of acting as a career option¹⁴ and the high number of Drama Departments and Schools in the formal HE sector, this is worrying. The problem partly stems from historic disagreements regarding the actor's function in the theatre, and whether impersonation should be considered an art form. In a current context the term actor is often conflated with performer, and has led to a range of training approaches that serve different ends. This lack of consensus has prevented a stable theoretical foundation from emerging, and subsequently a science of acting. Stanislavski's lifelong ambition¹⁵ was to identify the elements comprising the actor's art and to find a systematic means to convey them to students. He was a practitioner by nature however, not a theorist, which meant that he experimented with various, often undocumented methods until his death in 1938. As a result his ideas were appropriated piecemeal and the scientific approach that he envisioned mostly came to naught; particularly in the West where poor translations of his original Russian writings led to his ideas being either dismissed or misinterpreted. Yet throughout the twentieth century no other theatre practitioner managed to formulate a more comprehensive theory. The first step is perhaps to define exactly what constitutes the actor's art so that it can be seen as distinct from all others in realm of the performing arts. Only then might its fundamental principles be identified for what and why they are, and a clearer idea of how they might best be conveyed to student actors begin to emerge. In this regard the new translations of Stanislavski's writings and those of his students that have appeared in recent years may provide a key to resolve this 2,600 year old dilemma.

¹⁴ "NYU's drama program alone receives nearly 3,000 applications annually" (Bartow 2008: xx).

¹⁵ While attending a Moscow drama school in 1885 aged 21, Stanislavski (1980: 90) realised that "practical methods" had to be "systemized scientifically"; and dreamt of a „grammar“ of acting (Benedetti 2008: xix).

1.3 Research questions

It seems to me at this moment that it is necessary to speak of all the elements of the creative power of the actor, to speak of each separately, basing myself on my practical experience, on my sense of what the actor's art is, and, in particular, on my acquaintance with scores of acting personalities. The summation of all these fragments, opinions, does not yet constitute a science of course. The science will come from the working out of the question "how" and not "what" in training the young actor. (Nemirovich-Danchenko in Cole & Chinoy 1970: 496)

Nemirovich-Danchenko made this statement in 1940,¹⁶ two years after Stanislavski's death and months after Meyerhold's execution,¹⁷ whom he designated as his heir in the theatre.¹⁸ In many respects this date marks the culmination of the most innovative era in the modern evolution of the actor's art, as the drama unfolding on the world's big stage, WWII, overshadowed further developments on the small. In summarising his fifty year's experience, Nemirovich-Danchenko (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 495, 499, 500), "one of the drama's greatest teachers," concluded that certain "qualities of an actor's personality and of his individuality" were "not attainable through work, technique, the development of taste, etc. [...] a great, important, awesome question ... for the actor's science," and "a tremendous question for the actor's school;" namely "can this be taught or not?"

This question ultimately dwarfs all others when it comes to artistic expression, especially in acting where the artist and instrument are one. If talent is an inherent quality in some individuals, then why bother with a theory of acting or attempting to determine a suitable means of training? In fact, it is a common misconception that acting is simply „being oneself“ and reproducing everyday human behaviour, even if sometimes heightened to comply with a particular performance style, or theatrical genre. The truth however, as

¹⁶ Nemirovich-Danchenko in a private dictation to a stenographer between 14 and 16 August, which he called „For Myself, Various Thoughts“. It was posthumously published in *The Moscow Art Theatre Yearbook for 1944*, entitled „Simplicity in Acting.“

¹⁷ Meyerhold was arrested by the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) police on 20 June 1939, less than a year after Stanislavski's death on 7 August 1938. He was placed in solitary confinement in Moscow's Lubyanka prison, and shot on 2 February 1940.

¹⁸ Shortly before his death Stanislavski told his assistant Yury Bakhrushin to take care of Meyerhold, who he had appointed as a director at his Opera-Dramatic Studio, because he was his "sole heir in the theatre," not only in Russia, but "anywhere else" (Braun 1998: 251).

Vasili Toporkov (2001: 162) pointed out after Stanislavski's death, is that the technical expertise that he called for "can [only] be achieved by a great deal of hard work and daily exercises throughout one's life," and in this respect; "the more accomplished an actor's work is the simpler and easier it appears."

The „system“ was therefore formulated as a process by which “you can make yourself an actor,” as Stanislavski asserted (Nemirovich-Danchenko in Cole & Chinoy 1970: 499). Yet in 1934 he told Adler¹⁹ that “[it] had never been thoroughly practised at the Moscow Art Theatre” (Clurman 1974: 144), a claim echoed in his autobiography *My Life in Art*, in which he states that the exercises that comprise it had not “been performed even up to the present day” by the MAT²⁰ actors (1980: 529-530). Even during his final months, while working with a handpicked group of young MAT actors and directors on Molière's *Tartuffe* in an attempt to convey the key principles of his „system“ and the Method of Physical Actions to them, Toporkov (2001: 129) states he was often depressed “by the degree to which [they] had not mastered his method.” Furthermore, in a letter he wrote to his first English translator Elizabeth Hapgood in 1936, the same year *An Actor Prepares* was published, he made the following, quite startling admission (Stanislavski 2008: 687):

What does it mean, writing a book about the system? It does not mean writing down something that is already cut and dried. The system lives in me but it has no form. It is only when you try to find a form for it that the real system is created and defined. In other words, the system is created in the very process of being written down.

The significance of these facts is that the „system“, which Grotowski (*in Salata* 2008: 31) considered to be “one of the greatest stimuli for the European theatre, especially in actor education,” may well provide answers to the most important questions relating to the art of acting, yet it doesn't exist as either a coherent theory or a systematic process. Instead it is the legacy of “a pragmatic questioner whose books, teaching and productions together reveal the full range of his lifelong search for truth in art” (Cole & Chinoy 1970: 485).

¹⁹ He worked with Adler for five weeks in Paris during the summer of 1934 while convalescing from the after-effects of a heart attack he suffered in 1928 during the MAT's thirtieth anniversary celebrations. As a result he spent the harsh Moscow winters abroad in milder climes thereafter.

²⁰ A more correct abbreviation for the Moscow Art Theatre prior to it becoming a state-funded academic institution in 1920 would be the MKhT, and MKhAT thereafter. I elected to employ the more common abbreviation of the MAT to avoid any historic confusion.

Invaluable as this may be for future generations of actors and teachers, it is not “the few grains of gold” that Stanislavski (1980: 572) stated it took him his whole life to find, rather more akin to the “hundreds of tons of sand and stones” he had to wash “to find at last several grains of the noble metal.” In this regard he left behind 12,000 manuscripts, mainly rough notes and fragments, for his successors to sieve through (Cole & Chinoy 1970: 485). Had this been the only challenge facing those attempting to discern his key findings from this archive of personal insights that he began documenting at age fourteen while a member of his family’s amateur ensemble „The Alekseev Circle“, theatre scholars would perhaps already have done so. The problem however, as Hapgood (*in* Stanislavski 1986: 1) pointed out, is that: “His creative and artistic genius was never fully satisfied; it urged him on to the very day of his death to search for, to test, to choose new approaches to the art of acting, so that he hesitated to sum up any conclusions as final.” Yet, as unfinished and provisional as Stanislavski’s writings might be, Benedetti (2008: x, xi), who has studied them “closely over many years,” believes that anyone interested in Stanislavski must read them. Anatoly Smeliansky (*in* Stanislavsky 2008: 693), the editor-in-chief of the new Russian edition of Stanislavski’s *Collected Works in Ten Volumes* shares this view, stating that his „great book“²¹ “remains, in its thinking, a significant and provocative monument in the culture of world theatre,” and “no one seriously concerned with teaching theatre across the world can refuse to acknowledge K.S.’s work.” Taking all these sentiments into account, two questions arose regarding Stanislavski’s legacy that became the cornerstones of my investigation. The first was whether I could identify the „system“’s key elements as they stood at the time of Stanislavski’s death, considering that he told the cast of *Tartuffe* the following (*in* Toporkov 2001: 109):

As I depart this life, I want to pass the fundamentals of this technique to you. They cannot be conveyed in words or writing. They must be studied practically. [...] I’ll give you a short cut. Basically, the “system” has five to ten rules which will enable you to find the right path in all your roles all your life.

Although it may seem to be a relatively straightforward task to extricate these rules from Toporkov’s account of the *Tartuffe* rehearsals, this is not the case, as most of the cast had

²¹ The Russian editions of *An Actor Prepares* and *Building A Character* were published a few weeks after Stanislavski’s death as a single volume entitled *The Actor’s Work on Himself in the Creative Process of Experiencing*. He referred to this as his „great book“.

already undergone „work on oneself“ training, which meant that Stanislavski focussed on „work on a role“. Furthermore, he was clearly testing different approaches to creating a role, not only the Method of Physical Actions. One such was Active Analysis, which Toporkov does not specifically mention, and that only came to light several years later.²² Another was an unnamed method that appears to have been Stanislavski’s final avenue of exploration.²³ My second question was therefore how he might have integrated these methods, and how this would have impacted on his earlier findings.

An overarching question driving my research was how a „work on oneself“ process could be conducted in a formal educational setting without negative repercussions, given its perceived psychological overtures. I considered this the crux of the conundrum posed by Nemirovich-Danchenko, because no amount of theoretical ken or technical nous would help student actors to liberate their creative potential unless that particular „how“ could be resolved. As a result of my former studies I knew this was a vital precursor to acquiring the skills needed to perform a character, as students first had to learn about themselves and how to manipulate their natures before they could create “the inner life of a human spirit” (Stanislavski 1984: 14). This was the core of Stanislavski’s philosophy regarding the actor’s art, which he encapsulated with the following statements (*in Zon* 1955: 488-489, his italics and quotes) on 20 May 1938, less than three months before his death:

We are searching for organic nature and its unconsciousness. [...] It is easy to “enact”. I demand something different. [...] Write down your “soul” in a good book in golden words – it is the score of a role, it is your experience, your talent. The more the score changes, the more the role develops.

A truly holistic acting approach therefore entails much more than psychophysically embodying a character and grasping the interplay between content and form; the actor’s soul, spirit and subconscious must become involved in their creative process as well.

²² Maria Knebel (1898-1985), a student of Michael Chekhov in the 1920s, became Stanislavski’s assistant in the 1930s and is known in Russia for continuing his work on Active Analysis, or „action-analysis“, as she refers to it in her book *Action Analysis of the Play and the Role*, as yet unpublished in English.

²³ In a three page insert that comprises the sixth part of the eighth chapter of *Building A Character* entitled „Intonations and Pauses“, which appears to be a later addition, Stanislavski, as the fictitious director-teacher Arcady Tortsov, states (1986: 125-126): “Earlier it was physical actions that served as lures to our feelings when we engaged in building action, and now it is the inner images which serve as lures to our feelings when we are dealing with words and speech.” The significance is that only after *Tartuffe* was presented to the MAT’s Board of Management following his death did Toporkov (2001: 156) “[understand] for the first time the meaning of, the profound significance in acting, what Stanislavski defined as „inner images“”

1.4 Aims of the study

The Stanislavski method aims to develop in the student those abilities and qualities which give him the opportunity to free his creative individuality – an individuality imprisoned by prejudices and stereotyped patterns. The liberation and disclosing of the individuality; this must become the principal aim of a theatrical school. [...] The school must remove all the conventional rubbish which prevents the spontaneous manifestation of the student’s deeply hidden potentialities. (Vakhtangov in Cole 1995: 141)

Vakhtangov, a prototype of the fictitious student actor Konstantin (Kostya) Nazvanov,²⁴ whose first person, diarised account of his training forms the basis of *An Actor Prepares*, *Building A Character* and *Creating A Role*, documented the above statements during a lecture Stanislavski delivered on 15 March 1911, the day that he and other young recruits joined the MAT. Although the „system“ was called a method at that stage (*see note 3*), its aim is clear, namely “[to help] the actor to discover his own self or ... help him „express“ his personality to its innermost depth, and separate in his work what actually represents his true individuality from everything generic and theatrical” (Sulerzhitsky in Malaev-Babel 2011: 9). Stanislavski called this “the art of experiencing”, in that an actor “starts with himself, his own natural qualities, and develops them creatively as he works” (Toporkov 2001: 115, 151). When a role is created in this way the character’s behaviour is always organic, meaning “based on normal physiological and psychological processes, not on artifice” (Benedetti in Toporkov 2001: xi). This is imperative if „acted“ behaviours are to seem „true“, the key to the subtle deception at the heart of effective impersonation. To achieve this degree of authenticity the actor’s entire organism and all its biochemical processes must be available to the character, as Stanislavski (1984: 14) elaborates below:

To play truly means to be right, logical, coherent, to think, strive, feel and act in unison with your role. If you take all these internal processes and adapt them to the spiritual and physical life of the person you are representing, we call that living the part. [...] [This] helps the artist to carry out one of his main objectives. His job is not to present merely the external life of his character. He must fit his own human qualities to the life of this other person,

²⁴ Nazvanov means “the chosen one” (Benedetti in Stanislavski 2008: xxi).

and pour into it all of his soul. The fundamental aim of our art is the creation of this inner life of a human spirit, and its expression in an artistic form.

The function of a „work on oneself“ process is therefore two-fold. During the first phase student actors learn how to apply the „system“s“ psychological elements,²⁵ which include exercising the creative imagination, learning how to self-stimulate emotions and summon feelings at will, and the use of logic and the intellect in acting, as conveyed in *An Actor Prepares*. Its companion book, *Building A Character*, considers the technical elements, focussing on body and voice work that allow actors to give form to their inner impulses. Together these learnings enable them to use themselves as psychophysical instruments of artistic expression, able to distinguish between the self and the other, the actor and the character, as well as the private person from the public persona; the basis of an objective performance technique. This effectively means an ability to divide one’s attention, which Dr. Elly Konijn (2000: 101, her insert) explains as follows in her book *Acting Emotions*:

[T]here is a perception of being removed from oneself, watching oneself act. The actor does know that he is not the character, but he does act like the character. The sensation of the difference between the feeling and the emotion is seen (in psychological research) to be a feature of double or divided consciousness. This double consciousness is sometimes also called depersonalization. [...] „Stanislavski“s description of the depersonalization experienced on stage is similar to examples of depersonalization drawn from psychological research.“²⁶

Stanislavski first experienced this dual state as Dr. Stockman in Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, which the MAT premiered in October 1900. While performing this role “[he] felt the greatest joy an artist can feel, the right to speak on the stage the thoughts of another, to surrender [oneself] to the passions of another, to perform another’s actions, as if they were [one’s] own” (Stanislavski 1980: 406). It was this experience that prompted him to develop a systematic approach by which actors could consciously evoke this heightened

²⁵ The term „elements“ has a specific meaning in relation to the „system“, as Benedetti (2008: 14) clarifies: “When teaching the „system“, Stanislavski divided it up into what he sometimes called „Elements“. Acting is a complex combination of skills, too complex to be taken in all at once. The Elements have to be separated out, studied and mastered individually and then put back together again in a coherent technique.”

²⁶ Konijn’s quote is taken from p 24 of: Fink, J. G. 1980. *Depersonalisation and personalisation as factors in a taxonomy of acting*. New York: New York University (PhD Dissertation).

state during performance; both to shield their psyches from the feelings experienced by a character and to become the masters of their own inspiration. Richard Hornby (1992: 68), author of *The End of Acting*, describes his own experience of this dual state as follows:

[G]ood acting is exhilarating, all the more when portraying moments of intense suffering. When these are going right, everything seems to be moving of *its* own accord, my tears flow without my having to force them, I howl in agony with astonishing intensity, and I am thrilled by my own performance, enjoying it in exactly the same way that an audience does. [...] It is not like crying in real life, but it is far from being a cold, mechanical experience. It is almost indescribable joy.

It is significant that both Hornby and Stanislavski use the term „joy“, considering that according to Antonio Damasio²⁷ (2004: 284) “a spiritual experience is to hold sustained feelings of a particular kind dominated by some variant of joy,” and that the notion of spiritual is “the sense that the organism is functioning with the greatest possible perfection.” This is akin to Grotowski’s (1991: 99) idea of a „total act“, “the very essence of the actor’s calling,” which is “[to reveal] the different layers of his personality, from the biological-instinctive source via the channel of consciousness and thought, to that summit which is so difficult to define and in which all becomes unity.” He thus believed that an actor’s technique “provides an opportunity for what could be called integration, the discarding of masks, the revealing of the real substance” (Grotowski 1991: 211).

In his seminal book *The Empty Space* Peter Brook (1990: 33) states “[t]here are countless actors who have never had the chance to develop their inborn potential to its proper fruition,” and by thirty most “are tragically incapable however hard they try of laying down for one brief instant even in rehearsal the image of themselves that has hardened round an inner emptiness.” This is often due to actors only acquiring what Grotowski (1991: 16) called “a predetermined set of skills or ... a „bag of tricks“,” rather than how to access their inner beings, the true substance of art. In this respect Brook’s collaborator, the Japanese actor Yoshi Oida (*in* Oida & Marshall 1997: 39), pointed out “there are two elements in good acting: technical mastery, and the free and easy movement of the

²⁷ Damasio is a Professor of Neuroscience at the University of Southern California where he heads the Brain and Creativity Institute, and an Adjunct Professor of the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, globally ranked as a foremost research institute in neuroscience and behaviour.

mind.” Mind in this sense means the „inner self“;²⁸ which the Nō master Zeami (*in* Oida & Marshall 1997: 118) considered “the „bone“ of the artist’s craft;” namely the beautiful „flower“ that “depends on how you move your inner being.” Liberating this „inner self“, which Michael Chekhov (2004a: 87) called “a higher-level *I*” that “enriches and expands the consciousness,” is synonymous with “[freeing] the creative individuality of the actor-artist;” the ultimate aim of a „work on oneself“ process.

The Russian teacher and theatre theoretician Nikolai Demidov, who is still little known in the West but greatly influenced Stanislavski,²⁹ believed that “the courage to freely go with the impulse, not yet knowing where it might lead you, and the courage to wait for the impulse when it is not there” were “the two conditions that sustain the actor’s organic creative process throughout performance” (Malaev-Babel 2012: 11). This is a key aspect of the „work on oneself“ process, namely to gain what Stanislavski termed „actor’s faith“ in order to wholly trust one’s organism in performance. In this regard “[u]nless an actor engages in this highly personal and organic psychological process, their life onstage will remain mechanical, and their **transformation** false, or acted;” a self-conditioning that Vakhtangov (*in* Malaev-Babel 2012: 10, 99, his emphasis) described as follows:

The first state an actor experiences onstage is the one he just experienced in life. One needs great courage not to betray this experience. One must surrender entirely to the power of one’s artistic nature. It will do all the necessary things. Don’t impose any solution upon yourself in advance. The quality to develop in an actor is courage.

This was the same „it“ that Hornby referred to, and Chekhov called the higher „I“; namely “the „center“ of the performer, the „I“, [that] stands outside observing and to some degree controlling both the knower [actor] and the feeler [character],” as Schechner (2003: 316, my inserts) framed it. Having the courage, or faith, to let this „other“ consciousness take

²⁸ Oida used the Japanese word *kokoro* which Lorna Marshall points out can be translated as either „mind“ or „heart“, but suggests is probably best to think about as one’s inner self (Oida & Marshall 1997: 39).

²⁹ Demidov (1884-1953) published a manuscript entitled „The Art of Living on Stage“ in 1965. He disagreed with Stanislavski on several points in the „system“, but his writings were suppressed for many years until a four-volume edition of his work was published in 2004. So important was his influence on Stanislavski that he acknowledged the following in the foreword of his „great book“: “The biggest help in implementing “the system” in life and with writing this book was given to me by the stage director and teacher of the Opera theatre by the name of N.V. Demidov. He gave me valuable instructions, material, examples: he expressed his views about the book to me and pointed out the mistakes I had made.”

over in performance was vital to evoke what Stanislavski referred to as „I am being“ (*Ya Esm*),³⁰ the heightened creative state that results from a „work on oneself“ process, and is the overarching objective of the „system“. So important was this element that the seventh and longest chapter in *An Actor Prepares* is entitled „Faith and a Sense of Truth“, while the final chapter, in which this state is revealed as the key to engaging an actor’s spiritual nature in performance, is aptly entitled „On the Threshold of the Subconscious“.

The psychological conditioning that occurs during a „work on oneself“ process therefore equips student actors with what are arguably their most important tools, even if it is often overlooked in formal education where body-voice training and work on roles is mostly emphasised. This does mean I dismiss “classes in voice, movement, dance, acrobatics, fencing, play analysis and text study which provide the physical, vocal and intellectual skills without which the „system“ is meaningless” (Benedetti 2008: 15); rather that I am concerned young actors may not discover their true potential without a period of self-exploration before they acquire more technical performance skills. In this respect, after more than a decade of experimenting with various types physical training for actors, Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 225) realised “that which is the germ that act which determines all, that unveiling, could not be found through technical perfection, by means of training.” Instead, he realised the “genuine wisdom of craft”, which reached its apogee in Stanislavski’s theatre, was “that the actor ought to have two perspectives: the purpose of his work (what it will give the spectator), and what the character he creates is doing and thinking” (Grotowski *in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 218, his inserts). Although he ended his career as a director at that point, he nonetheless identified the essence of the actor’s art, and it is telling that in his final years he viewed „work on oneself“ as the key to „verticality“, which he described as follows (*in* Richards 2003: 124, 130, his italics): “[It] means to pass from a so-called coarse level – in a certain sense, one could say an „everyday level“ – to a level of energy more subtle or even toward the *higher connection*.” The principal aim of my investigation was therefore to determine how this form of training, which I considered to be the most essential in a young actor’s development, could be safely undertaken in a formal education environment.

³⁰ The term had a unique meaning in relation to the „system“ as Benedetti (2008: 6) explains: “This is a case of Stanislavski inventing or rather reviving a lost word. The verb to be now only exists in Russian in the infinitive, *est*’. Stanislavski uses the first person singular, *ja esm*’, which no one would normally use. „I am being“ is a way of conveying this usual [sic] usage.”

Although *An Actor Prepares* outlines the psychological elements of „work on oneself“, it is riddled with inconsistencies, partly due to “savage and often inept editing” (Benedetti 2008: viii), but also because Stanislavski’s ongoing experimentation to find an optimum means to convey them often negated his early approaches. During the *Tartuffe* rehearsals for example, he advised an actress who had kept detailed notes of his method for several years, and was unsure of what to do with this “treasure trove”, to burn them, as he “was very wary of ever looking back, lest it stopped him getting where he wanted to go” (Toporkov 2001: 111). A great deal of cross-referencing is therefore necessary to unravel his thinking, which means no single source of information can be considered definitive. A core aim of this study was to conduct a thorough examination of the English materials available, and key Russian texts I had translated,³¹ to understand his artistic ideology.

A further issue I hoped to address in this study is best expressed by Benedetti (2008: x): “Stanislavski’s books are now historic documents. He was born in 1863; his outlook and style belong to the nineteenth century.” Although the elements of acting he identified are timeless, his personal frame of reference was outdated, a problem that his Russian editor Lyubov Gurievich pointed out after reading the first draft of his „great book“ in 1929. In this regard she told him that “his book with all its ideals and examples that stemmed from a pre-revolutionary view of an actor’s life were doomed in the new Russia,” as it did not reflect “contemporary life, both Soviet and American” (Smeliansky in Stanislavski 2008: 687-688). An extensive rewrite was beyond his capabilities however, which means that his literary style remains “convoluted, verbose and confusing” with “passages that almost defy comprehension, let alone translation” (Benedetti 2008: viii). I therefore realised that a more accessible language to convey the „system’s“ elements was needed for English speaking student actors, bearing in mind I had spent twenty years in Australia, England and the USA. Determining a suitable pedagogic vocabulary thus constituted a further aim of my investigation. A related matter was that the exercises Stanislavski described in his books were by now somewhat old hat, and I considered it an obligation to experiment with alternatives that were more suited to my own pedagogic circumstances.

³¹ I obtained copies of manuscripts held in the MAT archives with the help of Prof. Smeliansky, the rector of the theatre school. One was an article by Boris Zon entitled „Encounters with Stanislavski“, published in *Teatralnoye nasledstvo. K. S. Stanislavsky. Materialy. Pisma. Issledovaniya* (*The theatrical heritage. K. S. Stanislavsky. Documents. Letters. Research*), Moskow: Akademiya nuak, 1955. Another was a chapter from Knebel’s autobiography entitled *Vsya zhizn* (*The whole of life*), Moskow: VTO, 1967, pp. 51-139.

1.5 Methodology

Stanislavsky evolved a set of principles and standards. His unique personal application constitutes his method ... We are not nineteenth-century Russians. We create from ourselves and from our world. Where the Stanislavsky System has been taken literally from his books, it has failed, as all imitations always do. Stanislavski's essential formulations are either universal or they are not. They are. If they weren't they would never be useful to us. The creative teacher ... finds his own style, that is to say his own method, as indeed every artist must. Otherwise he is a copyist. Copyists and creators are mutually exclusive. (Meisner in Pang 1991: 305-306)

In his book entitled *Toward a General Theory of Acting* John Lutterbie (2012: 10) states "[as] styles of acting increase, the search for new methods of teaching the art intensifies," yet he acknowledges most of these "[can] be traced back to the work of either Constantin Stanislavski or Vsevolod Meyerhold." Despite devoting only one of seven chapters in the book to training, Lutterbie (2011: 12, his insert) makes a strong claim in defence of "a theory that argues for universals," pointing out "that regardless of the method or system our cognitive processes (conscious and unconscious) utilize the same mechanisms, and regardless of outcome the basic operations are the same." In this regard Stanislavski did not consider „work on oneself“ a one-off stage of training, but a means of ongoing artistic and personal development, as Toporkov (2001: 160) clarifies: "Regular work on yourself to perfect your technique will bring you into accord with nature. Truth and belief are the path to organic creativity. We have to create a normal stream of events on stage so as to set our organism and the subconscious to work." In fact, according to Stanislavski (*in* Zon 1955: 464): "The word "system" is very confusing, *nature* – this is what it is. Find a key to the nature of the actor, help him to start living according to his own nature – this is an important task." This was the central premise that guided his lifelong investigation of the actor's art, which he encapsulated as follows in *My Life in Art* (1980: 483):

It will be asked: "Can there exist a system for the creative process? Has it really got laws that have been established for all time?" In certain parts of the system, like the physiological and psychological, such laws exist for all, forever, and in all creative processes. They are indubitable, completely

conscious, tried by science and found true, and binding on all. Each actor must know them. He does not dare to excuse himself because of his ignorance of these laws, which are created by nature herself. These conscious laws exist for the purpose of awakening another and higher superconscious region of creativeness. This latter is outside of our comprehension, and we are helpless in our consciousness when we attain it. It is ruled by inspiration. It is that miracle without which there can be no true art, and which is served by the conscious technique of the actor which I tried to establish. THE SUPERCONSCIOUS THROUGH THE CONSCIOUS! That is the meaning of the thing to which I have devoted my life since the year 1906, to which I devote my life at present, and to which I will devote my life while there is life in me.

Taking the above into account it could be argued that actor training is not a question of what methods and techniques should be conveyed to students, rather a process of raising their awareness of how the self and others function. Yet as Marion Rossi observed in her doctoral dissertation „Life Skills and Actor Training: Pedagogical Attitudes and Approaches“ (1999: 94), “the actor’s exploration of self and his/her instrument is given often only passing emphasis in most basic acting texts,” and “[while] almost all acknowledge the actor’s awareness of self as pivotal in preparing roles and learning the craft, few link this knowledge back into their approach.”

A possible reason why this area of enquiry has been largely neglected in performance studies is because it requires a multi-disciplinary approach to understand how human beings function. Although neurologists like Damasio have made this „hard science“ more accessible to laypersons, there are still gaps in our understanding of how biochemical processes become thoughts and feelings. As vital as neuroscience is to our knowledge of the body-brain organism and its mental processes, there are other, albeit „softer“ sciences that may cast a light on the complex motives that inform human behaviour. Although some theatre practitioners prefer to avoid theories from the field of psychology, I chose to be a “pluralist” from the outset of this research, a term the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas (2007: 4) used to describe his own outlook. In this respect I have no allegiance to any „school“ and allowed him to be my guide in the labyrinth of psychoanalytic thinking regarding human behaviour. This ancillary study was undertaken to support of my core

research, but also to determine if there were plausible alternatives to the theories of Freud and the Behaviourists to appraise and dismantle the „work on oneself“ process. In this respect Bollas led me to D. W. Winnicott, founder of the object relations perspective in psychoanalysis, which I hoped would provide a more contemporary toolkit for doing so.

A further lens used in my literary research stemmed from the performance scholar Philip Auslander’s critique of “the Stanislavsky System and, by implication, Method acting,³² by attaching its ideas to „logocentrism“,”³³ a notion Louise M. Stinespring, who based her doctoral dissertation on an in-depth analysis of Meisner’s praxis,³⁴ challenged in an essay entitled „JUST BE YOURSELF: Derrida, Difference, and the Meisner Technique“ (*in* Krasner 2000: 97). In Auslander’s opinion practitioners like Brecht, Grotowski and Stanislavski “implicitly designate the actor’s self as the *logos* of performance,” so that for them the self is “an autonomous foundation for acting;” a position he challenged by asserting “the actorly self” should instead be “produced by the performance it supposedly grounds” (cited by Stinespring *in* Krasner 2000: 97). Meisner (*in* Meisner & Longwell 1987: 34, his italics) however, made it clear that in acting: “*What you do doesn’t depend on you; it depends on the other fellow.*” This formed the basis of his technique, and may well have been influenced by Martin Buber’s theory of *Ich und Du* (I and Thou), which suggests “the human consciousness loses its separate identity in the moment of encounter with whatever is not itself, but immediately withdraws from the other so that it may interiorise and „understand“ what just happened before venturing forth to repeat the process” (Duggan & Grainger 1997: 6-7). The idea of placing one’s attention outside the self to gather objects that might illuminate the inner realm is echoed in Brook’s following observation (*in* Moffitt 2000: 56): “I think you can only explore yourself if you’re not interested in exploring yourself, but in exploring other people and exploring your relations with other people. The first thing that can destroy the true possibility of an actor

³² So-called Method acting is usually attributed to Strasberg’s approach, which relies on actors using affective memories to provide emotional authenticity in role portrayals, often resulting in insular, self-indulgent expressions on stage. Many prominent theatre practitioners in the early twentieth century, including Brecht, mistakenly associated this approach with Stanislavski’s „system“, and understandably opposed it. The fact is Stanislavski marginalised the use of affective memories in favour of the actor’s imagination in the given circumstances by the 1920s, and in the 1930s he favoured using physical actions to reflexively induce emotions on stage; the same period that Strasberg was busy developing his Method.

³³ Auslander’s postulated this notion in an essay entitled „Just Be Yourself: *Logocentrism* and *Difference* in Performance Theory“, *in* *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 28-38.

³⁴ Stinespring, a student of Meisner, entitled her thesis „Principles of Truthful Acting: A Theoretical Discourse on Sanford Meisner’s Practice“ (1999), Texas Tech University.

is that he's too interested in exploring himself." He therefore suggested that (*in* Moffitt 2000: 58) "[it] is extremely precious to develop for a young actor" an understanding that "acting basically is to do with relationships, [and] the possibility of developing a relationship is always there, in the best or worst circumstances."³⁵

Although I considered Auslander's postmodernist perspective a valid caution in terms of the „work on oneself“ process, I also concurred with Grotowski (1991: 2000) that “[s]elf-research is simply the right of our profession, our first duty,” a view Schechner (2003: 239) endorsed by pointing out that rehearsals “have become centres of psycho-physical, sociological, and personal research.” It was therefore not a question of what, but *how* this form of work should be undertaken to prevent the potential pitfall that it might lead to a self-centred acting approach, which I hoped to avoid as an outcome of my practical work. By combining an object relations perspective with the philosophy informing *Ich und Du* I therefore hoped to ground my training approach on “psychic structures in which persons are drawn into contact with each other by the personal need for relationships rather than being, as Freud maintained, driven into conflict with one another by the forces of impersonal instinct” (Fairbairn³⁶ cited in Duggan & Grainger 1997: 9).

My research perspective was also influenced by Rosemary Malague's doctoral thesis entitled „Getting at “The Truth”: A Feminist Consideration of American Actor Training“, in which she questions the notion that “truthful acting is *instinctual* acting,” pointing out that in many training environments “[t]he normative model for instinctual behaviours in this arena is male heterosexuality” (2001: 257, 305). In her aptly entitled book *An Actress Prepares* she elaborates on this (2012: 11), asking: “What happens if one discovers that the “truth” one is asked to produce in Stanislavskian training, and in the roles one enacts, might be false constructions, built upon gender-based assumptions and prejudices that reflect a patriarchal world view?” Given the imperative of student actors developing a sense of personal truth as a prerequisite to gaining confidence in their instinctive actions, the basis of an „actor's faith“, I therefore felt obligated to ensure that my outlook as their guide in this process was not tainted by a chauvinist worldview. Yet, despite raising this important question, Malague (2012: 2) also states: “This book emerges from my passion

³⁵ Brook made these comments during a seminar at the Dallas Theatre Centre in 1993 in response to a question raised by Dale Moffitt, who chaired the event and transcribed the recordings of his responses.

³⁶ Fairbairn, W. R. D. 1952. *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*. London: Routledge. pp 59-81.

for acting, my belief in the Stanislavsky System, and my concern that, despite the social advances made by woman in the intervening years, sexism in actor training persists.”

What is therefore under scrutiny in our postmodern, egalitarian era is not Stanislavski’s artistic ideology, rather the way in which his „system“ has been taught in the past, often involving heavy-handed tactics that did much to discredit this form of psychologically-orientated training. In acknowledging these concerns, and accepting my responsibilities as a teacher-trainer conducting practical research that might potentially improve my own praxis, I realised that I would have to continue monitoring my classroom manner as I had done in former studies, especially if I intended to one day engage in hands-on training in the somewhat touchy milieu of post-apartheid South Africa.

These filters and lenses therefore served as vital tools for conducting an in-depth analysis of the artistic theories that informed the methods and techniques of the principal Western theatre practitioners of the twentieth-century to identify common elements that could possibly form the basis of an integrated theory of actor training that might be practically applied in a formal educational environment. From the outset however, I realised there was a potential danger that an enquiry aimed at discerning an integrated approach to actor *training*, specifically the „work on oneself“ process, might be confused with an attempt to evolve an integrated theory of *acting*. In this respect, as Lutterbie (2011: 11, his insert) rightly pointed out, there “are unavoidable pitfalls of writing a general theory for a field as vast as acting,” because it is extremely difficult “trying to encompass in a satisfactory way all the forms of performance that can legitimately (or not) be called theatre.” Although I hoped my study might make an inroad in this area, I nonetheless realised it would be presumptuous to imagine that I could contribute to a theory of actor training that embraced the myriad considerations pertaining to different media, theatrical genres and styles of performance. In conducting this investigation I have therefore set out to specifically explore what Barba (2003: 105) refers to as a “pre-expressive” level of training, and I tend to think of as basal, because “[t]he effectiveness of a performer’s pre-expressive level is the measure of her/his autonomy as an individual and as an artist.”

1.6 Structure of the study

As frequently taught, characterization is an exploration of the limits of a person. The borders of the self, the outline, the silhouette, tend to be the actor's study. The conventional actor's inquiry tends to yield whatever it was designed to discover. Little remains to be discovered either about another person or about oneself. Instead, it sustains the stereotyping of people, the stereotyping of ourselves. (Chaikin 1995: 19)

The second chapter of this dissertation is devoted to an analysis of Stanislavski's writings regarding acting and actor training, and those others have written about his ideas in this regard, in order to grasp the thinking behind his formulation of the „system“. In this respect the contributions of his predecessors and contemporaries are also considered throughout the forty years of his career as a professional theatre practitioner. The second chapter therefore forms the spine of my investigation, providing a conceptual framework and a theoretical foundation for everything that follows.

In the third chapter, which has its own introduction that outlines its aims in more detail, I examine the individual careers of the prominent acting teacher-trainers who emerged from the Group Theatre, focussing on how they further developed the elements and principles of the „system“ in their own praxis. So too Michael Chekhov's career after he left the USSR in 1928, and the evolution of his approach to acting and actor training as derived from Stanislavski and Vakhtangov's influences. I also examine Sonia Moore's interpretation of the „system“, in particular the Method of Physical Actions. The bulk of this chapter is devoted to an in-depth analysis of Grotowski's praxis however, especially his „Theatre of Productions“ (1957-1969) period, to identify the contributions he made to a clearer understanding of the actor's creative process. The later phases of his research into Performer training are also considered, in particular his notion of „work on oneself“.

The fourth chapter, which also has its own introduction, is devoted to identifying the key principles of actor training, and examining them in a broader perspective, namely the twin lenses of contemporary neuroscience and psychoanalysis. The aim of this chapter is hopefully to provide a stimulus for a deeper, more comprehensive interrogation of the actor's art, freed from mysticism and jargon, that might contribute to the development of

a robust theoretical foundation for contemporary praxis, especially insofar as training students in HE is concerned.

The fifth chapter traces my practical experimentation with these principles over a three year period (2010-2012) working with different groups of trainee actors, both within and without a HE environment. The objective of this final phase of my investigation was to determine if a „work on oneself“ training programme for young actors could be designed that conveyed the elements of the „system“, as well as the principles underscoring them, while complying with the expectations, and limitations, of a formal education setting. In this respect I again used an Action Research strategy and associated methods to produce empirical materials that formed the basis of my analysis during this period. Examples of the tools I used to gather this data feature in the appendix, including examples of student feedback. In addition, the results of periodic interviews conducted with participants, examples of their work in class and third-party feedback are included on a DVD which accompanies this thesis.³⁷

In the sixth chapter, my conclusion, I attempt to weave together the multifarious strands of my research findings in the manner of a bricoleur.

³⁷ Please note that this DVD is only available on request from the researcher, due to ethical considerations regarding these materials leaking into the public domain.

Chapter Two The evolution of Stanislavski's 'system'

2.1 From amateur to theatre professional

Konstantin Sergeevich Alekseev was born in Moscow on 17 January 1863 into a wealthy merchant family. In his formative years he enjoyed all the privileges of the moneyed elite in Russia, travelling abroad and exposed to all manner of European art. His love of acting was instilled at age two when he first appeared on stage with his siblings in the makeshift theatre attached to the family's country estate. In 1877 his father had a hall with boxes, dressing rooms, and a space for storing properties and scenery purposely built. Here the family ensemble known as the Alekseev Circle staged forty-five productions with Konstantin serving as the principal director. In 1888, while working in the family's mercantile firm, he formed The Society of Art and Literature with the tenor Fyodor Komisarjevsky and theatre director Alexander Fedotov. It was at this point that he adopted the stage name Stanislavski. During the ensuing decade the company staged sixty productions including comedies, dramas farces, melodramas and operettas with Stanislavski serving as a leading actor and the principal director. In June 1897, at the height of the ensemble's popularity, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, an acclaimed playwright, critic, and teacher at the Moscow Philharmonic Society's drama school, approached Stanislavski to form a professional company. During a historic meeting lasting seventeen hours they laid the ideological foundation of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), which survives to date.

According to Stanislavski (1980: 330) the MAT's founding "was in the nature of a revolution," as they opposed bathos, declamation, overacting, theatricality, "the star system which spoiled the ensemble," and "the light and farcical repertoire which was being cultivated on the Russian stage at the time." They therefore hoped to overhaul nineteenth century Western theatre, as the situation in Russia echoed the prevailing European trends. Although Stanislavski had seen the naturalistic staging approach of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen and his director Ludwig Chronegk when the celebrated German ensemble performed in Moscow in 1885 and 1888, he felt "the Meiningen Players brought but little that was new into the old stagy methods of acting" (1980: 197-198). The productions were nonetheless "marked by excellent ensemble playing, historical accuracy in costuming, and by an artistic and vital interrelationship between the

movements of actors and the décor” (Cole & Chinoy 1970: 284), principles that later became part of the MAT’s manifesto.

Stanislavski (1980: 80) was also influenced by Michael Shchepkin (1788-1863),¹ the founder of Russian stage realism, who he called the “great lawgiver.” In a letter to the actor S. V. Shumsky in 1848, reprinted in *My Life in Art* (1980: 85-86), Shchepkin states actors should study real life for artistic inspiration, because if they base their acting on human nature they will always “play correctly.” This notion of playing “truly”, as Stanislavski’s literary alter ego Tortsov states in *An Actor Prepares* (1984: 14), quoting Shchepkin, is an important distinction between the externally natural approach of the Meiningen troupe and the authentic emotional experiences Shchepkin called for. In this respect an actor “must begin with wiping out his self ... and become the character the author intended him to be,” as Shchepkin (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 483) stated in a letter to the actress Aleksandra Shubert in 1848. Thus, despite the ideological influences of the European naturalist movement inspired by Émile Zola which called for men “taken from reality, scientifically analyzed, without one lie” to be put on the stage (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 209), there were also indigenous factors informing the MAT founders’ thinking, the most important being the idea of theatre as “the actor’s temple, his sanctuary,” namely “a place of hard but sacred work” as Shchepkin (*in* Komisarjevsky 1935: 65) described it.

In October 1898 the MAT’s maiden season commenced with Alexei Tolstoy’s *Tsar Fyodor*, with Nemirovich-Danchenko’s student Ivan Moskvín (1874-1946) playing the title role. In this respect he had invited only eight students whom he had graduated in seven years to join the MAT, including Meyerhold and Olga Knipper (1868-1959), while Stanislavski invited only six of the amateurs he had worked with (Worrall 1996: 59). Although the opening repertoire reflected popular tastes at the time, on 17 December they staged Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, a *coup de théâtre* which established their naturalist approach as a polemic against theatricality for its own sake. The production also signalled Stanislavski’s coming of age as a theatre artist. Even though he had initially considered the play “monotonous and boresome” and lacking in scenic potential,

¹ Shchepkin began his career as a serf actor in a theatre on his master’s estate. In 1921 the playwright Nikolay Gogol (1809-1852) and other members of Moscow intelligentsia purchased his freedom, and 1923 he joined Moscow’s Maly theatre, opposing the false pathos and artificial delivery so prevalent at the time. Despite a forty year tenure his sole literary legacy is comprised of a few letters he left behind.

Nemirovich-Danchenko, who co-directed,² “hammered all the beauties” of the work into his head³ (Stanislavski 1980: 321). Stanislavski then spent four weeks working on the stage director’s breakdown of the text and during this time began to question his former inclination to create scenic spectacles for an audience. In this respect he realised that despite the play’s apparent “kitchen of life” themes, meaning everyday “cares, politics, economics, and the larger part of general social interests,” it was “permeated by the eternal,” revealing “the eternal longings of man for happiness, his striving upwards” (Stanislavski 1980: 347). He therefore had an epiphany of sorts when he “saw and felt the play at last,” realising all his detailed work on the *mise en scène* “was not interesting or necessary for the stage” (Stanislavski 1980: 323). The fact that he also played Trigorin meant his former dilettantish acting approach was equally brought into question. Whereas before he had overlooked a play’s content in his “search for the outward stencil of the rôles,” believing if one found “the image, all the rest will come of itself,” he now realised “the very foundation of art ... [is] the life of the human spirit,” which resulted in him adopting a new artistic outlook, as his description below reveals (Stanislavski 1980: 332, 350):

Chekhov discovered to us the life of things and sounds, thanks to which all that was lifeless, dead and unjustified in the details of production, all that in spite of our desires created an outward naturalism, turned of itself into living and artistic realism, and the properties that surrounded us on the stage took on an inner relationship with the soul of the actor. Chekhov, like no one else, was able to create inward and outward artistic truth. This is why he was able to say the truth about men. This could not be said if they were surrounded on the stage by falsehoods. Chekhov gave that inner truth to the art of the stage which served as the foundation for what was later called the Stanislavski System, which must be approached through Chekhov, or which serves as a

² Stanislavski’s amateur experience meant he had “the right of veto in matters of stage direction and artistic production,” while Nemirovich-Danchenko had the literary veto due to his experience as a playwright (Stanislavski 1980: 295). Although a logical division of duties, their work together often led to lengthy “debates about principles, from the rôle to the play, from the play to art, from art to its fundamentals,” and eventually led to a barely suppressed hostility between them (*ibid.*: 353).

³ When Chekhov and Nemirovich-Danchenko jointly won a prize for new plays, he deferred to *The Seagull*’s writer, considering it “immeasurably higher than the play he had written” (Stanislavski 1980: 320). On its St Petersburg premiere it was poorly received however, and it took “a great deal of effort to persuade Chekhov that the play had not died after its failure, but had [merely] been shown to the public in the wrong manner” (*ibid.*: 321). It was therefore due to Nemirovich-Danchenko’s faith in Chekhov’s abilities, and his insistence, that the playwright allowed the MAT to stage his work.

bridge to the approach of Chekhov. Playing Chekhov one is not forced to search for the feeling of truth, which is such a necessary element of the creative mood.

The creative mood Chekhov's play inspired infected even Meyerhold, who gave a memorable performance as Treplev despite struggling to adapt his "angular grotesque style of acting with the muted naturalism demanded by Stanislavsky" (Braun 1998: 17). Although the opening night audience was uncertain of how to react to the slice-of-life realism in which the actors simply lived in their scenic surroundings without resorting to any „acting“, following "a gravelike silence" after the first act they "began to roar and thunder in mad ovation" (Stanislavski 1980: 356). This same triumph was repeated with Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, which the MAT premiered in October 1899 and took on tour to St Petersburg. It was here that Komisarjevsky's son Theodore, a stage designer who became a renowned director, saw it and *Lonely Lives* by Gerhart Hauptmann, an experience he described as follows (Komisarjevsky 1935: 123):

The actors did not "play to the public," but lived the lives of their characters in every word as if behind a fourth wall, in expressive silences and movements, and their environments seemed part of their lives also. I shall never forget the impression of the saturating atmosphere of reality and the perfect harmony of everyone and everything ...

Stanislavski, who directed both plays, had clearly mastered the style needed to stage Chekhov and could apply it to the works of other naturalist playwrights. As the world entered the twentieth century however, European theatre artists began to question the ongoing value of naturalism, turning their attentions to alternate forms such as impressionism and symbolism. This changing cultural landscape would present new challenges for Stanislavski.

2.2 The search for a new approach

His conversion from an amateur actor-director whose dominant interest was finding something that might “knock the eye of the public out,” to someone more concerned with uncovering the deeper meaning in a play and conveying it to an audience, meant Stanislavski (1980: 312) had to acquire a new approach. With naturalist playwrights like Chekhov and Hauptmann the „inner truth“ of their work was so compelling that all an actor or director needed was to follow “the line of the intuition of feelings,” and after the “evolution” that occurred during *The Seagull*, Stanislavski (1980: 346, 349, 353) followed this intuitive approach. With plays in which the line of inner truth was not clear he resorted to “an outward and coarse naturalism,” which made him realise “naturalism on the stage is only naturalism when it is justified by the inner experience of the actor,” because when they tried representing it “their spiritual and physical imitation betrayed them” (Stanislavski 1980: 331, 402-403). Chekhov’s death in July 1904 was therefore a major blow, especially as the MAT was now a private company with their own theatre, thanks to the industrialist Savva Morozov,⁴ and the pressure was on Stanislavski to produce a new repertoire for each season. In October 1904 he staged the symbolist playwright Maurice Maeterlinck’s trilogy of one-act plays *The Blind*, *The Uninvited Guest* and *Inside*, which failed due to his “lack of the necessary technique,” making him realise that symbolism had to “synthesize feelings and life” (Stanislavski 1980: 344). Concerned that the MAT “had run into a blind alley” as “the old roads were being rapidly destroyed,” he contacted Meyerhold, who was at the forefront of the „New Drama“ theatre movement in Russia⁵ (Stanislavski 1980: 425).

⁴ Morozov bought out the MAT’s shareholders, buying the Lianozov Theatre on Kamergersky Lane and renovating it. In 1902 the MAT became a joint stock company before moving into the theatre, but Meyerhold was excluded from its shareholder list, which disturbed Chekhov (Braun 1998: 17). This may have been at his own behest however. After the MAT’s successful St Petersburg tour they began touring the provincial capitals of Kiev, Odessa and Warsaw. The Southerner’s reception of their work was equally enthusiastic, and according to Stanislavski (1980: 385) “the actor Vsevolod Meierhold [sic], together with a few others of our troupe, established an enterprise in the provinces on the model of the Art Theatre and produced plays from our repertoire and according to our *mises en scène*.” The parting may therefore have been to both parties’ benefit as Meyerhold had become increasingly critical of the MAT’s naturalist ethos, whereas they found it difficult to accommodate his highly theatrical style, and as a result he was “entrusted with noticeably fewer parts than before” (Braun 1998: 17).

⁵ Meyerhold’s reputation as a theatrical revolutionary was based on the fact that the symbolist poet Alexei Remizov had become the literary manager of his troupe „The Fellowship of the New Drama“. Remizov’s “link with *Vesty* [*The Balance*], the influential Moscow symbolist organ” (Braun 1998: 19, my insert), meant that his articles on Meyerhold’s productions were widely read.

Despite opposition from within the MAT Stanislavski financed an experimental Theatre Studio with Meyerhold as artistic director. This enterprise, which entailed the symbolist painters Nicholas Sapunov and Serge Sudeikin remodelling the Girsh Theatre and “hiring a large body of men to take decent care of [it],” proved a costly failure due to Meyerhold’s experiments with non-representational staging being at an infant stage, as Stanislavski (1980: 430, 437) explains: “The talented stage director tried to hide the actors with his work, for in his hands they were only clay for the molding of his interesting groups and *mises en scene*.” Valery Bryusov (cited in Braun 1998: 45), the co-editor of *Vesy* and one of the few who saw a dress rehearsal of *Death of the Tintagiles*, had the following to say about Meyerhold’s approach:

In the Theatre-Studio various attempts were made to break away from the realism of the contemporary stage and to embrace stylization wholeheartedly as a principle of dramatic art. In movement there was plasticity rather than impersonation of reality; groups would often look like Pompeian frescoes reproduced in living form. Scenery was constructed regardless of the demands of realism; rooms were made without ceilings; castle pillars were twined around with some sort of liana; dialogue was spoken throughout against a background of music, which initiated the spectator into the world of Maeterlinck’s drama.

According to Meyerhold (*in* Braun 1998: 46) the failure was due to the fact that “the Theatre-Studio demanded fresh acting material, more malleable and less enamoured of the charms of the established theatre,” as “the majority [of actors] were from the drama courses at the Art Theatre.” The divergence of his and Stanislavski’s views on acting and actor training can be traced to this juncture. While he sought a heightened performance style to complement the new dramatic forms he was searching for, Stanislavski (1980: 436) dreamt of finding techniques that would allow actors “to kill the materiality in them, and to live a disembodied, spiritual and creative life on the stage.” The outbreak of the First Russian Revolution in 1905 compelled him “to make a hurried liquidation of the Studio,” which meant none of the plays Meyerhold had worked on for six months were shown to the Moscow public (Stanislavski 1980: 438). It would be the last time they tried to find a common ground for their disparate artistic visions for over thirty years.

2.3 A methodological template

Although the “majority of the company were glad that the Studio had failed,” both Stanislavski (1980: 439) and Nemirovich-Danchenko realised the MAT “had run into a blind wall.” Morozov’s death in May 1905 also meant their financial stability was under threat. It was against this backdrop that they took the MAT on its first foreign tour to Germany in January 1906 where they hired the Berliner Theatre in the capital. Despite several challenges the six week season proved a triumph. Forbidden to take any scenery, these had to be built in Germany. Supernumeraries for crowd scenes were hired from the Russian émigré community, and their modest placards were lost “amidst the gaudy advertisements of commercial establishments” (Stanislavski 1980: 443). Yet positive reviews⁶ led to the Kaiser attending a performance of *Tsar Fyodor* in March 1906, after which they became a *cause célèbre* – a laudable achievement as they were inevitably compared to the Meiningen players who had disbanded in 1890. Despite this success Stanislavski had become disillusioned. The deaths of Chekhov and Morozov, “the failure of the Maeterlinck plays and the catastrophic demise of the Studio,” and dissatisfaction with himself as an actor, contributed to a state of despair that led to him spending the summer in Finland to take stock of his artistic past (Stanislavski 1980: 458).

Spending mornings on a cliff overlooking the sea the forty-two year old Stanislavski (1980: 458, 460) analysed how he approached his former roles by consulting detailed notes in his artistic diaries to remind him of everything “[he] had experienced during the process of creativeness.” The role he had most identified with was Dr Stockman in Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, which the MAT staged in 1900. Meyerhold (*in* Schmidt 1980: 122-123, insert in original) described Stanislavski’s process as follows to his *Boris Godunov* cast in 1936:

He set himself a task: I want to find in Stockman not the man who talks intelligently in public, but the crackpot. He started working. And once he found the crackpot, then he started to talk intelligently. For a long time he wouldn’t come to rehearsal: only after he had found the crackpot did he begin

⁶ A reviewer of the *Neue Freie Presse* described the acting as “the play of a brilliantly rehearsed and conducted orchestra,” while Ludwig Bauer (cited in Nemirovich-Danchenko 1937: 284-285, 309-311), the chief German critic at the time, extolled that “perfection on the stage had been realised,” and inspired in him a feeling of “ruthlessness toward all mediocrity.”

rehearsing. He made this gesture with two fingers (*Meyerhold demonstrates*). Then he started to talk intelligently. Stanislavski told us all how he solved the problem he had set for himself. He resolved to get up in the morning not as Stanislavsky, but as Doctor Stockman. He held his spoon with two fingers, he picked everything up with two fingers. At the time all his friends thought he'd gone crazy. Later, after all those little quirks had become internalised, only then did he allow himself to speak a line of Ibsen's text ...

Meyerhold's anecdote reveals a key principle of Stanislavski's approach to character creation, namely: "When you play a good man look for the places where he is evil, and in an evil man look for the places where he is good" (Stanislavski 1980: 183). The logic behind this aphorism⁷ is the importance of creating contrasting qualities so a role is multi-dimensional. It was a contrived approach to characterisation however, as was his search for physical traits that would signify a particular „type“ of person. What made the experience distinctive is that he identified with "the love of Stockman for *truth*," which allowed him to empathise with his character and to "understand his feelings when his eyes saw the rotten souls of the men who had once been his friends," a process Stanislavski (1980: 404-405, his italics) described as follows:

I felt myself more at home on the stage in the rôle of Stockman than in any other rôle in my repertoire. In it I instinctively followed the line of the intuition of feelings. [...] From the intuition of feelings I went to the outer image, for it flowed naturally from the inner image, and the souls and body of Stockman-Stanislavsky became one organically.

Although Meyerhold and Stanislavski's interpretations reflect their personal outlook regarding the psychophysical interrelationship of character creation, it is apparent that a synthesis of form and content occurred. On a subliminal level Stockman's idealism echoed the leftist ethos in Russia at the time,⁸ an embodiment of the zeitgeist, which no

⁷ In 1889 Stanislavski attended rehearsals of at Society of Art and Literature production and was asked to give his opinion. When he tried to explain the lack of emotional colours in his role to an actor who played a hypochondriac, the aphorism came of itself (Stanislavski 1980: 182-184).

⁸ When the MAT staged the play in St Petersburg in January 1905, the night of the Kazansky Square massacre which heralded the start of widespread civil unrest that came to a head with the outbreak of the First Revolution, the theatre was filled with intelligentsia who identified with Stockman's line of never putting "on a new coat when one goes to fight for freedom and truth" (Stanislavski 1980: 378-379). Stanislavski's impassioned delivery "aroused such a pandemonium that it was necessary to stop the

doubt influenced his identification with the role and meant he wholly transformed into the character, as he reveals below (Stanislawski 1980: 405-406):

I only had to assume the manners and habits of Stockman, on the stage or off, and in my soul there were born the feelings and perceptions that had given them birth. In this manner, intuition not only created the image, but its passions also. They became my own organically, or, to be more true, my own passions became Stockman's. And during this process I felt the greatest joy an artist can feel, the right to speak on the stage the thoughts of another, to surrender myself to the passions of another, to perform another's actions, as if they were my own.

Despite being so deeply immersed in the role Stanislawski (1980: 406) remained in control of his performance, as his "double, the actor and stage director ... understood well indeed the scenic effect ... between the actor and the spectator." This double consciousness allowed him to regulate the character's actions and to orchestrate the audience's reactions, "[calling] out in both of them sincere passions, truthful living over⁹ of the moment, lively sympathy" (1980: 406). This interaction between stage and auditorium meant "the creative goal of the author and the tendency of the play were created not by the actor but by the spectator, as the result of all that he saw and heard in the theatre" (1980: 407).

In Finland Stanislawski (1980: 459) relived the feelings he experienced as Stockman, recalling "every movement of every muscle, the mimetics¹⁰ of the face, legs, arms, body, and the slitting of the eyes that belonged to the short-sighted man." Yet while playing him in Berlin "[he] had mechanically repeated these fixed appurtenances of the rôle and

performance," as the "entire audience rose and threw itself towards the footlights," stretching out their hands to shake his (*ibid*: 379).

⁹ „Living over“ stems from the Russian term *„perezhivanie“*, which is commonly associated with „experiencing“; namely “[t]he process by which an actor experiences the character’s emotions afresh in each performance” (Benedetti in Stanislawski 2008: 683). Smeliansky (*in* Stanislawski 2008: 692) points out that when Russian practitioners such as Oleg Yefremov used the word however, “it almost always seemed to sound like „living in“ by which was understood the actor’s ability to penetrate and fill every moment of his life onstage with vibrant material at times to create life, at others to complete an action.” In this respect „living over“ or „living in“ “means remaining alive in every second of the stage action, which moves ahead as a non-stop, complex *process*” (*ibid*). In *An Actor Prepares* Tortsov describes this type of acting as “the art of living a part” and the „system“ as “a psychological technique of living a part,” which reveals the importance of this notion in Stanislawski’s ideology (1984: 12, 15).

¹⁰ Mimetics relates to the portrayal of emotional state and thoughts through various facial expressions.

the physical signs of absent emotion,” and after reviewing all his roles he realised the same deterioration had occurred with them as well, in that they were all “disfigured by bad theatrical habits and tricks, by the desire to please the public, by incorrect methods of approach to creativeness, day after day, at every repeated performance” (1980: 460). He therefore posed himself the question of how to prevent this from occurring in the future, and concluded that it was not enough for actors to undertake a physical make-up before they performed, instead they needed “a spiritual make-up before every performance” (1980: 461). Although unsure how this might be achieved, he believed it was the only way to save “[his] rôles from bad rebirths, from spiritual petrification, from the autocracy of evil habit and the lack of truth” (1980: 461), and with this aim in mind he returned to Moscow for the start of the 1906-1907 theatre season.

2.4 The early „system“

“Cracks began to appear in the relationship between Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1905,” according to Benedetti (2008: xix), and they began engaging in separate pursuits, with the result that Stanislavski’s sole directing project for the 1906-1907 season was the Norwegian „neo-realist“ playwright Knut Hamsun’s *The Drama of Life*. His production assistant was Leopold „Suler“ Sulerzhitsky (1872-1916), who became his confidant at a time when he most needed one. An artist with “great talent and unusual charm [that] attracted many outstanding figures in art and literature to him” (Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 22), Suler introduced him to Hinduism¹¹ and the theories of the French objective psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot, in particular his publications *La Psychologie des sentiments (The Psychology of Emotions)* and *La Logique des sentiments (The Logic of Emotions)*,¹² which piqued Stanislavski’s interest in using affective memories in performance. During rehearsals of *The Drama of Life*, which premiered in February 1907, he was not yet prepared to explore this however, and despite applying “all [his] attention as a stage-director and actor almost entirely to the inner character of the play and its rôles,” the results were disappointing, as he explains below (Stanislavski 1980: 474-476):

Each actor squeezed out of himself the passion that he was ordered to create ... [but] they were not connected with each other, and acted each in his own way, without dependence on the meaning of the text which was pronounced mechanically, according to habit. [...] 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. [...] Physical strain was considered to be strength, and the general strained condition inspiration.

¹¹ According to Sergei Tcherkasski (2012: 4): “Apparently, in Stanislavski’s acquaintance with the philosophy of Hinduism a certain role was played by L. A. Soulerzhitsky whose knowledge of Oriental spirituality was quite good, partly thanks to his familiarity with the practice of Dukhobors.” In this respect the Doukhobors “believed that the highest truth resided in the deepest recesses of one’s own soul, untainted by tangible or worldly concerns” (Marowitz 2004: 44). Suler spent two years living and worshipping with them in Canada, helping them settle there at the request of his close friend Tolstoy. As a result he adopted many of their spiritual beliefs.

¹² Ribot also published other titles Stanislavski may have consulted, namely *Psychologie de l’attention (The Psychology of Attention)* and *Essai sur les passions (Essay on the creative imagination)*.

The experiment taught Stanislavski (1980: 480) that the results he was after could not be achieved through force, instead “a systematic approach” was necessary, because:

It is only through a strongly developed outer and inner technique that one can reach immobility without strain, the complete concentration of one’s inner life on the stage, the ability to fire one’s passion and show it in its nakedness without theatrical methods and with the help of imagination and creative effort.

This marked “a historical turning-point” in his artistic activity, and from that moment on his work and attention “were devoted almost completely to the study and teaching of inner creativeness” (Stanislavski 1980: 481).

After *The Drama of Life* Stanislavski (1980: 463-464) “was free of new rôles and the work of stage direction until the end of the season,” granting him the opportunity to experiment while performing his old roles, and during this time he made a discovery that became a fundamental element of his emerging „system“. Given that his attention was on his mental and bodily states during performance, it was “[drawn] away from what was happening on the other side of the footlights, in the auditorium beyond the black and terrible hole of the proscenium arch,” and as a result he felt “pleasantly and comfortably on the stage,” and “ceased to be afraid of the audience” (1980: 464). He also found “it was especially at such times that [his] creative mood was most pleasant,” and concluded actors must always have objects of attention on which to concentrate, both to alleviate their anxiety of being observed and to draw an audience into the scenic circumstances, as he elaborates below (Stanislavski 1980: 464-465):

[I noticed] that the concentration of the actor reacts not only on his sight and hearing, but on all the rest of his senses. It embraces his mind, his will, his emotions, his body, his memory and his imagination. The entire physical and spiritual nature of the actor must be concentrated on what is going on in the soul of the person he plays. I perceived that creativeness is first of all the complete concentration of the entire nature of the actor.

In *My Life in Art*, from which the above is taken, Stanislavski (1980: 465) stated he would dedicate “more than one chapter” of his next book to exercises he “invented” for

the systematic development of his attention following this realisation. In *An Actor Prepares* the fifth chapter is indeed devoted to „Concentration of Attention“, but the exercises are pedantic,¹³ a problem throughout his „great book“. In this respect, as Benedetti (2008: x) pointed out: “The principles of the „system“ may be constant, but the manner and style in which they are expressed is conditioned by time and place.”

Besides monitoring his organism’s functioning during performance, Stanislavski also examined the acting of others. On one such occasion, while watching a “great visiting star in his great rôles,” Stanislavski (1980: 461, 465) saw he was acting mechanically, relying on false pathos as he had done, but then realised “something was taking place in him,” namely “he resembled a singer who used a sounding fork to find the true note,” but once he “came to understand it, to feel it, placed it, directed it, believed in it, and began to enjoy the art of his own speech.” Stanislavski (1980: 465) therefore concluded actors had to believe in themselves as being the character in the imaginary circumstances, and once this happened their behaviour would come alive on stage, an important key to inducing the creative mood as he explains below:

The actor must first of all believe in everything that takes place on the stage, and most of all he must believe in what he himself is doing. And one can believe only in the truth. Therefore it is necessary to feel this truth at all times, to know how to find it, and for this it is unescapable to develop one’s artistic sensitivity to truth.

The question however, was how one could come to believe in the obvious un-truth of the world framed by a proscenium arch? The answer, as Stanislavski (1980: 466) saw it, was that the actor had “to develop to the highest degree his imagination, a childlike naïveté and trustfulness, an artistic sensitivity to truth and to the truthful in his soul and body.” This “feeling of truth” became a physical and spiritual filter by which he “cleansed”

¹³ The exercise used to convey what Stanislavski (1984: 82) termed “Solitude in Public” is “Circles of Attention.” This entails students learning to concentrate their attention on a small circle encompassing their immediate surroundings and then expanding it outwards. They also had to focus their “inner attention” through developing a sensory awareness of the objects they interacted with in the scenic environment, and then to use their creative imagination to heighten their emotional response to them (*ibid*: 87-89). Included in this training was developing observational powers and the ability to focus on objects in the „forth wall“ (*ibid*: 90-93). The final phase entailed learning to fix one’s full attention on other actors. A more astute assessment of these elements is provided by Stanislavski’s assistant Ilia Sudakov (1890-1969), in notes he prepared for his lectures at the Working Youth Theatre in Moscow, which he headed between 1933 and 1937 (see Sudakov in Cole 1995: pp. 91-97).

everything he did on the stage, including the concentration and relaxation exercises he did prior to performing (Stanislavski 1980: 467). He therefore identified the elements necessary for an actor's "spiritual make-up before every performance," as he had conceptualised it in Finland (Stanislavski 1980: 461), so that by the end of the 1906-1907 theatre season he had a theoretical template for his psychotechnique. Attention to objects, a feeling of truth, actor's faith and public solitude thus formed the cornerstones of the „system“ as together they evoked a creative mood, namely “that spiritual and physical mood during which it is easiest for inspiration to be born,” but it required a further element he defined as follows (Stanislavski 1980: 462): ““To-day I am in good spirits! To-day I am at my best!” or “I am acting with pleasure! I am living over my part!” means that the actor is ... in a creative mood.” The operative term is „I am“ or „I am being“ (*Ya Esm*), a core tenet of the „system“. In a manuscript Stanislavski (1975: 249, my insert) wrote in 1934 entitled „From Physical Actions to Living Image“, he described its function during performance as follows:

Standing thus on a firm base [the state of „I am“], I can manipulate both my physical and spiritual nature without fear of becoming confused and losing my ground. And if I do slip off into a false direction I can easily come back and direct myself again along the right path.

This description reveals the real intention behind the state, which was to grant actors creative independence, effectively able to direct themselves. In this regard, as an actor first and foremost, Stanislavski knew that no amount of technical proficiency would protect actors from weak direction, and if their function was using their intuition and emotional sensitivity to reveal the subtextual meanings of a playwright's work, they had to be empowered to convey it to an audience as well. In this respect Stanislavski (1980: 487) considered directors and designers to be in service of actors, helping them to “[create] the true life of the human spirit without which there can be no art.” This had been his principal objection to Meyerhold's work with the Theatre-Studio actors who were only “clay for the molding” in his hands, whereas Stanislavski (1980: 437-438) “did not overlove the stage director in the theatre,” and pinned his hopes “on the actor and on the development of a solid foundation for his creativeness and his technique.” In this regard the „system“ was never intended to be a directorial technique, rather a means whereby actors could create and perform their characters with little outside assistance. In

Meyerhold's view however, actors and playwrights were subservient to the "author of the spectacle" (Schmidt 1980: xvii), as he signed his productions, and his training system, Biomechanics, was formulated to transform them into multi-skilled „Ueber-Marionettes“,¹⁴ or „cabotins“,¹⁵ whose subjectivity was suppressed to not interfere with their objective expressive abilities. This interpretation of actors as an extension of the director's vision rather than creators in their own right is the difference between the „system“, conceived to help them gain conscious control of their unconscious functions, and techniques aimed at conditioning them to become disciplined signifiers in the *mise en scène*. In Stanislavski's view (1980: 544) "the actor was the prime figure and the prime creator in the theatre," and their ability to be both the character and the artist regulating the performance simultaneously was the fundamental aim of „I am being“, the dual subjective-objective condition synonymous with the actor's „creative mood“.

Having identified the main elements of his "spiritual technique" Stanislavski (1980: 542) was ready to experiment with its practical application, but to do so he needed "a play of complex psychology for laboratory work." The ideal opportunity arose in 1908 when he began rehearsing *A Month in the Country* by the Russian realist author Ivan Turgenev.

¹⁴ In his treatise entitled *The Art of the Theatre* (1911), Edward Gordon Craig (in Cole and Chinoy 1970: 381) proposed the notion of a perfect actor as an ueber-marionette, namely someone "who has trained his body from head to foot that it would answer to the workings of his mind without permitting the emotions even so much as to awaken," encapsulating the Platonic ideal.

¹⁵ Meyerhold's artistic manifesto *The Fairground Booth* (1912) expanded on Craig's ideas, calling for actors to become „cabotins“, namely "a strolling player ... kinsman to the mime, the historian, and the juggler ... [someone who] keeps alive the tradition of the true art of acting" (in Braun 1998: 122). Although a polemic against the MAT's realist staging of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1910, it became his ideological template as a Socialist director after the Second Revolution in 1917.

2.5 From conceptualisation to pragmatic application

After his acclaimed direction of the symbolist playwright Leonid Andreev's *The Life of Man*, which premiered in December 1907, Stanislavski resigned from the MAT's board of management as "[his] endless search for new creative ideas, for new experiment was at odds with his colleagues' desire for stability and their wish to hold onto a formula which had brought them success" (Benedetti 2008: xx). In September 1908 he premiered Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, a symbolist fairytale co-directed by Sulerzhitsky, which proved to be another triumph. Realising "[his] retreat from realism and ... entrance into the spheres of the abstract" merely led to "the oldest, most outworn, mediocre acting which is mistakenly accepted for creativeness," Stanislavski (1980: 493, 497) abandoned the search for new forms of staging and once again turned his attention to the actor's art as he "could not make peace with the fact that transcendent human emotions were falsified by the coarse conventions of mediocre scenic craft." *A Month in the Country* therefore came as a welcome challenge. Both directing and playing Rakitin, the beloved of the heroine Natalia Petrovna played by Knipper, he was ideally positioned to apply his psychotechnique to the complex love triangle at the heart of the play, which he described as follows (Stanislavski 1980: 543):

The lacework of the psychology of love which Turgenev weaves in such a masterly fashion demands a special sort of playing on the part of the actors, a playing that might allow the spectator to see closely into the peculiar design of the emotions of loving, suffering, jealous, male and female hearts. How was one to display his heart to such an extent that the spectator might be able to look into it and read all that was written there?

The answer, as Stanislavski (1980: 543) saw it, was that "[o]ne needed some sort of unseen rayings¹⁶ out of creative will, emotion, longing; one needed eyes, mimetics, hardly palpable intonations of the voice, psychological pauses." He thus "[did] away with all that might interfere with the spectator's process of entering into the souls of the actors through the eyes or from receiving through the voice and its intonations the inner essence

¹⁶ Despite the "quasi-mystical methods" he employed during these rehearsals (Worrall 1996: 186), the experiment greatly influenced the „system“'s further development. In this respect "radiation" means "to give" (send out) and "to receive", which connects "one's self with the utmost inner power" to objects, people or events on stage (Chekhov 2004a: 9-13, 19, his italics), the basis of „Communion“, the tenth chapter of *An Actor Prepares*, and a pivotal element of the psychotechnique.

of the feelings and thoughts of the characters in the play,” which meant they had to “infect the spectator with the manner in which they live their rôles” (1980: 543). In this respect the play’s production score charted each character’s inner motives with hieroglyphs denoting moods, thoughts, emotions and sensory awareness (Worrall 1996: 173, 178). It was clearly a radical experiment to undertake with actors unused to such a psychologically intense approach, and it is understandable that they accused Stanislavski (1980: 462-463) of turning them into “guinea pigs to be used for experimentation,” and the rehearsals “into an experimental laboratory.” Despite these complaints and Knipper suffering an emotional breakdown during the eighteen-month rehearsal process, the production, which opened in December 1909, was a triumph, and the general view was that Stanislavski (1980: 383) “had developed simplicity to a point of naturalism.” Although he had taken stage realism to a new height, while the MAT was on tour in Kiev in 1910, he and Knipper improvised their performance in the old palace grounds, the actual setting for the second act, but he stopped as “[he] could not continue [his] false and theatrical pose” (Stanislavski 1980: 383). This was an important realisation in his search for authentic expression, namely that “artistic truth, hinted to us by nature, is incomparably more aesthetic and beautiful, and what is more important, more scenic than that relative truth and theatrical conventionality with which it is the habit to limit theatrical creativeness” (Stanislavski 1980: 384).

The senior MAT actors’ resistance to apply the „inner technique“ during *A Month in the Country* made Stanislavski (1980: 526) realise it was due to a lack of willpower, as he explains below:

All actors ... like to work and are energetic in the sphere of purely physical work. [...] But if you touch their wills ever so lightly, and put before them inner spiritual problems, so as to call forth their conscious or superconscious emotions, you will be met with a rebuff, for the will of the actor is not well exercised; it is lazy, capricious.

Stanislavski (1980: 527) thus concluded that the inner technique, “which is necessary for the creation of the proper creative mood is based in its most important parts on the process of will.” In the twelfth chapter of *An Actor Prepares* entitled „Inner Motive Forces“ Stanislavski (1984: 244, 246, 247, his italics) lists “*three impelling movers in our*

psychic life, three masters who play on the instrument of our soul;” namely “the first, and most important master – *feeling*,” the second “is the *mind*, or *intellect*,” and the “third master – *will*.” Developing these qualities was essential if actors wanted to fully utilise their psychophysical „instruments“, as he clarifies below (1980: 248):

The power of these motive forces is enhanced by their interaction. [...] When we call our mind into action by the same token we stir our will and feelings. It is only when these forces are co-operating harmoniously that we can create freely.

Despite all his efforts to persuade the MAT actors to adopt his inner technique they remained “deaf to [his] desires” (Stanislavski 1980: 527), and he realised he needed actors who had been exposed to its principles throughout their training. He therefore approached Alexander Adashev, a former MAT actor who headed a private drama school, and arranged for Suler to give classes there. The timing proved fortuitous as Vakhtangov enrolled in August 1909.¹⁷ Serafima Birman, a fellow student, explains the significance of this event (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982:187-188*):

Something changed in the school’s life with the arrival of this new pupil [...] Vakhtangov’s face was suffused with will-power and an intense, active imagination. He created the impression of a man who knew how to stand up for his opinions. [...] Adashev ... took a slightly cautious interest in Vakhtangov, suspecting his student of unusual independence and strength. Sulerzhitsky recognised Vakhtangov’s qualities without any hesitation, believing in his rare and valuable quality to move ahead, and to take others after himself in time.

The meeting of these highly creative personalities was an important event in terms of the „system’s“ development. In this respect (Malaev-Babel 2011: 9): “Vakhtangov, a natural-born director and actor possessing the inborn feeling of truth, accepted Sulerzhitsky’s principles as unshakable; they were in perfect harmony with Vakhtangov’s own genetic makeup as an artist.” Although Stanislavski only met his friend’s protégé after he

¹⁷ Vakhtangov spent two years in the Natural Sciences Faculty and four in the Law Faculty at Moscow University. His first amateur directing experience was in August 1904 with Hauptmann’s *The Festival of Peace*. He also directed Gorky’s *Summer Folk* (1906) and *The Lower Depths* (1908), Hamsun’s *At The Gates of the Realm* (1909) and Chekhov’s *Uncle Vayja* (1909), before joining Adashev’s school.

graduated in March 1911, in the interim “Sulerzhitsky taught the different elements of Stanislavski’s Method carefully, but boldly in Adashev’s school,” while Vakhtangov, “one of the first offspring of the „Method“ ... [became] its ardent advocate” (Birman in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 189-190).

2.6 The „system“ comes of age

After Stanislavski's successful application of the inner technique with *A Month in the Country*, Nemirovich-Danchenko decided to put it to the test during his direction of a stage adaptation of Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brother's Karamazov*. While Stanislavski recovered from a lengthy bout of illness in 1910, Nemirovich-Danchenko and his actors immersed themselves in the psychological depths of this "Russian mystery-play", as Alexander Benois, a St Petersburg theatre reviewer, later described it (Braun 1998: 119).

During rehearsals Leonid Leonidov (1873-1941), the foremost MAT tragedian playing Dmitri („Mitya“) Karamazov, was unable to truthfully depict his distraught state after rushing into his lover Grushenka's apartment and searching for her, all the while suspecting she had gone to his father, Fyodor. In trying to help the actor Nemirovich-Danchenko experimented with himself in the role, and suddenly "everyone felt – there it was – the real truth" (Sudakov in Cole 1995: 89). When asked how he created this effect he said he had simply looked for a comb he had lost in the room, and "so it turned out that he had to strike upon an elementary act, to be actually looking for something, in order that all could come to believe in the genuine truth of the painful frenzy of jealousy on the part of Mitya breaking into Grushenka's apartment" (Sudakov in Cole 1995: 89).

Instead of trying to indicate the character's emotional state Nemirovich-Danchenko had therefore engaged in an analogous activity which nonetheless conveyed the required meaning in the dramatic circumstances. This was an important breakthrough as it offered a possible solution to a dilemma Stanislavski had struggled with for years, namely how to convey the actor's internal state by means of external expression without resorting to stereotypical gestures and movements. It was for this reason that he demanded stillness, which required tremendous control and inevitably caused physical tension. What Nemirovich-Danchenko's impromptu exercise showed was that "you may suffer from jealousy or from similar emotion, but in the long run all your actions can be resolved into a series of elementary acts" (Sudakov in Cole 1995: 88). Even though the simple act of looking for a comb was not truly reflective of the character's feelings, the actor's actions were real and unforced. This was a first step to resolving Stanislavski's conundrum of viewing the body's materiality as an obstruction preventing the manifestation of the inner

being. Despite similarities with the body-mind dialectic of Cartesian dualism, Stanislavski's favoured the spirit over both, reflecting his belief that it was the only aspect of human nature that would bring actors and their audiences to a state of "communion with God" (Malaev-Babel 2011: 36-37).

Despite his partner's lofty ideals Nemirovich-Danchenko had a theatre to run in a difficult economic and political climate. Although his approach was tendentious, when *The Brother's Karamazov* premiered in October 1910, staged in two parts on successive nights, he managed to fuse the "abstractly spiritual and realistically social" as his actors had an intensity of expression "nobody could remember ever having experienced before," making Gorky fear it would lead to an increase in the Russian suicide rate (Worrall 1996: 200-201). The unprecedented success of the production prompted Meyerhold to formulate a treatise championing the grotesque (*see note 15*), as it "aims to subordinate psychologism to a decorative task" (Braun 1998: 141).¹⁸ The production signalled that Nemirovich-Danchenko had "ripened into a perfect stage director," as Stanislavski (1980: 533) framed it, despite conducting "his own lines of research." This finding, the basis of *An Actor Prepares*'s seventh chapter, entitled „Units and Objectives“, became a pivotal element of the „system“. Although it would take Stanislavski twenty years to shift his focus from the psychological to the physical as a more reliable means to create a performance score, it nonetheless gave him a means to integrate the inseparable aspects of human nature with behaviour.

Nemirovich-Danchenko's successful application of the „system“, albeit in a modified form, led to him adopting a more positive attitude towards his partner's experiments. In 1911, at a pre-rehearsal meeting of Tolstoy's *The Living Corpse*, which they co-directed, he addressed the entire company and insisted that Stanislavski's methods should be studied "by the actors of the main group and accepted by the Theatre" (Stanislavski 1980: 526). However, when asked to explain the „system"s principles to the ensemble, Stanislavski (1980: 526) was unable to, as he elaborates below:

¹⁸ This polemical broadside was an ideological watershed for the thirty-six year old innovator who had been experimenting with various theatre forms, and for the next twenty years he would embrace the grotesque, a style he believed offered "the most wonderful horizons to the creative artist," as it allowed them to use any material as the basis of their art, not only those corresponding to the truth of reality (Braun 1998: 137).

I confess that at that time I was not yet prepared to solve the difficult problem that Nemirovich-Danchenko had laid before me. I had not yet found simple words for the expression of my thoughts and I fulfilled my mission far from perfectly. There was nothing surprising in the fact that the actors did not become as enthused as I wanted them to be.

Due to Stanislavski's inability to convey what he intuitively understood, the „system“ “at that time was severely criticized by the real actors,” and although they questioned him about its “special terminology,” and some adopted these terms, “they used the terminology to cover their own perceptions which were at times creative, but mostly merely theatrical” (Stanislavski 1980: 529). It also vexed him that they were only interested “to learn how such and such a rôle is *acted*,” rather than mastering the „system“ itself, which had to be “systematically and practically studied for years” and could not “be explained in an hour or a day even” (Stanislavski 1980: 526, 528). This attitude persisted, and a decade later, while writing *My Life in Art* (1980: 528, 530), he stated that the „system“ had not yet shown any results because the MAT actors “filtered it through the prisms of their experienced and well-trained artistic natures.”¹⁹ Thus, despite Nemirovich-Danchenko's support,²⁰ none of the actors were willing to study it, and although many “learned to concentrate, it only made them make all their old mistakes and made those mistakes display themselves more and more, perfected those mistakes, so to say” (Stanislavski 1980: 529). Embracing some elements while disregarding others therefore defeats the function of the „system“, which is to develop authentic expression by ridding actors of personal habits and theatrical tricks. In this respect, as Stanislavski (1980: 492, 529) asserted, “separate elements of art can fulfil the purpose of creativeness no more than separate elements of the air can serve man for breathing,” and the „system“ “does good only when it becomes the second nature of the actor, when he stops thinking of it consciously, when it begins to appear naturally, as of itself.”

¹⁹ This remained the case, and in 1934, while working with Adler in France, Stanislavski told her “that the System had never been thoroughly practiced at the Moscow Art Theatre” (Clurman 1974: 144).

²⁰ According to Benedetti (2008: xx): “Although the „system“ was declared the official working method of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1911, this was no more than an attempt to repair the increasingly poor relationship between Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko who was, in fact, hostile to many of Stanislavski's ideas,” and he “remained very much an isolated figure at the Moscow Art Theatre.”

Stanislavski's obstinacy led to the senior MAT actors working with him against their will, and a wall rose between him and the company (Stanislavski 1980: 528). The large casts of *The Living Corpse* and *Hamlet*, which premiered in September and December 1911 respectively, meant that supernumeraries were needed to bolster the MAT's ranks however. The timing was therefore perfect for Suler's students to join the company, and in March 1911 Vakhtangov and other Adashev graduates, including Birman, were hired on a temporary basis. Included in this new intake was Michael Chekhov, the playwright's nephew, whose aunt Knipper-Chekhova,²¹ had introduced him to Stanislavski. A graduate of St Petersburg's Suvorin Theatre School, he spent a year at the Maly Suvorinsky Theater where he had "excelled in creating offbeat characterisations of much older men" (Powers in Chekhov 2004a: xxx-xxx). The stage was therefore set for a clash between his highly theatrical style and the psychological realism Stanislavski hoped to foster, and the collaboration between Chekhov and Vakhtangov, two of the most gifted Russian theatre artists of their generation, would transform the „system“ in ways not even its creator could have predicted.

²¹ Chekhov created the role of Masha in *Three Sisters* for Knipper, and they married on 25 May 1901.

2.7 Founding the First Studio

The MAT's production of *Hamlet*, designed and co-directed by Gordon Craig, was a significant event in the evolution of the „system“, prompting Stanislavski to reevaluate its entire ideological basis. After Stanislavski (1980: 522) rehearsed the MAT actors for several months Craig dismissed the results, as his following account reveals:

He did not acknowledge the usual theatrical playing of actors, nor did we, but he did not even accept simplified though truthful interpretation of high feelings. [...] There was no noble simplicity, no grand assurance, no masterly restraint. There were no sonorous voices and beautiful speech, harmonic movement and plastics. But there was that which we feared most of all, – either usual theatrical pathos or the other pole, a very tiresome, heavy and prosaic living over of the parts.

To better understand what Craig sought, Stanislavski acted in a range of styles before him, including “the old and conventional French manner, then in the German, the Italian, the Russian declamatory, the Russian realistic,” and “the new impressionistic method,” but none were to his liking, as Stanislavski (1980: 522-523) explains below:

[H]e protested on the one hand against the old conventionality of the theatre, and on the other hand he would not accept the humdrum naturalness and simplicity which robbed my interpretations of all poetry. Craig wanted perfection, the ideal, that is, simple, strong, deep, uplifting, artistic and beautiful expression of living human emotion.

After his inability to satisfy Craig, a “very much confused” Stanislavski realised that what had seemed natural to him “was in reality born of old theatrical frumpery,” and led to him passing “many anxious months and years,” before concluding that his „inner technique“ only suited modern plays and he had “to find analogical methods and means for plays in the heroic and the grand style” (Stanislavski 1980: 523, 524). It was at this time of uncertainty regarding the „system“'s effectivity with the classic repertoire that the MAT's First Studio came into being.

During the *Hamlet* rehearsals in August 1911 Stanislavski approached Vakhtangov and asked him to gather a group of young actors who were interested in learning the „system“ and to start giving them lessons, promising he would provide the premises and the money they needed. According to Vakhtangov (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 15): “Stanislavsky said to me: „Work. If anyone interferes, I’ll tell them to leave. I need a new theatre. Go on working quietly. Don’t mention my name.“” The following year he hired a hall in the Moscow Hunting Club,²² “furnished with a little stage on the level of the floor,” and “gathered all who wanted to study the so-called Stanislavsky System, for this study was the main purpose of the founding of the Studio;” which he opened in October 1912 with Suler assuming its leadership (Stanislavski 1980: 531).

Here Stanislavski (1980: 531-532) gave a course whose “aim was to give practical and conscious methods for the awakening of superconscious creativeness,” based on exercises “for the creation of the creative feeling, for the analysis of the rôle, and for the construction of the willed orchestration of the rôle on the bases of consistency and the logic of emotion.” The actors also rehearsed Herman Heijermans’ *The Wreck of the Good Hope*, directed by Richard Boleslavsky (1889-1937). In January 1913 Nemirovich-Danchenko and senior MAT actors attended a dress rehearsal, which, in Stanislavski’s view (1980: 532), was “exceptionally successful and clearly displayed in all those who took part in it a certain special and until that time unknown simplicity and depth in the interpretation of the life of the human spirit.” Yet when the production opened in February, Chekhov’s portrayal of the old fisherman Cobe was “recognised as the best in the acting company, demonstrating „genuine humour, a heart-warmingness free of sentimentality, and an already significant ability for stage inventiveness“” (Kirillov in Chekhov 2005: 206).

Bearing in mind that Meyerhold worked as a director at the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theatre and Imperial Marinsky Opera in St Petersburg, Chekhov was no doubt aware of his work. In this respect Chekhov (2004a: xxx) studied the inspired performances of great actors “on the stage of the Alexandrinsky Theatre” to probe their secrets, “and began to apply them to his own work.” His acting approach was thus very different to Suler’s students, placing a far greater emphasis on external form and style than being

²² The same premises formerly housed The Society of Art and Literature.

psychologically „truthful“. He also had “a well developed sense of the ridiculous,” a quality he believed was essential, as humour “provides the kind of knowledge that is necessary for art and it brings a lightness into creative work” (Chekhov 2005: 21). Stanislavski did not share this view however, and during a performance of Molière’s *The Imaginary Invalid* in March 1913, in which Chekhov played a minor role, he was “ticked off by the maestro for having too much fun with the part” (Marowitz 2004: 38). In an incident which became part of the MAT’s folklore he was asked to create an affective memory exercise²³ and relived his grief at his father’s funeral, deeply moving everyone present including Stanislavski, who, “genuinely affected, embraced the actor and commented on his detailed powers of recall” (Marowitz 2004: 39). Afterwards he learnt that Chekhov’s father was still alive and that “the exercise was strictly an imaginative evocation of an incident as it might occur in the future,” and he promptly ejected Chekhov from his classes for having an “overheated imagination” (Marowitz 2004: 39). Despite their artistic differences Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko held his abilities in high esteem however, and he was soon offered more substantial roles,²⁴ but it was his work with Vakhtangov at the First Studio that enabled him to integrate his inherent theatricality with the „inner technique“.

Chekhov and Vakhtangov first collaborated on Hauptmann’s *The Festival of Peace*, the latter’s debut as a professional director²⁵ in the First Studio’s second production, which premiered in November 1913. Birman (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 190*), also a member of the cast, described the outcome as follows:

The Festival of Peace did not bring Vakhtangov success as a director. The Art Theatre “elders”, headed by Stanislavsky, did not accept the play: they

²³ Affective or „Emotion Memory“, the title of the ninth chapter in *An Actor Prepares*, was a mainstay of the „system“ from its inception until Stanislavski began to favour the use of the actor’s imagination in the given circumstances, possibly due to Chekhov’s influence. Although the Method of Physical Actions switched the focus to a character’s external behaviour rather than their psychological motives, he did not abandon the use of affective memories. In fact, this specialist technique remained a part of the „system“ throughout Stanislavski’s life, as it is often the most effective means of evoking intense emotional reactions for specific moments in a performance (*see Smeliansky 1999: 139*).

²⁴ As early as 1913 Chekhov understudied Moskvin in *Tsar Fyodor* and was offered the plum part of Foma Opiskin in a dramatisation of Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Village of Stepanchikovo*, but “Moskvin demanded the role for himself, and, given his eminence in the theater, it was given to him” (Marowitz 2004: 38). For Moskvin to have considered Chekhov, seventeen years his junior, a threat to his reputation, speaks volumes about his talent and ability to authentically portray much older men.

²⁵ He staged the play under the title *Sick People* at the Vladikavkaz Student and Drama Circle in 1904.

considered our performance “neurotic”. [...] Several months later Gorky saw the play ... and rated it very highly, both verbally and in the press. Gorky was touched, even deeply moved by our “emotions”. Sincere emotion in the role was the foundation of our emerging theatrical attitudes.

The production’s failure was an eye-opener for Vakhtangov whose “search for truthfulness and natural feeling” had resulted in the actors acting for themselves and ignoring the audience (Birman in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 190). But in his second Studio production, namely *The Deluge* by the Swedish playwright Henning Berger, his attention to external form would become a principal consideration.

2.8 A search for heightened forms

In a diary entry dated “Autumn 1913” Vakhtangov (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 31) uses several pertinent terms that convey the early „system“’s application in characterisation and performance, namely „work on the role“:

The actors’ tasks were expanded. The transitions from one part to another were made more vivid. I tried to set off each unit from the other units. Nearly all the actors had certain moments in their roles re-interpreted. Their tasks were freshened up with new „adaptations“.²⁶ The „cores“ of the roles played by Sushkevitch, Deikun, Khmara, Birman, and Popova²⁷ were changed. I began to search for the kernel of Boleslavski’s part.

From this description it is evident that Vakhtangov knew how to apply „Units and Objectives“ (aka „Bits and Tasks“) and „Adaptation“, all key elements of the „system“. His distinction between the terms „core“ and „kernel“ is also relevant, as they are often conflated but have specific meanings, as Stanislavski (1975: 63-64) explains below:

Deeply passionate emotions are necessary to carry away feelings, will, mind, and all of an actor’s being. These can only be aroused by objectives with a deep inner content. The secret of inner technique and its essence are concealed in them. [...] What must we do to accomplish this? Should we change the objectives and the whole physical and simple psychological score that provide the external life of his role? ... No! They continue to exist but gain substance. The difference will lie in the inner life, the general state of the actor, the moods in which each objective is carried out. ... This changed

²⁶ „Adaptation“, the title of the eleventh chapter in *An Actor Prepares*, initially referred to the actor’s external technique, i.e. mimicry, gestures and intonation, “which an actor must develop as he *adapts himself* to his partner’s acting during their work together on stage” (Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 22, italics in original). It remained an integral part of the „system“, but evolved to include a character’s inner state. During the *Tartuffe* rehearsals in 1938 Stanislavski “demanded an ever greater variety of tone and a broad range of adaptations,” stating (*in* Toporkov 2001: 144) that “human adaptations and ways of expressing feeling are innumerable and almost never straightforward” After his death, when the play was first performed, it was revelatory. According to Toporkov (2001: 155, his quotes): “The first moves, the first lines, when no one was doing any „acting“, only „adapting to each other, „forming up with each other“, produced great concentration in the audience, and that couldn’t but be reflected in the way the actors felt.” In 1934 Stanislavski explained the term to Zon (1955: 470) as follows: “One should *adapt* to the partner, i.e. to enter his soul, to guess what is happening within it.”

²⁷ Boris Sushkevitch first met Vakhtangov in 1906 during their amateur theatre days. He joined the MAT in 1908. Lydia Deikun, Anna Popova and Grigory Khmara were MAT actresses.

inner state or mood I shall call the *inner tone*. In actor's jargon it is called the *germ of feeling*.²⁸

Vakhtangov therefore deepened the „inner tones“ or „cores“ of the five actors' roles, which entailed adjusting their tasks and adaptations, but with Boleslavsky, who had skipped several rehearsals, and was “always superficial towards his partners” when attending, he still had to identify the „kernel“ of his role as it related to “the „kernel“ of the play” (Vakhtangov in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 30, 35). In an article Stanislavski (in Cole 1995: 28) wrote for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entitled *Direction and Acting*,²⁹ he referred to this as “the creative germ of the play,” and explained how this related to an actor's „work on the role“ as follows:

The actor's task, then, begins with the search for the play's artistic seed. All artistic action – organic action, as in every constructive operation of nature – starts from this seed at the moment when it is conveyed to the mind. On reaching the actor's mind, the seed must wander around, germinate, put out roots, drinking in the juices of the soil in which it is planted ... [so that it] may lead to the creation of life, of a clear truly artistic theatrical image, and not of a trade substitute ...

Although later termed a play's „Super-Objective“ and a character's „Unbroken Line“³⁰ in pursuing their goals, Vakhtangov clearly grasped the vital interrelationship of these elements. His failure with *The Festival of Peace* was therefore not because he did not understand the „system's“ principles, but perhaps because he tried to apply them as a

²⁸ The manuscript from which this extract was taken “was written between 1916 and 1920,” according to Hapgood (in Stanislavski 1975: 1), and does not employ the student diary format Stanislavski later adopted. It is a concise explication of „work on the role“ but is based on a study of the classic Russian verse comedy *Woe from Wit* by Alexander Griboyedov, a satirical portrayal of Moscow society in the 1820s which defies translation. A further problem is that he wrote it prior to formulating the Method of Physical Actions, which diminished the relevance of many procedures he described in the overall process. Whereas before a performance score relied on linking psychological movements derived from affective memories, the emphasis shifted to creating physical actions that reflexively triggered them.

²⁹ In the article, which formed part of a general section entitled „Theatre“ in Volume 22 (1947, pp. 35-38), Stanislavski (in Cole 1995: 30) states the ideas expressed in it were the result of contemplating “problems which presented themselves to the writer about 20 years ago,” suggesting he wrote it during the MAT's 1923-1924 tour to the USA, or shortly thereafter.

³⁰ „The Unbroken Line“ or „through line of action“, and „The Super Objective“, are titles of the fifteenth and seventeenth chapters in *An Actor Prepares*. These elements of the „system“ were so important that Stanislavski once stated (in Toporkov 2001: 159, author's emphasis): “The more I think about acting ... the shorter my definition becomes. [Good acting] is the kind in which there is a SUPERTASK and a THROUGH-ACTION. Bad acting is when there is neither.”

rigid formula. In *The Deluge* however, which opened in December 1915, “an acting style very different from the other plays staged at the Studio” emerged, according to the theatre critic Pavel Markov³¹ (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 177*), “marked by a more clear-cut and graphic quality ... [that] stressed to the utmost certain typical traits and details, imparting to the images a certain hyperbolisation and exaggeration,”³² which was best seen in Chekhov’s performance. In Birman’s opinion (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 191*):

Vakhtangov’s real career as a director began with *The Deluge*. [...] The sorrow and passion of his interpretation of the play fired everyone in the play. Vakhtangov was highly successful in fusing form and content in *The Deluge*. He expressed the play’s content in the only form possible, he rejected the idea of creating a form and then making the content fit it. The content gave rise to the correct form, not the other way round.³³

In a telling diary entry dated 14 April 1915 Vakhtangov states (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 32*) there was “a dissatisfaction with naturalist stage productions” and “a need for something lofty” among the First Studio actors and his own pupils,³⁴ namely “feelings reflected in the spiritual, lofty sphere,” which he described as “the first step towards „romanticism“.” His search for a heightened form of expression would be realised in his third Studio production of Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*, which premiered in April 1918 after two years’ work.³⁵ The choice of this particular play, which Ibsen (cited by

³¹ Markov, a director of the MAT and head of its literary section, was an astute theatre practitioner whose article was published in 1925, three years after Vakhtangov’s death.

³² The terms Markov used could apply to Vakhtangov’s portrayal of Tackleton in *The Cricket on the Heath* by Dickens, directed by Sushkevich and staged in November 1914. According to the Soviet theatre critic Nikolai Volkov (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 219*) it was Vakhtangov’s best role, revealing “his noble and refined talent,” his ability “to use make-up to full effect,” his “innate sense of measure, and his outward mannerisms [that] were restrained and graphic.”

³³ Birman’s comments should be viewed in the light of the fact that „formalism“ became the “declared enemy” of „socialist realism“ in the Stalinist era, and “was to be exterminated at all costs” (Smeliansky 1999: 2). This led to Meyerhold’s execution and Vakhtangov being labelled as having had similar tendencies. Despite her attempt to defend his legacy, Vakhtangov’s shift in emphasis from portraying the psychology of characters to more aesthetic considerations of performance is nonetheless apparent.

³⁴ From September 1911 Vakhtangov taught at various private theatre schools to experiment with his own ideas away from the MAT elders’ influence. His first such engagement was at Sofia Khalyutina’s school where he taught until 1915.

³⁵ Sushkevich, one of the three First Studio directors along with Boleslavsky and Vakhtangov, points out (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 198*), that during the period 1911-1920 “[their] six plays was a whole creative period in itself,” in that each play “was rehearsed for years at a time.”

Vakhtangov in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 49) described as a “poetic work dealing with people and their destinies,” was significant in that Nemirovich-Danchenko staged it in 1908, but it “was received uncomprehendingly, even harshly by the critics,” according to the Soviet theatre critic Lyubov Freidkina (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 213), and led to him feeling “so badly mauled” that “[he] didn’t want to direct anything for the next two years.” Vakhtangov and he therefore dreamed “of an intellectual theatre, a theatre of social ideas,” as Freidkina (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 213-214) elaborates below:

[In *Rosmersholm* both] wanted to “take the theatre out of the theatre” and to replace its outward colourfulness, its specific qualities and rapid action with an inner intensity, spirituality, and the revelation of intellectual and psychological conflict. In a theatre of this type, the actors do not play-act, they are transformed: their faces, eyes, and hands convey the subtlest nuances of their thoughts and feelings and their technique has a lofty spiritual quality.

2.9 Towards an ideological synthesis

During Vakhtangov's preparations to stage *Rosmersholm* several events occurred that impacted on his outlook on life and art. The first was the death of Suler in December 1916, followed by the Second Revolution in October 1917. Equally significant was Stanislavski's lavish production of *Twelfth Night* at the First Studio in late 1917,³⁶ in which Vakhtangov as "a magnificent Jester" gave "a marvellous, technically perfect performance" (Sushkevich *in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 200-201). However, his growing disenchantment with Stanislavski's approach is evident in the following excerpt taken from a letter he wrote to the actor Alexander Cheban³⁷ in August 1917 (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 42-43):

They are hurriedly doing the sets for *Twelfth Night* at the Studio. Stanislavsky has thought up something incredible. They will be beautiful and impressive, but pointless and expensive. They've already spent 6.000 roubles. And they believe in simplicity! [...] Stanislavsky is a strange man! I can't understand who needs these external effects. [...] The Method will lose out, and the Studio will fade – not change, but fade. All my hopes lie with you, my Rosmersholm brothers!

A footnote in the letter is equally revealing (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 43): "I'm not drinking any bicarbonate of soda, nor am I eating meat or smoking much. Nor am I getting any better." Considering Vakhtangov died of abdominal cancer less than five years later, it is possible that he already had a premonition of his terminal condition at this stage.³⁸

³⁶ According to Markov (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 11, his quotes): "The staging of this Shakespearian comedy was an indication of the involuntary striving towards "serious theatre". The play demonstrated a wish for unadulterated, real play-acting, but it was less obvious on what basis the new acting methods were to be created," and it was in this context that Vakhtangov began searching for a means "to reconcile the "life-like" and the "monumental" on the stage."

³⁷ Cheban initially rehearsed the role of Mortensgard, which Sushkevich took over after *Twelfth Night*.

³⁸ In a diary entry dated 24 November 1918 written in the Ignatyeva Hospital where he had been since 27 October, Vakhtangov (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 56) questions his depressed state and answers: "I sense something in the future. It is very vague, and therefore disturbing. [...] Time for me to think about taking courage and being more daring ...". In this revealing reflection he bemoans the fact that "talented writers deal with trivial themes," stating "[he would] like to make a stage version of scenes from the Bible" (*ibid*). This preoccupation with epic themes permeated all his subsequent work.

Whereas before Vakhtangov had been an ardent disciple of Stanislavski, during his work on *Rosmersholm* “[he] was greatly influenced by the psychological intensity typical of Nemirovich-Danchenko’s teachings,” according to the MAT actor and later Soviet theatre theoretician Alexei Popov (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 43). In Freidkina’s view (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 213):

Rosmersholm contained the restrained passion, tragic simplicity, and intense inner conflicts about which Nemirovich-Danchenko dreamed as he aimed for uncomplicated severity and depth. [...] The influence of Nemirovich-Danchenko’s directing methods could also be felt in Vakhtangov’s subtle, fastidious analysis of the text, in the way he disclosed the play’s main idea and how he determined his direction’s tasks, in his analysis of the characters, and his revealing the play’s essence.

Nemirovich-Danchenko’s ability to help actors pinpoint their characters’ personality traits was a key to the success of *The Brother’s Karamazov*, his comeback production after *Rosmersholm*. Despite the complex, oft contradictory qualities of Dostoyevsky’s personages, he had helped Leonidov identify with Mitya’s inner struggle in terms of his conflicting feelings towards his father, allowing him “to depict the two mutually exclusive sides of Dmitri Karamazov’s character, very difficult to present on stage” (Freidkina *in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 215-216). Revealing the duality of human nature on stage became an integral aspect of Vakhtangov’s emergent ideas as a director, and a hallmark of Chekhov’s characterisations. Vakhtangov’s assimilation of Nemirovich-Danchenko’s directorial approach is evident in his diary entry below from 1918 (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 52, 54, his insert):

The way in which the play can be broken down into sections depends on the play’s main line, its underlying motivating action. [...] The sections in the roles depend on the play’s main and auxiliary sections. [...] The performer should know what his guiding idea is, as opposed to what is incidental, and what incidental ideas contribute to the main (guiding) idea. The major idea should never be obscured.

Whereas Stanislavski (1980: 406) uncovered a play’s meaning through following “the line of the intuition of feelings” from which he believed “the outer and inner images,

their form, the idea and the technique of the rôle” would “grow unconsciously,” Nemirovich-Danchenko’s determined it through an in-depth analysis of the material. This had been a major cause of conflict in their relationship, because he approached a play’s “hidden riches ... by the literary road,” as Stanislavski (1980: 352) framed it, whereas he took “the road of the actor, the road of images.” What Vakhtangov learnt from Nemirovich-Danchenko was that studying a play’s text revealed its style and “guided the actor to an understanding of the *nature of the role* he is acting,” which in turn determined the “logic of his behaviour and his actions” (Popov in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 169, his italics). Vakhtangov thus “devoted great attention to the work’s style and inner structure, trying to present them as accurately as possible on stage,” according to the Soviet theatre critic Kim Krivitsky (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 261). In this respect “[he] took the inner intensity of the roles and clothed them in severe, restrained form,” forcing “his actors to think, as well, not just to intensify their feelings,” so that “*Rosmersholm* signalled a breakthrough, not only to the psychological core of the role, but to the actor’s creative essence” (Markov in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 178-179).

Despite Nemirovich-Danchenko considering *Rosmersholm* to be “one of the greatest successes of Vakhtangov’s career as a director,” achieving everything he had tried to in his own production, namely “restrained passion, tragic simplicity, and intense inner conflicts,” which he hoped would portray “uncomplicated severity and depth,” it was not well received, and many critics saw it as “a negation of the “theatre”” (Freidkina in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 214-215). Nevertheless, the young director had found his own voice, and according to Sushkevich (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 198): “*Rosmersholm* was at that time Vakhtangov’s last production for the First Studio within the framework of Stanislavsky’s Method.”

2.10 A catalyst and a confluence

In September 1918 Vakhtangov staged Maeterlinck's *The Miracle of St. Anthony* at his own studio³⁹ interpreting it as "a story about kind-hearted eccentrics" (Sushkevich in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 199), which was widely considered a failure.⁴⁰ His next significant production⁴¹ was *Erik XIV* by the Swedish playwright August Strindberg, which premiered at the First Studio in March 1921. According to Markov (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 182) it was "a powerful, stirring work for the Studio," capturing the mood in post-Revolutionary Moscow as well as being "a cry uttered by a man caught "between two worlds," in which Erik's doom and anguish were conveyed "[in] clear-cut movements and gestures and an utmost intensity." It was this production, in which Chekhov played the title role, that would be a definitive experience in the lives of both, as they created a new approach to characterisation and a performance style that challenged existing conventions.

In March 1919 Vakhtangov underwent an operation in which part of his stomach was removed. In a letter to Stanislavski dated 29 March (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 116) he wrote that he knew "[his] days on earth are numbered." At this time he also wrote an article entitled „To Those Who Write About Stanislavsky's Method“ in response to one Chekhov had published.⁴² Concerned it might give those unfamiliar with the „system“ "a false and incorrect impression from the fragmentary information it provided," he took offence at Chekhov's claim that it was a "complete and detailed

³⁹ In December 1913 a group of Moscow University students invited Vakhtangov to direct them in *The Lanin Estate* by Boris Zaitsev. Although the production was unsuccessful they decided "to devote their free time to serious theatrical studies" under his direction (Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 63). The Student Drama Society evolved into the Vakhtangov Studio before becoming the MAT's Third Studio in September 1920. The MAT's Second Studio was opened in 1916 under the leadership of Vakhtang Mchedelov with a staging of *The Green Ring* by the Russian playwright Zinaida Gippius. The principal function of this satellite was to train actors for the main company.

⁴⁰ Vakhtangov restaged the play in November 1921 at the official opening of the Third Studio, but the incarnation was wholly different. In Sushkevich's view (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 199) it "was a biting play about human vulgarity, a protest against bourgeois narrow-mindedness."

⁴¹ After his discharge from hospital in December 1918, Vakhtangov became the artistic director of the Popular Theatre where he staged Guy de Maupassant's *Le Port*, Octave Mirbeau's *The Thief*, and Isabella Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon*. He was also a director at the Anatoly Gunst Drama Studio, and served on the Second Studio's council, as well as teaching at the Armenian Studio, the Chaliapin Drama Studio, and the Tchaikovsky Motion Picture Studio.

⁴² Chekhov's two-part article, entitled „On Stanislavski's Method“, appeared in *Gorn (The Bugle)* in 1919, Vol. 2-3, a publication of the Proletarian Cultural-Enlightening Organisation (Proletkult). Vakhtangov's article was published in *Vestnik Teatra (The Theatre Herald)* in 1919, No. 14.

presentation,” which he felt “only the person who created this Method is capable of giving” (Vakhtangov in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 125). Despite his objection it is nonetheless clear that Chekhov understood the elements of the „system“ as they existed at that time.⁴³ He had also recently recovered from a bout of depression brought on by contradictions in his nature that stemmed from his parents’ contrasting personalities, in particular his father, who exerted a powerful influence on him,⁴⁴ and aggravated by heavy drinking. During his convalescence he gained insights into the duality of human nature that aligned his existential outlook with that of Vakhtangov, as his account below reveals (Chekhov 2005: 33, his italics):

Living with the contrasts and contradictions, the longing to reconcile these contradictions outwardly and to resolve them inwardly ... all this formed in me a certain special feeling for the life around me and for other people. I perceived the good and the evil, the right and the wrong, the beautiful and the ugly, the strong and the weak, the ill and the healthy, the great and the small, as particular *indivisible unities*. [...] I did not trust *straightforward and simple* mentalities ... [as they] did not know that to be truly human means to be able to reconcile opposites.

The confluence of emotional upheaval in Chekhov and Vakhtangov’s lives, echoed by the turbulent socio-political climate at the time, therefore formed the backdrop of their collaboration. Both were equally acquainted with the „system“’s principles after a decade of experimentation and personal assimilation, which included incorporating Suler’s spiritualist inclinations and Nemirovich-Danchenko’s intellectually orientated outlook in the mix. The catalyst that enabled them to integrate these influences and to express the result in a clearly defined manner was Comrade Meyerhold, who returned to Moscow in

⁴³ A collection of Chekhov’s notes that Toby Cole, editor of *Acting: A Handbook of the Stanislavski Method* dates to 1922 and included under the title „Stanislavski’s Method of Acting“ (see Chekhov in Cole 1995: pp. 128-140), shows he was familiar with the most important aspects of „work on oneself“ and „work on a role“. This document, which includes exercises for developing concentration and the imagination, was either the same article published in *Gorn*, or derived from it.

⁴⁴ According to Charles Marowitz in his book *The Other Chekhov* (2004: 15): “Every fibre in Michael Chekhov’s being, every nuance of his mind, every flaw in his character can be traced back to his father Alexander Pavlovitch Chekhov, the elder brother of the renowned playwright Anton Chekhov.” Growing up he “was terrified, entranced, monopolized, and dominated by a paterfamilias who was ingenious, inspired, irascible, unpredictable, alcoholic, neurotic, and entirely inescapable” (*ibid*).

1920 “to take charge of the Theatrical Department for the entire Soviet Republic”⁴⁵ (Braun 1998: 162). Using its literary organ *Vestnik teatra* he launched a “violent polemic on behalf of the proletarian, provincial, non-professional and Red Army theatres,” demanding “a ruthless redeployment of the manpower and material resources concentrated in the small group of „Academic Theatres“ in Moscow,”⁴⁶ but the State viewed them as “the most worthy custodians of Russian theatrical traditions and rewarded them with its financial support” (Braun 1998: 162). As a result he resigned from his post, and severed all ties with the Theatrical Department. His actions had made him a persona non grata as far as Nemirovich-Danchenko was concerned however, who later became “the theatrical director-in-chief of the Stalin empire” (Smeliansky 1999: 48). The stage was therefore set for an ideological battle between Meyerhold and the MAT⁴⁷ which would lead to some of the most acclaimed and innovative theatre productions of the early twentieth century.

In 1920 Meyerhold took over the Free Theatre Company, augmenting it “with his own young and inexperienced nominees” and renaming it the „R.S.F.S.R. Theatre No. 1“ (Braun 1998: 165). In November he staged an adaptation of *The Dawn*, a drama by the Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren “depicting the transformation of a capitalist war into an international proletarian uprising,” to coincide with the third anniversary of the Second Revolution (Braun 1998: 163). Despite being staged in the former Sohn theatre with its derelict, unheated auditorium, flaking plaster, and broken seats, the agitprop production was a major success, running to packed houses for a hundred performances, heralding the dawn of Soviet theatre, and becoming “a *locus classicus* in the history of the political theatre” (Braun 1998: 163-164). His return to Moscow after a fifteen year absence was therefore a cataclysmic event in the cultural circles of a city in which “the Revolution had

⁴⁵ Meyerhold left Petrograd, the former St Petersburg, in May 1919 and spent the summer in a Yalta sanatorium receiving treatment for tuberculosis. When the White Army entered the town in August he was arrested due to his Bolshevik sympathies, spending four months in prison and narrowly escaping execution. When the Red Army captured the town “he participated in regular military training and spoke at both political and theatrical debates” (Braun 1998: 162-163). He was appointed to his exalted position by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People’s Commissar for Education.

⁴⁶ They were the Bolshoi, the Maly, the MAT and its Studios, Alexander Tairov’s Kamerny (Chamber) Theatre and the Moscow Children’s Theatre.

⁴⁷ According to Edward Braun (1998: 179) Meyerhold “never missed an opportunity to emphasise that his condemnation of the Art Theatre did not embrace Stanislavsky.” This is borne out by Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), the Father of Montage, who became Meyerhold’s student in 1921. According to Eisenstein (*in* Schmidt 1980: 9): “His love and admiration for Stanislavsky were amazing, even during the fiercest years of his fight against the Moscow Art Theatre. How often he spoke with affection of Stanislavsky, how highly he valued his talent and his knowledge!”

left no impression” as “not one Academic Theatre had [yet] attempted to stage a Soviet play” (Braun 1998: 162). Besides *The Dawn*’s propagandist overtures that sophisticated audiences considered crude, the proletariat were confused by its *mise en scène* however. In this respect the designer Vladimir Dmitriev, who had attended Meyerhold’s theatre arts course in Petrograd,⁴⁸ favoured “the geometrical schematization of the Futurist school,” combining “red, gold and silver cubes, discs and cylinders, cut-out tin triangles” with “recognizable objects such as a graveyard cross” (Braun 1998: 164). The result of this audacious modernist experiment in the very heart of theatrical naturalism was that it led the way for artists like Chekhov and Vakhtangov to break with traditional conventions and to strive for more artistically challenging forms of expression. For Vakhtangov in particular the arrival of the theatrical innovator provided him with a role model. In November 1920, while receiving treatment for his deteriorating condition, he wrote to Meyerhold and invited him to work with his students, as the excerpt below reveals (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 135*):

My deeply respected Vsevolod Emilyevich, I am very ill and cannot come to see you in person [...] I have long admired you ... and have sought an opportunity to talk to you. If you like, this opportunity may be found through the Third Studio. You will find marvellous young people, unspoiled by any “theatrical” traditions here. We know how to be enthusiastic and we know what it means to be enraptured by something. Perhaps you would like to do something with people like this, maybe you could drop by some time to chat to us ...

Vakhtangov’s use of quotation marks with the term „theatrical“ betrays his derisive attitude towards the MAT’s naturalistic ethos, which he considered un-theatrical, if anything. In a diary entry dated 26 March 1921 (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 140*, his insert and quotes), while again receiving medical treatment two days before the premiere of *Erik XIV*, his thinking is revealed in no uncertain terms:

The “slice-of-life” theatre must die. “Character” actors are no longer needed. Everyone capable of being a character actor must develop a sense of the

⁴⁸ While working at the St. Petersburg Imperial theatres Meyerhold conducted theatrical experiments under the pseudonym „Doctor Dapertutto“ and formed his own studio in 1913, no doubt in response to the First Studio’s founding, where he began to explore the ideas outlined in his article „The Fairground Booth“ (1912).

tragedy (even comics) in any character role, and must learn to express themselves grotesquely. The grotesque should be both tragic and comic.

Vakhtangov's conversion to Meyerhold's artistic outlook was therefore complete. In the same diary entry, known as the „All Saints Notes“,⁴⁹ he summarised his mentors' abilities in the following manner (*in* Malaev-Babel 2011: 128-129, author's inserts):

[Meyerhold is] a genius director, the grandest of all who lived before us, and of all who exist today. His every production could produce an entire movement. Stanislavsky as a director is, of course, lesser than Meyerhold. [...] All of Stanislavsky's productions are banal. [...] As for Nemirovich-Danchenko, he has never been a director. He is not a master of form, nor [artistic] qualities. He does not have the feeling of rhythm and plasticity. [...] Both Nemirovich and Stanislavsky, due to their immense practice, know the actor. Meyerhold does not know [the actor] at all. Meyerhold does not know how to evoke the required emotion in an actor, the required rhythm, or the required theatricality. Nemirovich and Stanislavsky know how to do that – or rather Nemirovich only knows how to analyze a role and a play psychologically and evoke a particular emotion in an actor. And Stanislavsky, who does not know much about psychology, builds it intuitively (often much loftier and finer than Nemirovich). He knows the actor ideally – from head to toe. He knows him down to his intestines, and can see through his skin, foresees his thoughts and his spirit, but he [Stanislavsky] does not have any command of theatrical form in the noble meaning of the word. He is a master of characterisation and of unexpected character adaptations. However, he is not a master of theatrical performance. This is why he brought theatre to the philistine level ... having taken away all theatricality.

Thus, on the eve of the production that would herald his artistic vision, albeit in a compromised form as his experienced cast “had their own points of view and did not easily give in to the director” (Sushkevich in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 200), Vakhtangov had, in his own mind, identified his artistic individuality by assessing the

⁴⁹ The name of the rehabilitation resort where he wrote this document.

shortcomings of those who had influenced him. This was not an upstart's appraisal, but that of a thirty-eight year old theatre practitioner at the point of immanent death who had devoted his life to art. Although his altruism was lost on many, in Chekhov he found someone similarly attuned to the finer strains of human existence.

2.11 From naturalism to „imaginative realism“

The first new character Chekhov created after his bout of mental illness was Bozhaze in the vaudeville *A Match Between Two Fires* in December 1918, and it was at this point he “first exhibited a decidedly new quality of „eccentricity“ or „grotesqueness“, in his acting” (Kirillov *in* Chekhov 2005: 211). According to Knebel⁵⁰ (1967: 57), his student at the time, “mysticism, taking possession over him, was a form of nervous disease,” which manifested “itself in feelings of immeasurable solitude or torturing him with fits of fear.” His instability proved a fertile psychological soil for creating the fragmented personalities of Erik and Khlestakov in Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*, the latter resulting in Meyerhold declaring he “revealed himself in this role to be the best Russian grotesque actor of the time” (Kirillov *in* Chekhov 2005: 212). The question is how his inspired portrayals came about? Birman (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 192), who played the widowed queen in *Erik XIV*, stated that her most vivid recollection of the production was Vakhtangov’s work with Chekhov, “an extraordinary actor with overwhelming virtues and faults,” a working relationship that Chekhov (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 209) framed as follows:

[Vakhtangov possessed an] indispensable quality for a director: he was able to *show* an actor his role in outline. He did not show him the role in its entirety, he did not play the role instead of the actor, but he *acted out* the general outlines of the role. During rehearsals for *Erik XIV*, he sketched out Erik’s role during one entire act, and he did this in no more than two minutes. After his *demonstration* the entire act with all its details was clear to me although Vakhtangov did not touch on details. He simply gave me the psychological framework on which I could later add details and particular features of the role. He had a great ability to *demonstrate* roles in this way.

⁵⁰ Knebel was instrumental “[in] the revival of the Russian stage” following Stalin’s death (Smeliansky 1999: 6). In 1955, after 25 years with the MAT she became the Chief Artistic Director of Moscow’s Central Children’s Theatre, training several contemporary Russian theatre practitioners. The chapter of her book *Vsya zhizn* (1967) I had translated is entitled „I am a student of Michael Chekhov“, which I did to gain her views on his approach to actor training, and his collaboration with Stanislavski on *The Government Inspector*, a production she watched several times to study his performance.

Yury Zavadsky, “an unforgettable Prince Calaf in Vakhtangov’s *Turandot*”⁵¹ (Smeliansky 1999: 5), echoed Chekhov’s assessment of his directing approach, as his description below (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 235) reveals:

Vakhtangov possessed the magical power of suggestion, implanting in actors both their own interpretation of a role and his understanding of the author. He stimulated his actors not only to be excellent performers on stage, but also to be demanding towards themselves as artists and to have a profound sense of their own human dignity.

During his final years Vakhtangov had thus mastered an ability to convey the essence, or kernel, of a role to actors through a form of autosuggestion. This possibly stemmed from Nemirovich-Danchenko’s directing approach, based on his “gift of intuition,” a “sixth sense” that allowed him to „infect“ actors and encourage them to reveal their individuality “to the point of nakedness” (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1937: 154, 160). Although Meyerhold also made use of “demonstrations”, which were “a theater in themselves, a thrilling fantastic theater,” as the Soviet playwright Yury Olesha (*in* Schmidt 1980: 73) described them, most of his actors were only able “to reproduce mechanically ... some emasculated directorial outline” (Ilinsky *in* Schmidt 1980: 28). Stanislavski however, who often understood actors better than they themselves did, drove them beyond their limits as Toporkov (2001: 89) explains below:

All Stanislavski’s thinking was intended to rid an actor of everything that held him down to the level of a routine performer, and to lead him to the threshold of organic, human creativity. He had an infinite number of ways of doing this, based on a subtle understanding of the actor’s creative process and great experience in the study of all an actor’s ailments, which his method was intended to cure.

⁵¹ Carlo Gozzi’s fairytale *Princess Turandot* was Vakhtangov’s last production with his students at the Third Studio in 1922. Zavadsky also played the title role in the second version of *The Miracle of St. Anthony*, when Vakhtangov’s formalistic tendencies first began to emerge. According to Zavadsky (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 240): “Until then trained to almost entirely neglect external form and to concern themselves only with the inner truth of their roles, his actors were now forced to examine themselves from the outside – in Vakhtangov’s expression, to sculpt their figures in space, to feel themselves a part of an expressive bas-relief. A conscious approach, self-control, and total mastery of oneself on stage – these were the new qualities that Vakhtangov demanded his actors to train in themselves.” Zavadsky was Grotowski’s directing tutor at GITIS. in Moscow from 1955 to 1956.

During the overlapping rehearsals of *Erik XIV* with Vakhtangov and *The Government Inspector* with Stanislavski, Chekhov was therefore exposed to two very sophisticated directorial approaches and, given his state of personal and artistic redefinition, it is no wonder he achieved a breakthrough that would form the basis of his future technique. According to Knebel (1967: 95) Stanislavski was “consumed by the desire to finally find a decent stage medium the genius of Gogol would deserve,” and felt Chekhov “was the only hope of personification of the phantasmagorical of Gogol’s character.” To achieve this end he had him forego his tendency “to prematurely invent and grind out images, devise distinctiveness and artificially weave roles by lines,” and to first find the „grain”⁵² of his role, which Chekhov (*in* Knebel 1967: 63-64) interpreted as a “feeling of the future whole.” Stanislavski therefore probed the play’s subtext through the feelings, intuition and instincts of his actors as they tried to identify the essence of their roles, while Nemirovich-Danchenko and Vakhtangov defined it through textual analysis and guided their actors to reveal it to the audience.

In Stanislavski’s approach the director’s principal function was to ensure that everything actors did or said on the stage was authentic, stripping away any clichéd or stereotypical behaviours until they organically⁵³ fused with their characters. Although Chekhov’s portrayal of Erik was a formalistic success, as he and Vakhtangov⁵⁴ perfected the technique of “[attaining] a unity between profound content and clear-cut form,” the production “produced sharply dissimilar reactions in the theatrical world: admiration and rejection, praise and furious rebuffs” (Birman *in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 191, 192). Sushkevich (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 199) considered it the weakest of Vakhtangov’s last three productions, an experiment with a strong cast in which he merely wanted “to find something new in the Method and to move beyond the Method’s

⁵² Stanislavski’s directorial study of *Woe from Wit* (*see note 28*) was written during this period, in which he used the phrase „*germ of feeling*” (1975: 64). Germ, grain, kernel and seed are synonymous, the latter being the term he used in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article (*see note 29*).

⁵³ Stanislavski possibly encountered the term while working on *Hamlet* with Craig, who wanted to use „organic” materials for the scenery, “that is, as near nature as possible, and as far from being artificial as we could have them” (Stanislavski 1980: 511). According to Benedetti (*in* Toporkov 2001: xi) it came to mean stage behaviour that was “in accord with natural human processes, not artifice.”

⁵⁴ According to Zavadsky (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 235): “[P]eople who knew Chekhov and Vakhtangov sometimes found it hard to say where Vakhtangov’s influence on Chekhov stopped and where the actor’s influence on the director began. They had complementary natures in terms of imagination, creative individuality, and temperament. When Vakhtangov acted out something for us during lessons it sometimes seemed as if he were copying Chekhov.”

canons,” even though it was the first play he directed “as Vakhtangov, a theatrical figure in his own right.”

Following the mixed reaction to *Erik XIV*, the premiere of *The Government Inspector* in October 1921 left no doubt about Chekhov’s acting abilities. According to Kirillov (*in* Chekhov 2005: 212): “[He] embodied the metaphoric and phantasmagoric sense of Nikolay Gogol’s poetics as they had never been seen on the stage before, and his entire performance had the appearance of a constant flow of inspired improvisation.” Although many theatre critics attributed this to the actor’s genius, and “[t]here was an opinion that Chekhov destroyed Stanislavski’s theory by his performance,” only one touched on the truth according to Knebel (1967: 96), reporting that “in all its creative meaning, the genius of Stanislavski was uncovered, and the actor appeared, which the Russian stage has not seen for a long while.”

What Stanislavski achieved with the production, working with near clinical precision to release Chekhov’s talent during the rehearsal process,⁵⁵ was to show that his „system“ could be applied to any genre regardless how „un-naturalistic“, and with actors more inclined to the representational tradition. The result of this meticulous work, which often left Chekhov feeling extremely insecure, “suffering terribly” and convinced he could not play Khlestakov (Knebel 1967: 99), was a gradual wearing down of his ego at a time when he was emotionally unstable. Had it been undertaken by someone less experienced it may have been detrimental to the actor, but Stanislavski had seen enough of Chekhov playing with his artistic gifts to know his true potential. When the breakthrough finally occurred it was revelatory to everyone, none more so than Knebel (1967: 99), as her account below reveals:⁵⁶

[M]y conversation with Chekhov was most interesting. He was telling me about Hlestakov as if he was an eternally dear person to him, who deserted him forever. He was talking of his silly, dear features, about how horribly

⁵⁵ According to Knebel (1967: 58) who attended several rehearsals: “Stanislavski would eerily raise his arm if anybody in the hall made a noise turning pages ... [as he] was very afraid that this noise could possibly interrupt Chekhov’s oeuvre.” On other occasions, according to Chekhov (*in* Knebel 1967: 98), Stanislavski had him and the rest of the cast, which included experienced MAT actors such as Moskvina and Knipper-Chekhova, repeat a single phrase for hours “demanding clarity of thought, distinctiveness, punctuation marks and correct communication.”

⁵⁶ In 1921, after Chekhov informed his students he was too busy to continue with their classes, Knebel approached him to change his mind. Her account stems from impressions gained during this meeting.

hungry he was, when his life suddenly changed He was not talking of a role, but about a person, who he dearly loved, despite the fact that this person was “the most void”.

Chekhov’s identification with his character echoed Vakhtangov’s belief, based on the „system“’s principles, that an actor only achieves “the appropriate outer appearance in his role as he achieves complete empathy” (Freidkina in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 215). Chekhov’s intimate association with someone void of ethical and moral constraints in their dealings with others may have liberated previously suppressed id instincts in his own nature, yet whatever the cause of his psychic transformation it surpassed any conscious attempts to combine form and substance. Once he found Khlestakov’s spirit and surrendered to it, he was free to create with total abandon in a state of „I am being“,⁵⁷ spontaneously experiencing each night’s performance and resisting the temptation to include previous findings of what had proved effective with audiences, as Knebel (1967: 99, 104) elaborates below:

I have never seen such a severe shadow, which the role threw over the life and character of Mikhail Chekhov. Possibly features of his traits of his nervous disease influenced it. But in general, the dependence of an actor upon his role, change of his character and psychology in the process of the creation of a role, is one of the most interesting factors of creativity. [...] I watched “The Government Inspector” many times, but I never had a feeling that Chekhov, the actor, devised a new trick. No, there was Hlestakov on stage, who always adjusted to the surroundings. [...] He ... flew, jumped, danced, feeling that whatever he was doing was graceful, captivating and original ...

Vakhtangov’s final two productions, namely S. Ansky’s *The Dybbuk* at the Jewish Habimah Studio in January 1922, and *Turandot*, furthered his formalist experiments, but

⁵⁷ According to Knebel (1967: 101), if anyone wanted to know what Stanislavski meant with the term „I am“ during *The Government Inspector*’s production run he told them “[they] should go to the theatre and view Chekhov performing Hlestakov.” In this respect he may have defined the notion of „I am“ at this time, as his writings during this period (*see note 28*) emphasise it as the key to an actor’s creativity on stage (*see Stanislavski 1975: pp 25-35*), although it is only inferentially mentioned in *My Life in Art* (1980: 462), which he dictated to his secretary around the same time.

with more pliable, young and inexperienced actors,⁵⁸ and their shortcomings were perhaps overlooked due to his terminal state. In this respect he was too ill to attend *Turandot*'s premiere on 28 February 1922, a production which exemplified his belief in "the laws of unity of content and expressiveness, and the laws of expressiveness dictated by content" (Sushekevich in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 200). In April 1922, seven weeks before his death, he conducted discussions with Boris Zakhava⁵⁹ and Ksenia Kotlubai, both associates in his teaching and directing work, to impart his vision of a new theatre. Contrasting Meyerhold's mastery of "genuine theatricality" which did away with life's truth on the stage but in the process also "[did] away with emotional truth in the theatre," with Stanislavski's mastery of producing "genuine and natural feelings on the stage, [although] forgetting that the actor's feelings must be conveyed to the audience by a theatrical means," Vakhtangov (in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 151-155) proposed a synthesis he termed "imaginative realism". Although Zakhava agreed with this notion, Kotlubai rejected the term, offering the following counter-argument (in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 155):

I don't like it because Vakhtangov should bring words back to the stage in their real and single meaning. [...] For me realism in art, and in the theatre in particular, is an artist's ability to create anew what he receives from the material which inspired him. The material gives the realist a definite impression, a definite idea which he then creates through means known only to himself in his specific art form.

Had it not been for Vakhtangov's collaboration with Chekhov to create this hybrid, a fusion of realism and theatricality which became a hallmark of the latter's technique, his vision would have died with him on 29 May 1922. Although it took Chekhov several years to refine this synthesis of form and content into the heightened realism it later became, the resultant acting approach would prove that the correct application of the „inner technique“ could both inspire and substantiate any manifestation on a stage.

⁵⁸ According to the First Studio actress Nadezhda Bromely (in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 205): "If Vakhtangov ordered his actors to fly, they would fly."

⁵⁹ Zakhava was a founding member of Vakhtangov's studio and became a director at the Vakhtangov Theatre, as the Third Studio was renamed in 1926.

2.12 The MAT's American tour (1923-4)

Following the 1917 Revolution the Broadway producer Morris Gest sent his literary agent Oliver Saylor to Russia, now embroiled in a bloody Civil War,⁶⁰ to determine the state of its theatre. Despite siding with those “trying to find a remedy for realism in the theatre,”⁶¹ Saylor (1920: 45, 52, 79) was astounded by the “perfect ensemble” acting of the MAT that gave an impression of life not copied but “brought to the point where there seems to be no interpretation,” as the actors simply lived their character’s lives on stage so their “joys and sorrows became clear.” On his return he published an account of his findings entitled *The Russian Theatre* (1920). The book was well received and coincided with the theatre boom on Broadway,⁶² with the result that the Russian-born impresario sponsored a MAT tour to the USA in the 1922-1923 season.

The tour abroad was condoned by the MAT’s council due to an inability to generate sufficient local income to sustain the company’s survival, especially as by the Spring of 1921 “Russia was on the verge of bankruptcy as a consequence of the privations and chaos wrought by the Civil War” (Braun 1998: 166). At this stage the inclinations of the MAT’s co-founders were so divergent they no doubt welcomed the opportunity to focus on what concerned them most. For Nemirovich-Danchenko it was to find a means to skilfully steer his theatrical ship, “aware of all that lurked in the Soviet sea” (Smeliansky 1999: 48), whereas the prevailing political climate made little dent on Stanislavski’s artistic pursuits, an ignorance which became increasingly problematic later. The troupe arrived in Paris in the late fall of 1922 for a two week engagement at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées where Stanislavski was welcomed by Jacques Copeau. During the ensuing weeks they met regularly, and on 21 December 1922 he received the MAT at his *Théâtre du Vieux Colombier*, hailing his Russian counterpart “as the master of them all”

⁶⁰ The Russian Civil War between the White and Red armies lasted from 1918 to 1921. While on tour to Kharkov a group of MAT actors that included Vassily Kachalov (1875-1948), the principal dramatic and romantic lead, were cut off from Moscow by a White Army advance. Unable to cross the front they performed in Europe as the Kachalov Group, and later as the Prague Group of the MAT. This “catastrophe”, as Stanislavski termed it (1980: 557), meant no new plays were staged for three years.

⁶¹ Craig told Saylor to visit the MAT, stating that “no study of the modern theatre is complete without Stanislavski,” and he later described their acting as “spiritualized realism, a use of the realistic form as a means and not an end, a means to the more vivid interpretation of life” (Saylor 1920: 2, 28-29).

⁶² During the 1919-1920 New York season 49 theatres staged 144 productions, a boom that peaked in the 1927-1928 season with 76 theatres staging 264 productions, before a slump following the onset of the Great Depression of 1929 (Poggi 1968: 46-48).

(Kurtz 1999: 101). The MAT's brief visit was a triumph, summed up by *le patron's* lead actress Valentine Tessier who, after seeing them act, said to him (*in* Kurtz 1999: 100): "I ought to go to the country and grow cabbages."

On 21 January 1923, "amidst delirious anticipation," the MAT opened at Jolson's 59th Street Theatre on Broadway, and, according to Foster Hirsh (2002: 50), author of *A Method to their Madness*: "American acting has never been the same." The response of the opening night audience to *Tsar Fyodor*, the MAT's signature production which had been part of their repertoire for twenty-five years, is best described by a reviewer of the *New York American* (cited in Hirsh 2002: 54): "The emotions of the audience rose to match the emotions on the stage. At the close there were such cheers and shouts as New York had never heard – even the chilliest of Anglo-Saxons were swept up in it." Moskvina and Vasily Kachalov's acting in *The Brothers Karamazov* became the talk of the city's theatrical community, yet despite the troupe's male stars stealing the limelight, Stanislavski's transformational abilities astounded audiences, as Hirsh (2002: 56) explains below:

As the cynical Satin in *The Lower Depths*, the absentminded avuncular Gaev in *The Cherry Orchard*, and the handsome, lovesick soldier Vershinin in *Three Sisters*, Stanislavski seemed to inhabit three separate bodies.⁶³ Like Moskvina, he transformed himself physically, vocally, and spiritually for each of his roles, growing shorter, taller, stouter, handsomer, or sillier as the parts demanded. Neither actor carried an identifiable persona from one character to the next.

Reviewers struggled to describe the acting, and James Corbin of the *New York Times* (cited in Hirsh 2002: 57) employed terms like "realism of the spirit" and "intensity of soul revelation," attributing it to the actors having "the Slavic gift of the persistently incandescent soul, of the persistently illuminated countenance." The result was that the MAT was invited back for a second Broadway season after a tour of the principal Eastern cities. The tour ended in May 1924, after which they returned to Moscow. Boleslavsky,

⁶³ Strasberg, an avid theatregoer who saw both Stanislavsky and Kachalov's interpretations of Gaev and Vershinin, described his impression as follows (1988: 40): "In both plays, Kachalov seemed more the actor than the character. Stanislavsky always seemed to fade into the character. Whether this was really a difference in acting approach or simply the fact that Kachalov always remained a star on the stage without making any special effort to accomplish it, I do not know."

who joined the company on their arrival in the USA,⁶⁴ stayed behind with Maria Ouspenskaya and founded the American Laboratory Theatre, funded by wealthy American patrons. The Lab offered a three year training programme and in 1925 staged Amélie Rives' *The Sea Woman's Cloak*. Directed by Boleslavsky, it prompted the playwright Rachel Crothers to write an open letter to the *New York Times* on 3 May, in which she declared the following (cited in Hirsh 2002:61):

The Sea Woman's Cloak is an awakening to the depth and breadth and boundless possibilities of the art of acting ... young people playing old women and men without makeup, and looking old because they have become old through absolute understanding and feeling in the quickening of dramatic imagination to such a flame that they are transported into the little seacoast village of Ireland – actually living the lives of these in the play – people as remote from these young Americans as anything can be.

Crothers (cited in Hirsh 2002: 61) also described the acting as “so much greater and more sincere than one usually finds in the professional theatre that it is amazing and unbelievable,” a strong endorsement of the Russian „system“, which inspired Adler, a working actress, to enrol at the Lab, joining Strasberg who started attending classes in January 1924. For both future founding members of the Group Theatre, the seminal collective that defined American acting in the twentieth century, this training would shape their thinking about the actor's art for the rest of their lives. And, thus, “the gospel according to Stanislavski [was brought] to the New World” (Hirsh 2002: 58).

⁶⁴ Boleslavsky, born Srzednicki, had been a Polish lancer in the Tsar's army before joining the MAT in 1908. He emigrated in 1920, no doubt fearing potential reprisals from the Bolsheviks given his military background. He spent two years in Europe before travelling to America in late 1922.

2.13 The dawn of a new era

During his discussions with Copeau in 1922 Stanislavski bemoaned the fact that the theatre was “extraordinarily behind all the other arts,” but felt it would be “a fraud to apply to it artificially the methods of these other arts,” and that theatre artists should not try to express what they cannot express (Kurtz 1999: 101). His assessment proved astute as the cinema gained popularity and three quarters of the Vieux-Colombier’s patrons failed to renew their subscriptions for 1923-1924 theatre season, its tenth and last (Kurtz 1999: 106). In the USA Stanislavski also encountered an entertainment industry “based on the personality of the actor” in which stars with sex appeal sold tickets (Hirsh 2002: 52-53). It was against this backdrop that he wrote a “most confidential” letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1923, stating the following (cited in Smeliansky 1999: 147-148, italics in original):

We must get used to the idea that the Art Theatre no longer exists. You seem to have realised this before I did; I have been flattering myself all these years and salvaging the mouldy remains of it. During this trip everything has become blindingly clear to me. No one has any *thought*, or *idea*, or big *aim* any longer. And without that no intellectual enterprise can exist.

Stanislavski’s premonition proved astute as following the MAT’s return from abroad “the period of the Soviet Art Theatre began” (Smeliansky 1999: 148). In Moscow Meyerhold had established himself as a foremost proponent of Soviet culture, having been awarded the title of „People’s Artist of the Republic“ in 1923, the first stage-director to be so honoured (Braun 1998: 190). In this respect he had become a master of theatrical spectacle, staging mass entertainment productions in the *Sohn* with its “fifty feet wide and forty feet high” proscenium opening, that suited his experiments with constructivism, eccentricism, and a gradual “cinefication”⁶⁵ of the theatre (Symons 1973: 40), confirming Stanislavski’s concerns. He also encountered challenges within the MAT as Chekhov set himself up as the Artistic Director of the First Studio after Vakhtangov’s death, renaming it the MAT 2 in August 1924. Here he “formulated a general system of acting including

⁶⁵ „Cinefication“ (*kinofikatsiia*) in the theatre stemmed from the fact that the proletariat were ignorant of theatre conventions, whereas the cinema was more suited to mass education.

very particular principles,”⁶⁶ which continued his friend’s formalistic experiments, as Andrei Kirillov (*in* Chekhov 2005: 210, 212-213, his inserts) explains below:

The same dialectics of *what* and *how* (or form and content) were reflected in Chekhov’s new views on theatre art and particularly in his teaching of his method in the MAAT 2. It is incorrect to ask an imaginary character questions about „what“ (the character is doing, acting, speaking etc.), Chekhov forewarned the actors, „ask him about “how”.“ „What“ is contained in „how“ and will appear from that „how“ itself, because artistic form always has a profound content and its content becomes clear first of all from the overall artistic picture.

Chekhov therefore emphasised form over content, the crux of „imaginative realism“, as Vakhtangov’s advice to *The Dybbuk* actors (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 229) suggests: “Love and sculpt your character, love his inner self, and love the form which contains its content very, very much.” This “impulse towards a non-realistic, non-psychological means of acting, as well as a search for external forms of expression other than those of the inner and personal human psychology,” was now taken even further as Kirillov’s account below (*in* Chekhov 2005: 212, 214, his insert, italics and quotes) confirms:

In Chekhov’s method imagining the character and making it clear in one’s imagination (by consciously asking questions of the image of the character) is the first stage of rehearsing. The image of the character gives its answers not in verbal form, but *visually* by gradually demonstrating its different features, qualities and circumstances to the actor within his imagination. [...] In effect, the image of the character „dictates“ itself „objectively“ to the actor. The main sense of Chekhov’s method here is reflected in its name: the „method of image imitating“ or more precisely the „method of image fantasising and imitating“. Working on the character to such a degree purely within the realm of the imagination frees the actor from the limitations of his

⁶⁶ According to Knebel (1967: 58), after Vakhtangov’s death Chekhov “stumbled creatively, and he raised the artistic error in a new, as he seemed to think, system of aesthetic thinking.” This stemmed from his conversion to Rudolph Steiner’s Anthroposophy, which proposed the existence of a spiritual world accessible through the imagination and sensitivity to inspiration and intuition. Steiner’s attempts to forge a synthesis between mysticism and rational thinking influenced Chekhov’s personal and artistic outlook for the rest of his life.

own personality, and even from the limitations of the physical world in general, providing him with the „ideal“ and „objective „essence“ of the character.

Chekhov’s aversion to using emotional memories to provide characters with an „inner life“ in favour of using his creative imagination, had thus come full circle. By denying the actor’s psychology in the creative process he had to marginalise the influence of their personalities, and proposed that the „everyday I“, namely “[all] we associate with our body, habits, mode of life, family, social standing and everything else that comprises normal existence,” should be renounced in favour of a „higher-level I“, “which enriches and expands the consciousness” (Chekhov 2004a: 86-87). This notion of lower and higher egos stemmed from his Astrophysical beliefs, and whereas it was unconscious in most people, artists had to consciously relate to it by developing their individuality, as Kirillov (*in* Chekhov 2005: 216) elaborates below:

Chekhov’s belief was that the „personal“, which is inappropriate for the realm of art, is always egoistic and subjective; it might be effective as far as the audience is concerned, but that effect is not artistic. The „individual“ is non-egoistic and objective, and it coincides with the „ideal“ realm of images and art. Chekhov maintained that the idea of „temperament“ resides in the sphere of the „personal“, and he denounced the „primal“ nature of its influence, maintaining that with „temperament“ the actor achieves nothing on the stage except for agitating his audiences nerves.

The significance of this proposition is that it undermined the ideological basis of the „system“, as the actor’s „temperament“ (*temnepameht*)⁶⁷ was a vital prerequisite in the process of „living over“ (*perezhivanie*). In this respect Stanislavski’s expression “the temperament is not flowing ... [meant] that the nature of the artist keeps silent, and in this case nothing happens on stage, there is no art,” according to Zon (1955: 448). The actor’s task during rehearsals was therefore to ensure there were no blockages to their organism’s natural functioning in the scenic circumstances and then to transform „normal“ behaviour into a character’s actions, always ensuring they were motivated by a free flow of temperament, as Toporkov (2001: 151, my insert) explains below:

⁶⁷ “„Temperament“ in Russian theatre and everyday language denotes the capacity and tendency of an actor (or a person) to react and express themselves emotionally” (Kirillov *in* Chekhov 2005: 41).

A premature concern with the outside pushes an actor towards mere copying, and can be a barrier to the establishment of a living organic pattern of behaviour. External characterisation puts the finishing touches to the actor's work. Did that mean Stanislavski suggested we should repeat ourselves in every role, use our favourite habits, and reduce a role to our limitations? Obviously not. ... [The actor] starts with himself, his own natural qualities, and develops them creatively as he works. He must try to broaden them, and raise them to the level the play demands ...

It is therefore understandable why Chekhov's approach to acting was considered "in many ways polemical to Stanislavski's in its basic principles" (Kirillov *in* Chekhov 2005: 211), and contributed to the general view that he had "destroyed Stanislavski's theory" with his performance as Khlestakov (Knebel 1967: 95). The fact is that both held similar beliefs. Stanislavski also emphasised the liberation of an actor's creative "individuality imprisoned by prejudices and stereotyped patterns" (Malaev-Babel 2011: 9),⁶⁸ which informed his notion of a „Dramatic „I““, as distinct from the „Real „I““ (Benedetti 2008: 4),⁶⁹ but he believed this should occur during „work on oneself“, which Chekhov never underwent. The onset of his personal crisis at "twenty-four or twenty-five" (Chekhov 2005: 32) could perhaps be attributed to this. What made his approach distinctive was a propensity for „mystical realism“ (Smeliansky 1999: 204), and being "[naturally] gifted with an unusually vivid visual thinking" (Knebel 1967: 106). Stanislavski was in search of a universally applicable acting method however, not merely one suited to his personal artistic abilities and spiritual outlook.

To demonstrate his approach Chekhov staged *Hamlet* with himself in the title role, assisted by a triad of directors.⁷⁰ After eighteen months of careful preparation, which included transforming the play's language "into pure sound shorn of literal content" (Marowitz 2004: 87), the MAT 2's maiden production opened on 20 November 1924. Chekhov's interpretation of the tragedy "[as] that of an idealistic, spiritual individual in

⁶⁸ Vakhtangov recorded this lecture which Stanislavski gave to the MAT recruits on March 1911.

⁶⁹ The notion of the actor's dramatic, or creative „I“, can be traced back to lectures Stanislavski gave to students of the Bolshoi Opera Studio between 1918-1922 (*see* Magarshack 1950: pp. 115-118).

⁷⁰ Well aware of his limitations in this regard Chekhov had three assistant directors, namely Alexander Cheban, Valentin Smyshlyaev and Vladimir Tatarinov, which contributed to the production's "obvious eclecticism" and provoked a great deal of criticism (Kirillov *in* Chekhov 2005: 213).

the non-individualistic world of reality, leading to the inevitability of his death” (Kirillov in Chekhov 2005: 213), received mixed reviews. Markov (cited in Marowitz 2004: 90), the most respected critic at the time, had the following to say about it:

[It] took up a wholly negative attitude without disclosing the positive foundation of the play. The philosophic foundation of the tragedy was disregarded, and it was interpreted as no more than the struggle between the heir to the throne and a usurper. The result was a rich, pretentious production that kept the audience in a state of unabated suspense and enthusiasm but did not bring it any closer to an understanding of Shakespeare’s characters.

Besides this somewhat facile interpretation, Chekhov’s acting style was also unusual, as described by the symbolist writer Andrey Bely (*in* Chekhov 2005: 212):

Chekhov plays from the pause, not from the word. [...] From the pause – to the word; but in the pause – a great power of the potential energy, which in the next wink transforms into the kinetics of a gesture, where the whole body works like lightning; from the edge of this lightning, as from the discharge of energy – comes the word: the last of all expressions.

Chekhov’s vocal technique can be traced to Stanislavski’s work with him during *The Government Inspector*, when he had “to manage the extremely difficult lexicon of the role” so Khlestakov’s babble, which supposedly lacked self control, “unexpectedly” burst out of his mouth (Knebel 1967: 100). This approach was again evident in his portrayal of senator Ableukhov in a dramatisation of Bely’s novel *Petersburg* the next year, in which the author used „rhythmical prose“. Despite the production again being considered “eclectic and weak,” Chekhov’s tragi-farcical performance was hailed “for its brilliant and mature eccentricity and grotesqueness” (Kirillov in Chekhov 2005: 215). His last new role in the R.S.F.S.R. was Muromsky in Sukhovo-Kobylin’s *The Case*, which opened in February 1927. Directed by Sushkevich, it was a return to familiar territory for the thirty-five year old who fully utilised his gift for portraying older characters, and even Markov (cited by Kirillov in Chekhov 2005: 216) admired his ability to play “a whole register of genres in his performing of Muromsky, simply by transforming the

rhythm of his acting.”⁷¹ Despite the recognition of his acting abilities questions were increasingly being raised about his “mystical deviations” however, resulting in the Commissariat for Education sending him a letter stating that his work as Director of the MAT 2 was “not fully satisfactory,” and he had to cease disseminating Steiner’s ideas (Marowitz 2004: 93). Shortly afterwards a resolution was passed calling for his arrest, but a high-ranking Party member arranged that Chekhov and his wife Xenia be given passports for a vacation abroad, and thirty-six hours later, in August 1928, “they left Russia, never to return” (Powers in Chekhov 2004a: xxxv).

⁷¹ This is again derived from Stanislavski’s lectures at the Opera Studio (*see note 69*), and is the basis of his assertion (*in* Magarshack 1950: 144): “[That] you have to make yourself master of your rhythm of breathing and, furthermore, realise that the whole universe exists in accordance with a definite rhythm and that you, as a fraction of it, are also subject to the laws of rhythm. Having grasped the fact that not only yourself, but everything that lives, is an eternally moving rhythmic entity, you ... will yourself, as you analyse a part, be able to detect the rhythm of every part and every performance of a whole.” This principle, encapsulated by the term tempo-rhythm, is explicated in chapters 11 and 12 of *Building A Character*, entitled „Tempo-Rhythm in Movement“ and „Speech Tempo-Rhythm“.

2.14 A search for new directions

Vakhtangov's untimely death and Chekhov's exile curtailed Stanislavski's aspirations to further develop the „system“. Despite misconceptions that he opposed his talented students' experimentations, it is more likely that he learnt from their findings, even if he did not always agree with their formalistic inclinations. The same held true with his attitude towards Meyerhold's work, which he followed “with keen interest,” and even when unable to personally attend his productions “he knew in detail about all of them from detailed reports by trusted “spies”” (Law and Gordon 1996: 67). In this respect Meyerhold's production of Nikolai Erdman's *The Warrant*, which premiered in April 1925, deeply impressed Stanislavski, who remarked that his staging of the final act had accomplished what he himself dreamt of at the time (Braun 1998: 196).⁷²

On his return from abroad “Stanislavski found himself in sole charge of the Moscow Art Theatre from 1925 to 1927 and under his direction it was relaunched with a series of brilliant productions” (Benedetti 2008: xxi). His choice of materials show that he tried to comply with the political climate without compromising his artistic integrity. In October 1926 he premiered *The Days of the Turbins*, based on Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, dealing with the fate of intellectuals and officers in the White army caught up in the revolution, a favourite of Stalin who saw it several times. In 1927 he staged Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*, which foreshadowed the French Revolution by denouncing the privileges of the aristocracy, but reworked it to reflect conditions in Russia prior to the First Revolution. His use of a revolving stage to facilitate quick scene changes, and the overall rhythmic quality of the production resulted in it being hailed as one of his major achievements. The American director Joshua Logan, who saw it in 1930, conveys his impressions below (*in* Moore 1984: xiv):

[I]t was done with a racy, intense, farcical spirit which we had not associated with Stanislavski. It was as broad comedy playing and directing as anything we had ever seen. The high-style members of the cast in flashing coloured

⁷² The play, “a satirical fantasy in the style of Gogol,” was directed at those “who still dreamt of the restoration of the monarchy and preserved all the trappings and customs of the old order” (Braun 1998: 195-196). In the final act Meyerhold revealed the total loss of identity of the hapless „internal émigrés“, summed up by the last line (*ibid*): “What's the point of living, mama, if they don't even bother to arrest us?” For all its comic absurdity the play drew little laughter, revealing the tragic side of the grotesque.

costumes would run, pose, prance, caress, faint, stutter in confusion, and play out all the intricate patterns of the French farce with a kind of controlled frenzy.

In November 1927 Stanislavski premiered *The Armoured Train 14-69* to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the Second Revolution. Based on a novel by Vsevolod Ivanov it dealt with the capture an ammunition train in Siberia by a group of partisans led by a peasant farmer during the Civil War, “which became the model for the new Soviet play” (Benedetti 2008: xxi). In April 1928 he premiered *The Embezzlers*,⁷³ a satirical portrayal of Soviet bureaucracy in the post-revolution era based on a short story by Valentin Kataev. It was Toporkov’s first MAT production, and although he was initially meant to play a minor role, Stanislavski recast him as Vanechka, one of the leads. His motives for doing so are best explained by Toporkov (2001: 12) below:

Stanislavski’s concern with establishing and teaching a new technique of acting was so deep that it began to take precedence over everything else he did in the theatre, especially in the last days of his life. And so, it was of particular interest to him to meet actors from other theatres, and to try to bring them round to his way of thinking.

As with Chekhov before him, Toporkov trained in St Petersburg, graduating from the Imperial Theatre School a year before he did from the Suvorin Theatre School. They therefore shared similar formative influences, as Toporkov (2001: 5) explains below:

In those days the art of declamation – melodramatic declamation – flourished and tribute was paid to it in theatre schools. In the first half of the first year ... students learned „recitation“ which bore no relation to what actors actually do on stage. [...] Three-quarters of the year were spent in studies that were either useless or even ... harmful to them as actors. Very often pupils who were successful in declaiming found they were either poorly or totally unprepared when they turned to real acting.

Chekhov (2005: 27) echoed this view, stating: “I cannot say that I studied the art of acting at drama school. [...] The lessons in voice production irritated me and made me

⁷³ On *Days of the Turbins*, *Armoured Train* and *The Embezzlers* Stanislavski was assisted by Sudakov, which is no doubt the reason that his understanding of the „system“ was so thorough (see note 13).

laugh.” This emphasis on „technique“ in St Petersburg led to an acting style that Stanislavski most opposed, describing it as follows (1984: 24-26, his inserts):

There are special ways of reciting a role, methods of diction and speech. (For instance, exaggeratedly high or low tones at critical moments in the role, done with specifically theatrical “tremolo”, or with special declamatory vocal embellishments.) There are also methods of physical movement (mechanical actors do not walk, they “progress” on the stage), for gestures and action, for plastic motion. [...] No matter how skilful an actor may be in his choice of stage conventions, because of their inherent mechanical quality he cannot move spectators by them ... so he takes refuge in what we call theatrical emotions. These are a sort of artificial imitation of the periphery of physical feelings.

With Chekhov Stanislavski took a nineteen year old actor reared in this tradition and tried to convert him to the „system“, often with unexpected results. Toporkov was thirty-nine however, “one of the rare people who were taken into the Moscow Art Theatre from the outside” (Benedetti in Toporkov 2001: vii). His acting approach was therefore quite fixed, presenting Stanislavski with a considerable challenge to bring him around to his way of thinking. Yet to consolidate his acting theories he needed to experiment with someone wholly ignorant of the „system“, as a result the rehearsals of *The Embezzlers* “were fraught with tension and anxiety” as even the seasoned MAT actors “were in trouble, and for the newcomers ... it was sheer murder” (Toporkov 2001: 16).

Although the play had been in rehearsal for several months before he took over in the winter of 1927, Stanislavski had the cast engage in an „at the table“ process until they fully grasped the text.⁷⁴ With pressure on theatre companies increasing to improve their efficiency however, lengthy rehearsal periods were no longer acceptable, and he needed a means to accelerate the process of getting actors identifying with their roles. It was during this production that he began to place much greater emphasis on the actors simply engaging in logical actions which their characters might do in the given circumstances, and although Toporkov did not realise the significance of this at the time, he later noted

⁷⁴ „Around the table“ rehearsals were a MAT hallmark and months were spent discerning a play’s super-objective, which allowed the actors to define their characters” through line of action and divide it into smaller bits with individual tasks, allowing them to work as a team to serve a playwright’s vision.

(2001: 28): “The shift from the search for inner feelings to the fulfilment of tasks is one of Stanislavski’s greatest discoveries, and solves one of the major problems we actors have.” In this respect he paid greater attention to even the smallest physical action, “niggling over every detail, every movement,” often improvising scenes that were not even in the play, and most confusing to Toporkov (2001: 21, 34), “[paying] far greater attention to things the audience wouldn’t see.”

This process of actors discovering aspects of their character’s personality by improvising situations not in the text was not new, but Stanislavski’s emphasis on physical details became a template for the Method of Physical Actions,⁷⁵ as they began to “live through [their] character’s little actions” (Toporkov 2001: 19). Although further experimentation with this integrated psychophysical approach to characterisation and performance would be delayed for three years due to Stanislavski suffering a heart attack during the MAT’s thirtieth anniversary celebrations in the winter of 1928, he had stumbled across a new avenue of enquiry which he would explore during the final years of his life.

Stanislavski’s successes in the 1920s were eclipsed by an audacious reinterpretation of *The Government Inspector* which premiered in December 1926, “the clearest and the most coherent realisation of the style which in his crucial essay, „The Fairground Booth“ (1912), Meyerhold defined as the „tragic grotesque“” (Braun 1998: 211). Staged five years after Stanislavski’s “basically traditional and psycho-naturalistic” production (Kirillov in Chekhov 2005: 212), Meyerhold’s controversial rendition of the Russian classic “inspired a greater volume of critical literature than any other production in the history of the theatre” (Braun 1998: 218). The champion of theatrical form over psychological content therefore challenged the aging defender of the opposite cause to muster a response. Although he had to wait seven years, when it finally came on 28 November 1932, the premier of Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, it would be “virtually a polemic against *The Government Inspector*” (Braun 1998: 218-219), and Stanislavski’s work with the actors described as “one of the most significant chapters in the history of the Art Theatre” (Sakhnovski in Toporkov 2001: 43).

⁷⁵ Mel Gordon (1987: 208) states the Method of Physical Actions “was intended to be a correlative to the slow motion rehearsal process normally associated with the Stanislavski System,” and was often perceived “to be a purely directorial device.” Although it was initially intended to speed up rehearsals in which actors “[analysed] the text while sitting passively around the table” (Law & Gordon 1996: 67), it was predominantly an actor’s technique, even after it evolved into so-called Active Analysis.

2.15 Attempting to document the „system“

During the MAT's American tour in 1923 Stanislavski's interpreter at a White House function was Elizabeth Hapgood, who spoke fluent Russian and introduced him to her husband Norman, an experienced editor, who suggested that they publish "the results of his experience as an actor and trainer of actors in the foremost acting company of this century" (Hapgood in Stanislavski 1986: 1). Despite having "made innumerable drafts of potential books, trying out various forms including the novel," he abandoned them all (Benedetti 2008: xxi). Following his heart attack however, he was compelled to curb his activities, especially during the winter months when his medical condition was particularly severe, which gave him the time to start working on it in earnest. His problem was not a lack of materials, as he had been documenting his ideas on acting since age fourteen, rather that he was struggling to find an appropriate literary format to convey his findings to others less versed in the actor's art. During 1929 and 1930, whilst convalescing in the milder climes of France and Germany, he worked with the Hapgoods on the manuscripts they later published as *An Actor Prepares* and *Building A Character*. It was at this time that he adopted the student diary format, a literary style he hoped might make his theories of acting more accessible, which only served to further obfuscate them, as Benedetti (*in* Stanislavski 2008: xvi) explains below:

One of the difficulties of presenting a readable account of Stanislavski's ideas is his style, which is at considerable variance with his other writings. He was haunted by the possibility that he would be misunderstood, as had so often been the case in the past, even by close associates. In consequence his tendency was to overwrite and over-explain, using several words where one of two would do, and repeating definitions like a mantra. His style too often obscured his meaning.

In this respect Stanislavski's earlier writings, before adopting this awkward format, are often more comprehensible in terms of discerning his essential meanings. More so are third person accounts of his verbal explanations during rehearsals, as Toporkov and Zon's writings both attest to. Perhaps the most revealing record are the shorthand notes students kept during his lectures, in which his stream of consciousness manner of imparting his trove of knowledge, enhanced with artistic and philosophical views, is most

effective. In this respect David Magarshack's astute translation⁷⁶ of his „talks“ to the Bolshoi students (1918-1922), is a valuable resource, as the following comment in his book *Stanislavski on the Art of the Stage* elucidates (1950: 79):

The importance of these „discourses“ lies in the fact that in them we see Stanislavsky's methods of putting into practice his long experience as actor and producer. They include a great deal of material that forms a valuable addition to his famous „system“, especially so far as its philosophic background is concerned. [...] But perhaps the real value of these „discourses“ lies in their bringing the reader in close contact with Stanislavski's personality, with his infectious enthusiasm for the art of the stage, his great love of man, and his infinite patience with an actor's shortcomings. These „discourses“ were never prepared, and therein lies their great charm. Stanislavski did not believe in „lecturing“.

The crucial shortcoming of Stanislavski's „great book“, intended to impart the „work on oneself“ process of an actor's training, is that it lacks a conceptual framework on which to ground the precepts the fictitious Arkady Tortsov imparts to his ten charges, including „Kostya“ Nazvarov, the diary's keeper. Although the „system's“ elements are discussed in detail in classroom interactions, they seem to be isolated considerations rather than integral parts of a holistic acting approach. The fact that its English instalments were published fourteen years apart is also problematic, in that the psychological aspects of initial training appear to be divorced from the technical conditioning of a student actor's „instrument“, which makes the „system“ seem one-sided. Most importantly however, these manuscripts were written when Stanislavski was on the brink of exploring physical actions as the basis of characterisation and performance, whereas he had championed an „inner technique“ before. In the winter of 1930 he resumed his responsibilities at the MAT, supervising a production of *Three Fat Men* based on Yury Olesha's novel, which featured “actors blown up with papier-mâché and stuffing,” and representing “the Church, Capitalism, and the Army” (Logan in Moore 1984: xv). The time had clearly arrived for him to disassociate from the populist theatre in Russia to pursue his rarefied explorations elsewhere.

⁷⁶ Russian-born Margashack became a British citizen in 1931. He is known for his insightful translations of Dostoyevsky's works and his biographies of Stanislavski (1951), Chekhov (1952), Turgenyev (1954), Gogol (1957) and Pushkin (1967).

2.16 Towards a psychophysical approach

After his inability to wholly document the „work on oneself“ process, let alone „work on the role“, during the many months spent with the Hapgoods, Stanislavski no doubt questioned whether his fifty year ambition⁷⁷ to create a systemised approach to acting would remain unfulfilled. Despite having identified the elements that comprised both processes there were variables that relied on an individual’s psychological makeup. With gifted actors like Chekhov the use of affective memories to induce emotions was irrelevant, as they could do so by simply using their creative imaginations in the given circumstances.⁷⁸ Using past events also relied on personal experience and if this was limited, and they lacked imagination, little could be done except work on a role’s external aspects. Despite previously believing that “the physical materialization of a character to be created emerges of its own accord once the right inner values have been established,” and furthermore asserting “that external characterization can be achieved intuitively and also by means of purely technical, mechanical, simple external tricks,” Stanislavski (1986: 5, 9) now began to re-evaluate this position.

While Stanislavsky pursued a psychologically orientated acting approach, Meyerhold had focussed on an actor’s physicality, developing his training system, biomechanics, which

⁷⁷ At 21 Stanislavski enrolled at the Imperial Little Theatre’s drama school but withdrew after realising that the training was piecemeal, as his following explanation in *My Life in Art* reveals (1980: 90): “We were taught collectively or individually to play a given rôle, but we were not taught our craft. We felt the absence of fundamentals and of system. We were taught practical methods without these methods being systemised scientifically.” In a diary entry from April 1885 he noted there had to be a “grammar of acting,” as “no one seemed able to define ... the nature of the acting process” (Benedetti 2008: xix).

⁷⁸ Although the term „given circumstances“ is usually associated with the information a playwright supplies in the text, it is a consideration of all aspects of a production, as Tortsov explains in *An Actor Prepares* (1984: 51): “It means the story of the play, its facts, events, epoch, time and place of action, conditions of life, the actor and regisseur’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.” In this respect “[The magic] *if* gives the push to dormant imagination, whereas the *given circumstances* build the basis for *if* itself. And they both, together and separately, help to create an inner stimulus” (*ibid*). The „magic *if*“ stemmed from Stanislavski’s early speculations of the actor’s creative process during the 1906-1907 theatre season when he was trying to determine a means whereby they could mentally surmount the obvious falsehoods on the stage during a theatrical production, to give a realistic portrayal of human behaviour in the given circumstances. His deduction, as conveyed in *My Life in Art* (1980: 466), was that “creativity begins from the moment when in the soul and imagination of the actor there appears the magical, creative *if*.” Although this line of enquiry provided a basis for his ongoing exploration of this faculty, it is apparent in chapter four of *An Actor Prepares*, devoted to „Imagination“, that it depends on “logical reasoning,” as “[work] on the imagination is often prepared and directed in this conscious, intellectual manner” (1984: 66). The next step of his enquiry was attempting to conjoin the actor’s active imagination with the physical actions of the body-brain organism, the most direct link in terms of its evolutionary function as a mental process in service of the latter, without interference from the intellect.

was publicly demonstrated for the first time in 1922 (Braun 1998: 183). Its ongoing refinement in workshops he conducted at various institutions in the 1920s,⁷⁹ meant that by 1930 word of his training approach had spread abroad. John Martin, the American dance critic who was instrumental in establishing the modern dance genre, had the following to say about biomechanics (*in* Law & Gordon 1996: 229, 231):⁸⁰

[Certain exercises] are almost pantomimic. For example, there is one in which a man stealthily pursues a woman with an imaginary knife in hand; he stabs her, she falls, he lifts her rigid body to his back and carries her away. This is performed under the same muscular basis as the more frankly gymnastic exercises, and is based on no emotional premises whatever. It is interesting to observe, however, that emotional colours inevitably develop of themselves during the progress of the exercises. [...] This is a healthier, a more objective way of working than the introspective obsession with affective memory which has sent Stanislavsky's finest actor, Leonidov, three times to the insane asylum.

Stanislavski was no doubt aware of the growing popularity of Meyerhold's training approach, and even though he may not have been in favour of the stylised acting that resulted from it, he was nonetheless interested in the principles upon which it was based. In the early 1930s, over the course of three years, one of Meyerhold's students, Zosima Zlobin, regularly "visited Stanislavsky in order to demonstrate the principles of Biomechanics to him" (Law & Gordon 1996: 67). These demonstrations occurred at the Opera-Dramatic Studio attached to his Moscow townhouse, which had become the principal workplace for his ongoing experiments to further develop the „system“, well away from the prying eyes of the MAT members solely interested in promoting its „socialist realism“ agenda. A further factor that influenced his clandestine activities was that Nemirovich-Danchenko and Meyerhold "were barely on speaking terms" (Law & Gordon 1999: 68), and the interest Stanislavski expressed in the latter's work was

⁷⁹ Meyerhold first taught biomechanics at the State Director's Workshop (GVYRM), which was renamed the State Theatre Workshop (GVYTM) in January 1922. The following year it merged with the State Institute of Musical Drama (GVIRM) and eight smaller workshops under the umbrella of the State Institute of Theatrical Art (GITIS), which survives to date as the Russian Academy of Theatrical Art. Meyerhold broke away from GITIS in 1924 and established the independent State Experimental Workshop (GEKTEMAS), where he developed many of his innovative staging approaches.

⁸⁰ The article from which these extracts were taken was entitled „How Meyerhold Trains His Actors“ and was published in *Theatre Guild Magazine* (November 1930), pp. 26-30.

instantly and summarily rebuffed.⁸¹ What Stanislavski realised while observing Zlobin demonstrate the biomechanical etudes was the same effect Martin had noticed, namely that physical actions executed with total commitment reflexively stimulated corresponding emotions in the performer. This led him to deduce that “[if] emotions influence the physical actions of a person, then physical actions must to an equal degree influence emotions” (Stanislavski in Law & Gordon 1999: 68). Although the theoretical premise underlying this psychophysical interrelationship was proposed by the American physician turned philosopher-psychologist William James in the 1880s, encapsulated by his famous dictum „I saw the bear, I ran, I became frightened“ (Law & Gordon 1999: 36), Stanislavski had been so influenced by Ribot’s postulates that emotions were a product of the psyche, he was unable to entertain the possibility that they might have a physical aspect as well. Although Meyerhold (*in* Law and Gordon 1999: 143) used James’s theories to endorse his physically-orientated approach,⁸² his view of actors as objective signifiers in the *mise en scène* “not concerned with the *psychic* world, but with the *physical* world,” and merely an extension of a director’s vision, meant that the potential of this psycho-somatic interplay insofar as their art was concerned was mostly left unexplored by him.

In 1931 Stanislavski took over the direction of *Dead Souls* from Vassily Sakhnovski, a new MAT director who was looking for a heightened form of expression “with more than a nod in the direction of the grotesque” (Toporkov 2001: 44). Although the rehearsals had been ongoing for almost a year before Stanislavski’s involvement, they had entailed “fascinating discussions” about “Gogol’s personality, his view of the world and his relationship to his contemporaries,” including visits to art galleries and museums, which Toporkov (2001: 45) considered “all too abstract and too much dead weight as far as the practical work was concerned.” After watching a dress rehearsal Stanislavski told Sakhnovski “[he] had gone down a blind alley and ... would have to throw everything

⁸¹ Stanislavski wanted to invite Meyerhold to direct at the MAT in the early 1930s, but Nemirovich-Danchenko vetoed the idea, making it quite clear that while he was alive his former pupil “would never be allowed to work at the MXAT” (Law & Gordon 1999: 68).

⁸² During a conversation with the British journalist Lancelot Wilson in 1926, Meyerhold (*in* Law and Gordon 1999: 226) explained the differences of his „school“ from that of the „subjectivists“, or „vitalists“, as he referred to them: “[Their school] is based upon emotional movements. It imagines that these emotional movements are separate from physical movements, that the two are worlds apart. The other school to which I belong is based upon sure, firm ground: on the physical side of man. Emotions are the production of the nervous system; soul existence is not an element to be studied objectively. [...] There is no place for the soul. Scientists who make a study of reflexology tell us that it is replacing psychology. My aim is to lay the foundations of a race of perfect actors, of perfect men.”

out and start all over again,” and it was at this late stage that he became involved “to save the play” (Toporkov 2001: 45).

The situation Stanislavski encountered was in many respects an ideal opportunity for him to experiment with his emerging ideas. Spared the arduous task of analysing the play to familiarise the actors with its given circumstances, he could focus on their performances, and working with senior MAT artists like Leonidov, Moskvina and Maria Lilina,⁸³ meant they were thoroughly *au fait* with his directorial approach. He also had talented younger actors in key roles including Mikhail Kedrov, who played Manilov in what became a career altering experience,⁸⁴ and Toporkov as Chichikov, initially the “most thankless role” in Bulgakov’s adaptation of Gogol’s novel, whom Stanislavski made the central figure, so that his progress from being an opportunist to becoming a calculating swindler became the play’s main theme (Toporkov 2001: 45-46).

Having identified this super-objective and through line of action for the actors to focus on, Stanislavski divided the play into a series of encounters between Chichikov and the other characters which would reveal aspects of his developing nature. This entailed finding suitable objectives/tasks for each unit/bit of the unfolding narrative that would best convey this to an audience, a process that mostly entailed improvisations. Having broken the play into sections, each with its own objective in terms of serving the overarching theme, Stanislavski guided the actors to find the logical actions of their characters in these given circumstances. He did this by asking them simple, practical questions that “demanded a knowledge of the character’s life in the minutest detail,” a process which aroused their creative imaginations (Toporkov 2001: 47-48). What made this tact unusual was that he “[was] only concerned with physical behaviour,” specifically with the actors creating “a sequence of physical actions” in each bit that they could “[put] together in an unbroken line” in each scene (Toporkov 2001: 51). Whereas

⁸³ Lilina was the stage name of Stanislavski’s wife Maria Petrovna Perevostchinkova (1866-1943). A MAT founding member “with a gift for comedy” and “playing charming young women and girls,” she was “trying out new roles,” which meant the landowner Korobochka in *Dead Souls* “was one of her first as an old woman” (Toporkov 2001: 89). Toporkov’s account of how Stanislavski helped her to transform into a character so alien to her artistic nature is illuminating (see Toporkov 2001: pp. 89-95).

⁸⁴ Kedrov joined the MAT as an actor in 1924, but during the *Dead Souls* rehearsals often challenged Sakhnovski’s direction, especially his manner of assigning character tasks „in general“, instead of demanding specificity. It is clear from Toporkov’s account of these exchanges that Kedrov had a sound grasp of the „system“, whereas Sakhnovski was obviously ignorant of its key principles (see Toporkov 2001: 65-67). Kedrov was Stanislavski’s assistant on *Tartuffe*, completing and staging the production after his death, and headed his Opera-Dramatic Studio until 1948. He was also a MAT head until 1970.

before his emphasis had been on actors finding a character's inner life and basing their performance score on these moments of psychological identification, he now focussed on external behaviour, as Toporkov (2001: 54) confirms: "Stanislavski considered action to be the sole, the indisputable basis of acting. He ruthlessly excluded everything else."

Stanislavski's ideological turnabout is placed in a clearer perspective when considering that he asserted the following in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article (Stanislavski in Cole 1995: 39, his italics):

[By] extracting from the recesses of his working memory the combinations of emotions necessary to the part, of emotions that have an active character and mould themselves into dramatic action ... the different sections of the actor's part grow more lively and richer by degrees, owing to the involuntary play of the complicated organic survivals. By joining together and grafting these sections, the *score of the part* is formed; the scores of the separate parts ... are summed up in a single *score of the performance*.

In *An Actor Prepares* (1984: 164) Tortsov advocates the same approach, telling his students "feelings, drawn from our actual experience, and transferred to our part, are what give life to the play," and "external production is formal, cold, and pointless if it is not motivated from within."⁸⁵ This „inside-out“ approach is already introduced in the first chapter, in which he states (1984: 14) "we begin by thinking about the inner side of a role, and how to create its spiritual life through the help of the internal process of living the part." It is only in writings dating from the *Dead Soul* rehearsals, bearing in mind it premiered in November 1932, that the true extent of Stanislavski's ideological shift becomes apparent. In a document he wrote between 1930 and 1933, according to Hapgood, Tortsov tells his students that he has "come across a new and unexpected method" that will help them "feel [the] part ... by creating a *physical life for it*," and goes on to explain the following (Stanislavski 1975: 107, 131, 149):

⁸⁵ Interestingly, in the final section of this chapter on „Emotion Memory“ Tortsov states that "[a]nother important source of stimulation of emotion is true physical action and your *belief* in it (Stanislavski 1984: 190, his italics). Given the contradictory nature of this assertion vis-à-vis the rest of the chapter, in which actions are deemed the result emotional activity, and not the other way around, it is apparent Stanislavski tried to incorporate his new ideas in the book throughout the 1930s before it went to print.

The creation of the physical life is half the work on a role because, like us, a role has two natures, physical and spiritual. You will say that the main purpose of our art does not consist of externals, that the creation of the life of a human spirit is what it looks to in order to inform what we do on the stage. I quite agree, but precisely because of this I begin our work on the physical life of any part. [...] The spirit cannot but respond to the actions of the body, provided of course that these are genuine, have a purpose, and are productive.

Had this manuscript been included in *An Actor Prepares* or *Building A Character* it would have brought into question the psychotechnique's entire theoretical basis, yet it only appeared in *Creating A Role*. The fact is neither of the earlier books should be viewed without this filter, especially the first, focussing on an actor's psychological development in preparation to create a character, although there is ample evidence of later inclusions and rewrites, in particular in the eighth and longest chapter entitled „Faith and a Sense of Truth“. It is most significant in terms of Stanislavski's latter thinking, introducing principles that inform his manuscript entitled „From Physical Actions to Living Image“, which Hapgood (*in Stanislavski 1975: 211*) states he wrote “around 1934,” but also only appeared in *Creating A Role*.

Despite its contradictions with the other chapters in *An Actor Prepares*, and even itself, in section four of chapter eight Kostya states that Tortsov directed “[his] physical actions, movement by movement, second by second, until a coherent sequence was achieved,” and once “[he] was convinced of the truth of [his] physical actions, [he] felt perfectly at ease on the stage” (1984: 134-135). In section five Tortsov expresses the thinking behind this new approach, stating (1984: 140): “In every physical act there is a psychological element and a physical one in every psychological act.” In section six he asserts that “laying down a series of physical actions” helps an actor create “the life of a human body,” which constitutes “one half of the image to be created,” and in section seven clarifies (1984: 142-144, 147): “We use the conscious technique of creating the physical body of a role and by its aid achieve the creation of the unconscious life of the spirit of a role.”

Considering Stanislavski-Tortsov's statements in the book's first chapter, which suggest a diametrically opposite approach, these later assertions might appear to undermine the

„system“s“ ideological credibility. Yet the fact is the materials that comprise *An Actor Prepares* stem from various periods of Stanislavski’s ongoing experimentation, and as he discovered more effective ways to stimulate an actor’s inner life, his early methods were sidelined during his practical work, although never discarded. In this respect they were merely a means to address the challenges actors faced and not part of a rigid formula. Thus, even though his later focus shifted to the actor’s physical being, the „system“s“ psychological elements became a second tier that complemented the first. In this respect the systematic approach to training, characterisation and performance that he made it his life’s goal to define is not necessarily undermined by his late change of mind, as he was a reflexive practitioner, not a theoretician, and his attempts at documentation should be viewed in this light.

Toporkov’s account of the *Dead Souls* rehearsals is a testament of Stanislavski’s extensive know-how of the actor’s art, in that “he mobilised all his skills, all his genius as a director and teacher, and those who were present at rehearsals could not but be dazzled by his mastery and talent” (2001: 43). Sadly, it was his final MAT production due to his medical condition. Yet his work at the Opera-Dramatic Studio attached to his Moscow townhouse in his final years assisted by his wife Lilina, sister Zinaida and brother Vladimir, would be the most important in terms of consolidating his findings.

2.17 From physical actions to active analysis

From 1933 onwards “Stanislavski worked exclusively at home, rehearsing actors for new productions, [and] drafting his books” (Benedetti 2008: xxi). In April he gave permission that Zon be allowed to attend rehearsals at the Opera-Dramatic Studio. Zon’s former experience of the „system“ consisted of having attended a course years before with his colleagues at the Leningrad Theatre of the Young Spectator conducted by Vakhtangov’s student E. V. Elagina. Despite having approved this transference, Stanislavski (*in* Zon 1955: 452) pointed out: “Vakhtangov passed away a long time ago, eleven years had passed and at this time we analyzed over a lot and had to refuse a lot that before was considered indisputable”. Zon may therefore have been recruited to serve the same purpose as Toporkov, namely someone from a different theatrical tradition unfamiliar with his working methods whom he could convert to his way of thinking. Zon’s invitation may also have been prompted by the fact that Sudakov, Stanislavski’s former assistant director (*see note 73*), now headed the Working Youth Theatre in Moscow, and lectured on the „system“ without his sanction.⁸⁶

The first day Zon attended rehearsals Stanislavski worked on the opera *The Maid of Pskov* by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. The same approach used in *Dead Souls* is again evident with the performers creating sequences of logical actions aligned to the super-task by focussing on physical behaviour rather than psychological identification. This is encapsulated by Stanislavski’s assertion “[a]bsolutely no feelings,” and the following statement he made “loudly and forcefully,” as if “eliminating an invisible opponent,” according to Zon (1955: 445, 446): “Logic and common sense are the foundations of stage art. Temperament flows easily when actions are logical and feelings are not forced.” He therefore announced his intention to pursue a whole new direction in his investigation of the actor’s art,⁸⁷ which everyone present, including Zon, deemed to be

⁸⁶ According to Smeliansky (*in* Stanislavski 2008: 687), Stanislavski “went into a fury” when Sudakov tried to expound the „system“ to his students. In a letter he wrote M. K. Tamantsova in February 1934 at the *Iskusstvo* („The Art“) publishing house that published the Russian version of his „great book“, he stated (*ibid*): “It is not a matter of an author’s pride, but the fact that the thing I love most, to which I have dedicated my life, has been cynically violated and given over to the crowd in mutilated form.”

⁸⁷ During a discussion at the end of the rehearsal Stanislavski told Zon that his new method was based on ensuring actors were not overloaded with information at the start of the creative process, rather that they approached a play “step by step in a logical way through action” (Zon 1955: 452). In Zon’s understanding a director must “lead the actor to a process of involuntary creation of an image based on the process of action itself and the actor on his own,” not from interpreting the text (*ibid*).

highly controversial (1955: 446). His convictions at this stage are conveyed in the following talk Tortsov gave his students, which appears in the manuscript he wrote at this time (1975: 209):

With the help of nature – our subconscious, instinct, intuition, habits, and so forth – we evoke a series of physical actions interlaced with one another. Through them we try to understand the inner reasons that gave rise to them, individual moments of experienced emotions, the logic and consistency of feelings in the given circumstances of the play. When we can discover that line, we are aware of the inner meaning of our physical actions. This awareness is not intellectual but emotional in origin, because we comprehend with our own feelings some part of the psychology of our role. Yet we cannot act this psychology itself nor its logical and consecutive feelings. Therefore we keep to the firmer and more accessible ground of physical actions and adhere rigorously to their logic and consistency. And since their pattern is inextricably bound up with that other inner pattern of feelings, we are able through them to reach the emotions. That pattern becomes part and parcel of the score of the role.

The important shift in Stanislavski's thinking at this time is that a "task emerges non-voluntarily," and actors should "perform in a "visual" order"⁸⁸ rather than trying to convey intellectual ideas gained from „round the table“ analysis, so they discover the play's meaning through a purely physical exploration prompted by their visualisation of it (Zon 1955: 453). This method, which was later referred to as Active Analysis, was aimed at engaging all the actor's creative resources (emotions, feelings, instincts, intuition etc.) through a combination of imagination and logic. Unlike the former use of the „magic if“ to enable actors to identify with the play's given circumstances (*see note 78*), the emphasis was now on visualising its content and acting on it without any predetermined considerations. This meant the play was read once or twice and then

⁸⁸ The origin of this aspect of his new method can be traced to *The Government Inspector*. According to Knebel (1967: 106): "Chekhov visualised everything he was saying on stage, with amazing clarity. The study of "visualisations" had not taken such a place in Stanislavski's system, as it later did." Considering that Knebel became Stanislavski's personal assistant at the Opera-Dramatic Studio from 1936 onwards, and is known in Russia for continuing his work on the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis, or „action-analysis“, as she termed it in her book *Action Analysis of the Play and the Role*, as yet unpublished in English, it is a significant statement. These techniques, and the elements comprising them, such as visualisations, are still largely unknown outside Russia.

performed, as he explained it to Zon (1955: 452): “They do not know the text, but they know what to do. If they forget – I will remind them. If a question arises, we will consult the text.” In this respect Stanislavski (*in* Zon 1955: 453) considered this “a development of the antecedent” to his former approach.

The next day Zon attended a rehearsal of the opera *The Barber of Seville*. Although a different genre to the previous day’s drama, Stanislavski’s approach was the same, telling the performers to create logical actions they could believe in as themselves. The first step was that they had to “orientate” themselves in the rehearsal space by “finding their bearings,” imaginatively transforming objects in it into elements of the play, a wardrobe into a statue for example, and a couch into a fountain (Zon 1955: 454). While they walked around the room “quietly touching the items, gazing at them, as if they saw them for the first time, not paying attention to each other,” Stanislavski (*in* Zon 1955: 454) explained the reason for this exercise: “When I walk around these objects, a certain attitude towards them will develop, their presence will be quite natural and I will find it comfortable to be amongst these objects, in other words I will find my “I am” as we say.” Next he told them to “[w]alk along the lines of the play,”⁸⁹ performing simple tasks “to reconstruct the elementary actions of the persons they were performing before the start of the passage,” but to do it for themselves, not the spectators (Zon 1955: 454-455). Only after he considered them to be ready did the rehearsal proper start. This deceptively simple means to engage the performers in the scenic circumstances is based on the principle of “here, today, now” (Zon 1955: 454), which also informed Vakhtangov’s final method,⁹⁰ and incorporates the notion that “*attention* and *object* are the elements and conditions of the emergence of elementary action” (Sudakov *in* Cole 1995: 95). It

⁸⁹ This indicates an imaginative shift from walking around the rehearsal room, to the realm of the play.

⁹⁰ According to Zavadsky (*in* Vendrovskaya and Kaptereva 1982: 235): “The improvisational quality of Vakhtangov’s rehearsals, his new and unexpected solutions “here, now, today” ... evolved from his background with Stanislavsky, together with his rejection of Stanislavsky’s postulates.” The principle, as Zavadsky elaborates (*ibid*: 243), is that “a stage production should have the only interpretation possible, arising not from the play’s text, but also from the era in which the work is being staged, as well as the particular talents of the cast performing it.” The origin can be traced to Meyerhold calling for modern dramatists “not to copy the traditions of the old theatre,” or else “[the] actor may get bored with perfecting his craft in order to perform in outdated plays,” rather to contribute to “the rebirth of *the theatre of improvisation*” in „The Fairground Booth“ (*in* Braun 1998: 126-127). In it he cites Gozzi as an ideal dramatist who provided Giovanni Sacchi “with scenarios which left the actors free to compose their own improvised monologues and dialogues” (*ibid*: 127). Vakhtangov’s use of *Turandot* to demonstrate this “improvised” topicality and his knack to guess “what needed to be said „today“ and how it should be said, and to understand *what* had to be done „today“ in art and *how* it should be done” (Zavadsky *in* Vendrovskaya and Kaptereva 1982: 245-255), suggests it was a homage to Meyerhold.

furthermore echoes Meyerhold's assertion (*in* Braun 1998: 137) that an artist's „I“ reflects their attitude to life and should precede all else, which entitles them to use anything as material to express the truth of their creativity, not only “the truth of reality.”

Although Stanislavski's experiments during the summer of 1933 incorporated ideas attributed to others, there was a clear intention to his enquiry, which was finding the most direct means of engaging a performer's subconscious in their creative activities. In this regard he emphasised simplicity, telling them to get rid of “pluses”,⁹¹ namely “everything what is not meant for oneself, for internal purposes” (*in* Zon 1955: 455), so they engaged with their characters on an organic level. So too his insistence that they visualise everything they did, which he explained as follows (*in* Zon 1955: 456):

One learns a role according to the images and not the words. At first I see a picture on my internal display; this picture in turn creates a word for me. [...] The role must in such a way gradually become a film, so that one can see it all with one's eyes.

Although not a new element of the „system”,⁹² Stanislavski now viewed this “string of images” the key to psychologically engaging actors with the inner life of their role, no longer relying on affective memories, but a combination of reflexive responses to the character's actions and feelings unconsciously triggered as a result of these images playing on their mind's eye (Zon 1955: 459). In *An Actor Prepares* Tortsov explains how this works in actual performance (Stanislavski 1984: 63-64, his italics):

During every moment we are on the stage, during every moment of the development of the action of the play, we must be aware either of the external circumstances ... or of an inner chain of circumstances which we ourselves have imagined in order to illustrate our parts. Out of these moments will be

⁹¹ „Pluses“ equates with theatrical touches actors add to their behaviour which introduce falsehoods that block the flow of their organic impulses, which Stanislavski explained as follows to Toporkov during *The Embezzlers*'s rehearsals (2001: 23): “[O]nly do the minimum necessary. That's the most expressive level. Pluses, extras, lead nowhere. They're a big lie. We call that “theatrics”. Find the right level – that's the hardest thing in our business. [...] That's what you should always try and do.”

⁹² According to Knebel (1967: 106) “the term “film of visualisations” and the demand to create an illustrative subtext had already entered into the practice of rehearsals” during Stanislavski's work on *The Government Inspector*, and “Chekhov, who by nature was gifted with an unusually vivid thinking, was especially fond of this part of the system.” In Chekhov's view (*in* Knebel 1967: 106): “To see, to see, to see what you are talking about on stage, this is the key to everything. You can not compensate the absence of an image which must be placed behind words.”

formed an unbroken series of images, something like a moving picture ... [that] will unroll and be thrown on the screen of our inner vision, making vivid the circumstances among which we are moving. Moreover, these inner images create a corresponding mood, and arouse emotions, while holding us within the limits of the play.

In *An Actor Prepares* Stanislavski therefore emphasised the effect of the mind on the body, encapsulated by Tortsov's assertion (1984: 58): "Activity in imagination is of utmost importance. First comes internal, and afterwards external action." Yet during the 1933 rehearsals, this interplay is not as straightforward as he asserted in the book, as is evident in his following explanation (Stanislavski in Zon 1955: 457, his italics):

We remember life in sketches, i.e. how one or another action is performed in life. When we have remembered, *partially consciously and partially intuitively* we pause and then determine what we are doing here, i.e. secure the tasks, which in turn will awaken and initiate the following tasks. These are *the notes which in time will form a score of your role*. [...] *For every second of your stage life you must have a living object and communication with it. If this does not exist, you will be left with simple "acting"*. [...] *We create an image in our mind, it is what we call living through it*, and at other theatres they don't imagine anything, they just "play a role".

Although this shift in his thinking is subtle, and he was no doubt still unclear on how remembered images influenced those created by the process of the imagination, he was nonetheless starting to realise that it was a more complex interrelationship than he had previously assumed. This became the central topic of the final manuscript he wrote in the winter of 1933-1934, entitled „From Physical Actions to Living Image“.

The third rehearsal Zon attended in April 1933, again of *The Barber of Seville*, was not particularly revealing insofar as Stanislavski's new line of enquiry was concerned, although his emphasis on logic as the cornerstone of the actor's art, even in operatic performance, was again evident. In this respect he insisted that the players develop "continuous lines of logically rational behaviour" in each scene, encapsulated by his dictum (in Zon 1955: 460): "*Logic first, then rhythm, then exceptional logic again.*" Another element he emphasised, which harked back to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

article, was the imperative of actors choosing active verbs⁹³ to define their objectives, which would strengthen their wills and spur them to action, and while working on a scene between Bartolo and Don Basilio, he explained the imperative of „communion“ (see note 16) during performance (in Zon 1955: 460, 461, his italics and insert):

How do you test yourself, if the scene was good or not? For example, it was pleasant for you, but what feels the most pleasant to the actor is the process of acting according to clichés, because it is so easy. [...] *The only true judge is your partner*. For you (Basilio) the judge is a combination of Alexei Dmitrievich and Bartolo: The performer + role. Look for “the soul” of this new creature. Influence it with all the strength you have. And if Alexei Dmitrievich tells you after work: “Dear me, how you frightened me today!” – this is what we mean by business, this is important.

This became an increasingly important aspect of the revised „system“, namely that actors were now expected to actively exchange mental images with each other, not merely lines of dialogue, encapsulated by Stanislavski’s assertion (in Zon 1955: 449) that they speak to each other’s eyes, not ears. When Zon again attended rehearsals in August 1934 he would encounter a far more clearly defined version of this emerging method, no doubt due to Stanislavski reflecting on his practical findings during the winter months. The fact that the psychotechnique was evolving into a psychophysical approach could no longer be denied however, even if it would be poorly reflected in *An Actor Prepares*, which the Hapgoods were finalising for publication in America.

⁹³ Considering that Knebel’s first book was entitled *The Verb in the actor’s art* (1954), the importance of this element of the „system“ is apparent. Although it had always been inferred in the need for actors to identify their objective in each unit of action, including verbal actions, it became more pronounced, in that the active nature of the verb selected served to create an inner compulsion to their outer action.

2.18 A brief encounter and a methodological key

In October 1931 the Soviet authorities closed the Sohn theatre to renovate it, which left Meyerhold's company homeless until the summer of 1932 when they moved into the Passage Theatre, "a miserable little box which was as much responsible for the gradual stagnation of the company's repertoire as the tenets of socialist realism or the mediocrity of contemporary dramatic literature" (Braun 1998: 243). This meant the master of theatrical spectacle had to forego his large scale experiments and focus on more conventional fare. In January 1933 he staged a poorly received adaptation of Yury German's novel *Vstuplenie (Entry)*, followed in April by Sukhovo-Koblin's *Krenchinsky's Wedding*, no doubt to regain public support for his activities. Yet there was more to this, as Ilinsky (cited in Braun 1998: 244) suggests below:

[In this production he] undoubtedly advanced a further step towards profound psychologism and inner development of character. A new period seemed to have begun at the Meyerhold Theatre. A departure from the Meyerhold of sensational bluff, the urge to shock and scandalise ...

In March 1934 Meyerhold staged *The Lady of the Camellias* with his wife, Zinaida Raikh, in the lead. Despite a "sour response from the majority of the critics," it was his only public triumph in the 1930s, largely due to Raikh's "grace, beauty, and stage presence" (Braun 1998: 246). It was this urbane, untypical Meyerholdian production that Adler, Clurman and Strasberg encountered on their arrival in Moscow in May.⁹⁴ Although their visit was prompted by increasing tensions amongst the Group Theatre members regarding Strasberg's use of affective memories, and they wanted to consult with Stanislavski to clarify their application of his „system“, he was abroad. Strasberg attended a lecture on Biomechanics by Nikolai Kustov, keeping detailed notes,⁹⁵ and according to Clurman (1983: 139), he was "most impressed in Moscow with the Meyerhold productions, as they always held a theoretical fascination for him," with the result that on his return to New York to start rehearsals on Melvin Levy's *Gold Eagle*

⁹⁴ During his ten day visit Clurman asked Meyerhold about this "curious, not to say hazardous choice," to which he responded (in Braun 1998: 244): "I am interested in showing the bad attitude of the bourgeoisie to women. Marguerite is treated like a slave or a servant. [...] I was interested to show this because we, too, in the Soviet Union, have had a wrong conception of love and of women."

⁹⁵ Strasberg's notes were published in *The Drama Review* vol. 17, no. 1 (March 1973), pp. 110-112.

Guy he “displayed a greater concern with movement and the expressive value of physical materials than he had ever had before.”⁹⁶ His shift in emphasis came too late however, as he had already alienated many Group members.

Failing to find Stanislavski in Russia, Adler and Clurman travelled to Europe, hoping to track him down there.⁹⁷ On arrival in Paris Clurman contacted Copeau who he had assisted in a Theatre Guild production of *The Brother’s Karamazov* in 1927,⁹⁸ and he arranged a meeting with Stanislavski. After his return to New York Adler stayed on and worked with Stanislavski for five weeks, and he supposedly told her he no longer used the actor’s affective memories, but their imagination in the given circumstances. Armed with this information she returned to the Group, “[l]ike an apostle to the Gentiles,” and informed them “Stanislavski said we’re doing it wrong,” whereupon Strasberg apparently replied: “Stanislavski doesn’t know, *I* know!” (Hirsch 2002: 79).

When Stanislavski recalled his encounter with the “famous American actress [who] decided to learn the system for her development” to Zon (1955: 463) months later, he was somewhat derisive, despite the incident having been made much of by Adler.⁹⁹ A more significant occurrence during a year spent abroad was that he had identified a possible methodological key for his radical new approach to characterisation and performance, which he documented during this time. In the words of his literary alter ego, in the opening lines of the manuscript (Stanislavski 1975: 213):

“Here is my approach to a new role,” said Tortsov. “Without any reading, without any conferences on the play, the actors are asked to a rehearsal of it. [...] More than that. One can act a play not yet written.”

⁹⁶ Clurman visited the USSR on his own the following year, attending thirty-five productions in five weeks and a biomechanics class at Meyerhold’s Theatre, which he considered to be “the best body work for the actor [he] had ever seen” (Clurman in Law & Gordon 1996: 252).

⁹⁷ According to Stanislavski (*in* Zon 1955: 464) she rushed to Nice to look for him, but he had already left for Paris, where she eventually tracked him down.

⁹⁸ Clurman wrote a thesis on the French drama at the Sorbonne, regularly attending the theatre as well as Copeau’s lectures at Théâtre du Vieux Colombier. He was thus fluent in French and helped Copeau out during the rehearsals in New York “when his English went dry” (Clurman 1983: 16).

⁹⁹ According to Adler (2000: 237) she and Stanislavski “worked together for many, many weeks,” and “achieved the greatest closeness of director and actress, and very soon it was just actor and actress!”

2.19 „I am being“, the basis of a new approach

In early August 1934 Zon gained permission to again attend rehearsals at the Opera-Dramatic Studio. During their first talk Stanislavski mentioned his work with Adler to underline the importance of the super task and through action to the young director.¹⁰⁰ What he gleaned from this, “an absolutely new idea” for him, was that “*the super task was for the play and not for separate super tasks relating to roles,*” and the counter-through action “could be a separate character, and sometimes it interweaved into one role together with the through action,” a notion that Stanislavski (*in Zon 1955: 464, his italics*) clarified as follows:

[The main task] only manifests itself fully within the *through action*, so we mostly talk about the *through action*, *counter-through action* and about the *super task of the poet*. The flow of the play is a bundle of fibres of through actions interlacing with counter-through actions.

It was also the first time Zon heard the expressions “the *perspective of the role* and the *perspective of the actor*,” which referred to a character’s focus on the moment-to-moment scenic events, while the actor ensured that the role was conveyed in the most expressive manner, always remembering “the necessity of *diversity*, *contrasts* and the possibility of *excrescence*”¹⁰¹ (*Zon 1955: 464, his italics*). The basis of this duality was the state „I am being“, the key to inducing a creative mood during performance. Thus, although experimenting with physical actions to create a performance score, and exploring the psychophysical interrelationship between actions and emotions, the state of „I am“, the crux of the psychotechnique, was still considered beyond the realm of somatic influence. Yet it is apparent from Stanislavski’s 1934 manuscript and discussions with Zon that a transition towards a more holistic view of the actor’s art was occurring. In an attempt to explain this to Zon (1955: 465) he equated physical actions with a railway track and the actor to a “neat, clean wagon” hurtling along the carefully laid “rails”

¹⁰⁰ Stanislavski dismissed the training Adler received from Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya, telling Zon, in his typically understated manner (*in Zon 1955: 464*): “They, obviously, explained everything to her, but forgot about something small, - *why* all happens on stage, they could not impress that everything is intended *for a through action and the super task*. Can you believe it, they seemed to be smart people.”

¹⁰¹ „Excrescence“ referred to „pluses“, namely “unattractive or superfluous additions” (Oxford 11th Ed.).

towards “the blooming of a feeling,”¹⁰² a process he summarised by stating “the physical living of a human body leads towards a “soul”, to complex psychological experiences.” Tortsov uses the same analogy to explain this notion to his students in the 1934 manuscript, but Grisha¹⁰³ exclaims that “true artists don’t ride around in railway carriages on the ground, they soar in airplanes, above the clouds” (Stanislavski 1975: 235). He then uses this metaphor, comparing the line of physical actions to a runway from which an actor’s “creative airplane” takes off to go on “inspired flights”, but pointing out (1975: 236): “[These] flights do not depend on us and we cannot make rules about them. The only thing we have in our power is to prepare the ground, lay our rails, which is to say create our physical actions reinforced by truth and faith.” Thus, whereas before he emphasised the importance of creating logical sequences of actions, Stanislavski (1975: 215) now expected actors to wholeheartedly believe in them, as Tortsov urged his students to “[k]eep strictly inside the narrow confines of physical actions, search out their logic and consecutiveness, and try to find the state of „I am“.” The implication of this shift in thinking is evident in Tortsov’s explanation below, which reveals the meaning of the manuscript’s title, namely „From Physical Actions to Living Image“ (Stanislavski 1975: 221):

[Once] you have grasped the logic and the consecutiveness of these physical actions as well as felt their truth and established your faith in what you were doing on the stage, it will not be difficult for you to repeat this same sequence in different given circumstances, which the play will set for you, and which will be enlarged and enhanced by your imagination.

¹⁰² Stanislavski’s metaphoric reference to flowers representing feelings can be traced to his struggle to identify with Satin’s emotional state in *The Lower Depths* in 1902. After consulting “[an] experienced actor and good psychologist” he was told the following (cited in Magarshack 1950: 56): “To attempt to repeat a feeling an actor accidentally experiences on the stage is like trying to revive a faded flower. Why not try to growing a new one instead? How are you to do it? To begin with, forget all about the flower itself, but water its roots or plant a new seed, and a new flower will grow from this seed.” He conveyed this as follows in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article (in Cole 1995: 29): “The actor’s task, then begins with the search for the play’s artistic seed. All artistic action – organic action, as in every constructive operation of nature – starts from this seed at the moment when it is conveyed to the mind. On reaching the actor’s mind, the seed must wander around, germinate, put out roots, drinking in the juices of the soil in which it is planted, grow and eventually bring forth a lively plant.”

¹⁰³ In *An Actor Prepares* Kostya describes Grisha (the Russian equivalent of Gregory) Govorkov as “a stocky young fellow ... who had already played in some small theatre” (Stanislavski 1984: 1). As with each of the ten fictitious students, he represented a particular mindset and outlook regarding acting. In Grisha’s case he was extremely passionate, but had acquired the habits of mechanical acting and was also referred to as the “tragedian” (Stanislavski 1975: 236), which suggests he was based on Kachalov.

Whereas before the actor's imagination in the given circumstances and their affective memories determined their scenic actions, dependent on facts provided by the text, Stanislavski (1975: 213) now suggested that they could act without this information, merely needing to induce an "inner creative state," or „I am“. In this respect, once "all the elements that alert him and orient him toward creative work" were "[gathered] up into a single whole" the actor could "act out a play not yet in existence" (Stanislavski 1975: 213). This effectively meant that actors, as creators in their own right, would be independent of a director or playwright's influence, in a position of artistic autonomy that had always prompted his experimentations. Yet in order for them to be free from relying on others to practice their art, actors had to have absolute control over their instruments and be able to access creative materials beyond their conscious ken. They also had to transform subjective impressions into objective portrayals to effectively convey them to an audience, the role of a director.

Considering that "the fundamental objective of [the] psycho-technique is to put [actors] in a creative state in which [the] subconscious will function naturally," as Tortsov explains in the sixteenth and final chapter of *An Actor Prepares* entitled „On the Threshold of the Subconscious“,¹⁰⁴ in which the notion of „I am“ is first introduced, the import of this state in "[creating] favourable conditions for the birth of inspiration" is clear (Stanislavski 1984: 281, 292). In this respect Tortsov told his students that "[when] you have real truth, [and] faith in your actions," „I am“ is reached, and when this happens "[you] are on the threshold" (1984: 289). Whereas before Stanislavski (1984: 291) attributed this state to engaging with a play's content, stating, as Tortsov, that "[if] you sense the truth in a play subconsciously, your faith in it will naturally follow, and the state of „I am“," from 1934 he wanted to ensure that an actor's creative process in the early stages of characterisation was as uninfluenced as possible by the ideas of others, as Tortsov explains below (Stanislavski 1975: 218):

¹⁰⁴ According to Benedetti (*in* Stanislavski 2008: xvi-xvii) Stanislavski sent the final chapters of *An Actor Prepares* to Hapgood in 1935, including „On the Threshold of the Subconscious“, and these were substantially different from the Russian versions that appeared in his „great book“ published in 1938. This was due to the fact that it had to be extensively revised and rewritten and to him being "locked in a bitter battle with pseudo-Marxist Soviet psychology, which did not recognise the existence either of the subconscious or of the Mind" (*ibid*). This was particularly problematic as "[he] was attempting to define the actor's processes (mental, physical, intellectual and emotional) in a comprehensive way that had never been undertaken before" (Benedetti *in* Stanislavski 2008: xvii, his insert). Smeliansky (*in* Stanislavski 2008: 689) confirms this by quoting from Stanislavski's letter to Lyubov Gurievich, his Russian editor, in which he states: "To my mind, the greatest danger of the book is "the creation of the life of the human spirit" [...] the subconscious, transmission and reception, and the word *soul*."

[A]pproach the role in your own person, from life and not from the author's directions, not from all the rubber stamp conventional forms. This will allow you to be independent in your ideas of the image to be projected. If you were going to be guided only by printed instructions you would ... be doing blindly what the author said, you would be staking everything on him ... instead of making your own image analogous to the one created by the author.

What Stanislavski therefore proposed was that an actor's conscious work to create a sequence of logical/truthful actions that did not violate any aspect of their organism's natural functioning, would enable them to sincerely believe in what they were doing, thus inducing the state of „I am“. Once this occurred they could consciously monitor their scenic behaviours to ensure that they were effective in conveying their intended meanings to an audience, whilst simultaneously opening a conduit to the unconscious realm of feelings, instincts and intuitions, the impulses prompting their spontaneous expression. Not only did he suggest actors could self-induce this state by reproducing natural human behaviour in the given circumstances (of a playwright's work and the director's interpretation of it), but also that it would release their creativity in any genre, as Tortsov's statement below confirms (Stanislavski 1975: 237):

[The] truth of our physical actions and our faith in them are not needed by us for the sake of realism or naturalism but rather to affect, in a reflexive way, our inner feelings in our roles, and to avoid frightening away or forcing our emotions, in order to preserve their pristine quality, their immediacy and purity, in order to convey on the stage the living, human, spiritual essence of the character we are portraying.

Stanislavski's distinction between emotions and feelings is telling, especially when considering they are different processes,¹⁰⁵ as are his references to a soul (*dushá*) and the spirit (*duh*). Whereas he had focussed on the interrelationship between physical actions and emotions before, he now began to entertain the prospect that they might also provide a means to access an actor's spiritual nature, not only preparing it for the affects of

¹⁰⁵ Damasio (2004: 28, 284-285) points out that emotions “play out in the theater of the body” whereas feelings “play out in the theatre of the mind,” and in this regard “spiritual experiences ... are biological processes of the highest level of complexity” which “dig deeper into the substance of living.”

inspiration, but actually stimulating feelings associated with this heightened state, as Tortsov explains below (Stanislavski 1984: 293, his italics):

[T]he smallest action or sensation, the slightest technical means, can acquire a deep significance on the stage only if it is pushed to its limits of possibility, to the boundary of human *truth, faith* and the sense of “I am”. When this point is reached, your whole spiritual and physical make-up will function normally, just as it does in real life and without regard to the special condition of having to do your creative work in public.

This suggestion is more explicit in Stanislavski’s final manuscript in which Tortsov states that just as an airplane’s flight starts once it has taken off from the ground, so too an actor’s “elevation begins when the realistic or even the ultranaturalistic ends,” the point at which their “*spiritual wellsprings open wide*” (Stanislavski 1975: 236, his italics). He was clearly no longer content that actors portrayed authentic emotions on stage, namely simply „living over a role“ (*perezhivanie*), instead he wanted them to penetrate the realm of the unknown and to channel impulses emanating from there during performance. This intriguing idea would remain untried in actual practice until April 1937 however, when he began work on Molière’s *Tartuffe*.

2.20 The challenge of transmission

Although Stanislavski revised old material and wrote new manuscripts to be included in his „great book“ during the 1930s, he began doubting if it would accurately convey his beliefs about the actor’s art. When Zon asked him who the book was intended for, namely beginners, actors or teachers, his reply (*in* Zon 1955: 478) was: “[I] don’t know yet myself. I want to complete it in such a manner that everyone would be able to understand me, this will most likely not be possible.” In the preface of the Russian edition his concern regarding misinterpretation his of „system“ is evident, despite stating its essence “is to access the subconscious through the conscious,” namely “[using] the conscious methods in an actor’s work to study and stimulate subconscious creativity – inspiration” (Stanislavski 2008: xxv-xxvi). Although it was a bold declaration in the face of the opposition towards his artistic convictions, even within his inner circle,¹⁰⁶ the fact is his proposition was conceptually challenging, and more so when trying to apply it pragmatically. Stanislavski was acutely aware of this however, realising his writings might be interpreted as an acting formula, or worse, a philosophy, a concern he expressed to Zon (1955: 460, his italics) in 1933: “The system is a reference book, and not a “philosophy”. When “philosophy” begins – it is the death of the system. *Look at the system at home and leave it on the stage – you cannot act the system.*”

Stanislavski’s aversion to intellectual analysis meant his unstructured writings lacked the qualities he considered most important in performance, namely having a clear objective and a through line. Being unsure of who he was writing for meant that “in his effort to be absolutely clear” he achieved “the very opposite of what he intended,” as his “style became convoluted, verbose and confusing” (Benedetti 2008: viii). His indecision also extended to the order in which the elements of the „system“ had to be studied, as his response to Zon’s enquiry in this regard reflects (1955: 472): “It all differs for everyone: actor, student, ... degree of preparation. It is necessary to begin with action.” Given the apparent contradictions between his beliefs at different stages of his lifelong investigation it is little wonder that he was concerned his ideas might be misinterpreted.

¹⁰⁶ In August 1934, Zon was privy to a discussion between Kedrov, Stanislavski, and his sister Zinaida, regarding the “correctness” of a document he had written in which he stated that the main purpose of a Soviet writer was to “display the soul of a new person,” a term that concerned her, but Kedrov tried to dismiss as “only a figure of speech” (Zon 1955: 468). According to Zon however: “Stanislavski would not give up the “soul” in any way: “Think about an equivalent word and I will gladly accept it.” (*ibid*).

Besides his difficulties with Soviet censorship, rewriting his earlier documentation to align it with his latter thinking would take time, which he no longer had available due to his rapidly deteriorating medical condition. He therefore resorted to the age-old tradition whereby one generation of actors conveyed their know-how to the next, namely through direct transmission. In June 1935 a group of eleven young actors and directors trained by his sister Zinaida gathered at the Opera-Dramatic Studio to serve as Stanislavski's assistants. During the summer 3,500 students were auditioned and twenty selected for the drama section. On 15 November they had their first lesson in what was to be a four year training programme in the „system“.

Zon, who attended a rehearsal session of the comic opera *Don Pasquale* at the Studio in May 1935, noted a single-minded emphasis on logically executed physical actions as the basis of the work, which Stanislavski described as follows (*in* Zon 1955: 481, 483): “Everything must be placed in a logical manner. [...] Action – counter action. This must continually occur. There is no performance without it.” Although this principle informed „work on a role“, the „work on oneself“ training the students were engaged with was still based on the psychotechnique, in which actions were merely manifestations of inner activity and logic marginalised in favour of the imagination; a dichotomy Stanislavski's following statement (*in* Zon 1955: 481, his inserts) at the conclusion of the rehearsal revealed: “I imagine something at first (imagining), I then reason (reasoning), and only after this I act.” In his 1934 document however, Tortsov stipulates the following (Stanislavski 1975: 239):

[The] new secret and new quality of my method of creating the physical being of a role consists of the fact that the simplest physical action when executed by an actor on the stage obliges him to create, in accordance with his own impulses, all sorts of imaginary fictions, proposed circumstances, and „ifs“.

Clearly, by the mid 1930s, the ground on which Stanislavski was trying to pitch his ideological tent was becoming increasingly unstable. Although Benedetti (2008: xii) considers his work with the students at the Studio to be his “true testament,” initiating a legacy “handed down from teacher to teacher in major theatre schools,” the fact is he was struggling to integrate the psychotechnique with the principles informing the Method of

Physical Actions and Active Analysis. At that stage he needed the input of someone other than his loyal acolytes, and given that his relations with Nemirovich-Danchenko and the MAT were virtually nonexistent, he turned to the only theatre practitioner he respected, despite their ideological differences, namely Meyerhold.

After eighteen years devoted to drama Meyerhold returned to the opera in January 1935 with Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades* at the Maly Opera in Leningrad. In true Meyerholdian fashion however, he had the poet Valentin Stenich compose a new libretto more aligned to Pushkin's original story. The result was "almost universal criticism that the new libretto deprived Tchaikovsky's score of much of its thematic logic, particularly in the exposition of the Hermann-Liza relationship" (Braun 1998: 248). In March he staged a trilogy of Chekhov's one-act comedies *The Jubilee*, *The Bear* and *The Marriage Proposal* at his Moscow theatre under the collective title *33 Swoons*,¹⁰⁷ but his heavy-handed treatment of the material led him to admit (*in* Braun 1998: 248) that "Chekhov's light, transparent humour was crushed beneath the weight of our theories and the result was a disaster."

It was Meyerhold's last new production as the campaign against formalism "took an ominous turn" after the Communist Party denounced it at an assembly of the Supreme Soviet in 1936 (Braun 1998: 248). In February Chekhov's MAT 2 was closed, yet despite the noose tightening Meyerhold gave a defiant lecture in March entitled „Meyerhold against Meyerholditis“,¹⁰⁸ in which he attacked his imitators, but asserted his own creative independence (Braun 1998: 249). His public declaration, which "[was] tantamount to a rejection of socialist realism and the official interpretation of the term „formalism“,” may well have been an admirable display of artistic integrity “[at] a time of craven hypocrisy and self-humiliation” (Braun 1998: 249), but in positioning himself as an outspoken opponent of the official party line, he also cast himself as the figurehead of a movement “which was to be exterminated at all costs” (Smeliansky 1999: 2).

¹⁰⁷ According to Meyerhold there were thirty-three occasions when a character swoons in the plays, and each “was played as a distinct „jeu de théâtre”, accompanied by special „swoon music”, brass for the men and strings (for the ladies)” (Braun 1998: 248, his insert). Unfortunately “the repeated bouts of neurasthenia culminating in fainting fits, deprived the production of all pace” (*ibid*).

¹⁰⁸ This „disease” equated with “[the] practice of manhandling classic dramas and rewriting them into virtual parodies of themselves” (Symons 1973: 119). It stemmed from Meyerhold's 1924 production of *The Forest* by Alexander Ostrovsky, one of the most respected playwrights of the Russian realist tradition, which he reinterpreted as a constructivist pageant to show off the superb physical skills of his young biomechanical actors on a minimalist set specifically designed for that purpose.

Despite Nemirovich-Danchenko's opposition to any contact with Meyerhold, towards the end of 1936 Stanislavski began regularly meeting with him to discuss "various matters connected with the theatre" (Law & Gordon 1996: 69). Thus, despite their thirty year estrangement following the failure of their joint venture in 1905, largely due to their disparate artistic views at that stage, a seventy-three year old Stanislavski and his sixty-two year old student began to share their findings about the art to which both had devoted their lives. In this respect Stanislavski (2008: 693) "compared their coming together to digging a tunnel from opposite ends so that they should finally meet in the middle." Although this conjoining of these innovative theatrical minds would have been a significant event in any other place and time, in Stalinist Russia its potentially far-reaching implications were eradicated as though it never occurred.

2.21 From organic behaviour to sincere self-expression

By 1937 Stanislavski was so ill that his contribution to the Studio was to review work his assistants prepared with students in a series of master classes, the first occurring in April 1937, seventeen months after they started their „work on oneself“ training and were considered “sufficiently advanced in their studies to be able to start work on plays” (Benedetti 2008: 131).

The text selected for the „work on the role“ phase was *Hamlet*, with an actress playing the prince, a casting Stanislavski approved of “on the grounds that this emphasised the need to work from one’s own self,” as she would not “role-play a man, but use her own life experience for the character” (Benedetti 2008: 131). In his book *Stanislavski and the Actor* Benedetti provides accounts of this class and two others, including the last on 13 June 1938, based on shorthand notes kept by Irina Novitskaya. These transcripts reveal the students’ ignorance of the principles informing both the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis, namely that characterisation and creating a performance score must begin with the self. Partway through the session an assistant apologises to Stanislavski, stating (*in* Benedetti 2008: 135): “The hardest thing for them is to behave as themselves. When the students are sitting there, thinking, I have the feeling they are somehow doing it as someone else, not as themselves.” Stanislavski thus had to explain the imperative of creating organic actions that were true to the self, and the adaptations that then had to be made in the given circumstances. At the end of the session the same assistant asks (*in* Benedetti 2008: 138): “Could I sum up everything that has been done and said today so we can incorporate what we have learned into the „system“?” He assents and she consults her notes, listing the points he made.

From Novitskaya’s account it is apparent that both the students and their trainers were unsure how to apply the „system“, and despite his efforts to explain the function of its various elements, their requests for clarification reveal they were clearly confused.¹⁰⁹ His reliance on others to convey his ideas was therefore proving ineffectual, and he was forced to acknowledge his theories were far in advance of the practical work conducted

¹⁰⁹ After Stanislavski explained that once “the nature of an action, its structure” is understood, it can be “perform[ed] in any situation, in any adaptation,” one of the students responds (Benedetti 2008: 135): “In our first year you said an actor needs to know *what* he is doing but not *how* he is doing it. But when I wrote out my physical actions, I wrote out *how* I do them.”

at the Studio with young actors lacking the ken of the MAT professionals he was used to dealing with. As a result, and despite his estrangement from the company, he asked permission to work with a group of nine actors and directors on *Tartuffe*,¹¹⁰ which he intended to “give form and substance to ... using a new, improved, more effective acting technique” (Toporkov 2001: 104).

Work commenced in April 1937, the same month as the students’ first master class. According to Toporkov (2001: 104) it was undertaken “with a strictly educational end in view,” and “it was not a question of rehearsing a play, as such, but of improving the technique of the actors involved.” As with the students, Stanislavski’s choice of play is revealing. In this regard *Tartuffe* was usually performed in a highly stylised, declamatory manner associated with the “traditional cliché-ridden style of acting” he opposed (Toporkov 2001: 104). In his opening address to the cast he stated he had no intention of staging it, but wanted to teach them “not how to play one part but every part” so the rehearsals equated with a „work on oneself“ process (Toporkov 2001: 108). The only condition was they had to be open and honest if they were to acquire “the technique of mastering the laws of human creativity, of being able to influence and control that creativity, the capacity to reveal one’s creative capabilities, one’s intuition in every show,” and in closing said the following (Stanislavski in Toporkov 2001: 108, 109):

As I depart from this life, I want to pass the fundamentals of this technique to you. They cannot be conveyed in words or writing. They must be studied practically. If ... you understand this technique you will be able to spread it and develop it further. [...] I’ll give you a short cut. Basically, the „system“ has five to ten rules which will enable you to find the right path in all your roles all your life.

Stanislavski therefore realised that his attempt to document the „system“ was a wasted effort. He also suggested that elements of the psychotechnique could be marginalised in favour of the principles informing the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis, inferring that the „work on oneself“ and „work on the role“ processes might be combined. This made sense, as it was clear from the result of the students’ training that they had

¹¹⁰ According to Toporkov (2001: 107) “the theatre could release a small group of actors from their obligations without harm to itself, and hand them over completely to Stanislavski.”

acquired the „system“s“ terminology without grasping how to apply it, even or how to access their authentic natures.¹¹¹ In this respect he insisted that the *Tartuffe* cast rehearse as themselves by getting rid of any theatrical tricks and clichés that might obscure their “real human self from the audience,” offering the following explanation (*in* Toporkov 2001: 110) why this was so important: “Real acting begins ... when there is no character as yet, but an “I” in the hypothetical circumstances. If that is not the case, you lose contact with yourself, you see the role from the outside, you copy it.” He therefore wanted them to start afresh, acquiring his new method as if they were novices. The foundation of this work was the need to be sincere however, for reasons Toporkov (2001: 111) elucidates below:

The most vital and convincing feature of our kind of acting is its sincerity. What is said and done sincerely never raises doubts. Sincere laughter is catching, false, pretending laughter is offensive. Real tears will always touch you, but you will never believe acted grief and false tears. Sincerity is what gives human beings their appeal and charm.

As the winter approached Stanislavski had to abandon this work to seek shelter at a sanatorium outside Moscow until spring. During this time, in August 1937, while he was bedridden for five months, he and Meyerhold talked of “wide ranging reforms both in the theatre and in training” (Law & Gordon 1996: 68). Stanislavski knew his days were numbered and his final hope was to involve Meyerhold with the Studio“s activities, a suggestion met with derision by everyone, including Zinaida, who dismissed it “as one of Kostya“s whims” (Law & Gordon 1996: 68). Unbeknownst to everyone however, Meyerhold“s time was also running out.

¹¹¹ Stanislavski asked the student playing Polonius why he found it hard to behave as himself, to which he replied (*in* Benedetti 2008: 135): “In my mind I create a sort of second self and see how this person behaves. He moves about, says hello to people ... but, at the same time, I know its not me.” Stanislavski told him to avoid it “like the plague,” because it led to clichés, and stipulated: “Always do everything as yourself, ask yourself, „What would I do today if I were in this or that situation?“” (*ibid*).

2.22 Towards an ideological integration

In the Autumn of 1937 Meyerhold began rehearsing a stage adaptation of Nikolai Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel was Tempered* to commemorate the second revolution's twentieth anniversary but "the Supreme Committee for the Control of the Arts demanded extensive amendments before authorising its performance" (Braun 1998: 250), which meant it failed to meet the October deadline. He thus curtailed his work on the play and instead revived *Camille* with Lev Snezhnitsky playing Armand opposite Raikh. After a rehearsal Meyerhold (*in* Schmidt 1980: 185) gave the young actor the following advice:

It is hard to say exactly where work on the role should start. [...] It all depends very much on the actor's personality. Some actors rely more on physical factors, others on psychological ones. Our system of acting is often presented as the opposite of the Art Theatre's system. That's not correct. [...] Work on the role can start with whatever psychological factors will lead to the right physical patterns. Or ... with those physical elements which make it possible to find the needed inner content.

Meyerhold's statements reveal a shift in his initial hard-line opposition to a psychological acting approach. Whether this was due to his contacts with Stanislavski or the prevalent socialist realism ethos, it nonetheless meant a common ground had been found to merge their former disparate beliefs. It was therefore an ideal opportunity for them to conceive an integrated psychophysical training and performance approach, a prospect usurped by forces beyond their control. On 17 December 1937 *Pravda (The Truth)*, the official organ of the Communist Party's Central Committee, published an article by its president Platon Kerzhentsev entitled „An Alien Theatre“, in which he condemned Meyerhold's career and concluded the following (cited in Braun 1998: 250, his insert and ellipsis): “The systematic deviation from Soviet reality, the political distortion of that reality, and hostile slanders against our way of life have brought [his] theatre to a total ideological and artistic ruin, to shameful bankruptcy ... Do Soviet art and the Soviet public really need such a theatre?” As a result Meyerhold's theatre was liquidated on 8 January 1938.

Throughout the winter months Stanislavski and Meyerhold continued their covert liaisons, and in May 1938 it was announced he had been appointed as a director at the

Opera-Dramatic Studio (Law & Gordon 1996: 68). The same month Zon visited the Studio on three occasions, and during the first, on 19 May, he asked Stanislavski to clarify at what point in a rehearsal process actors should start to use the playwright's dialogue rather than improvising sketches based on the play's content. Stanislavski's reply (*in* Zon 1955: 483) reveals the reason why delaying this stage is so important:

From time to time one needs to read a play out loud, then to perform it using their own words. Afterwards the play must be read repeatedly. Gradually the exact text will be memorised. [...] During the process of reading the listener lives through the text in thought, while at the same time not overworking it before its time.

The idea of actors performing sketches can be traced to the „work on oneself“ training at Chekhov's studio in 1917. According to Knebel (1967: 60) they were used to finding the “creative feeling in oneself,” and could not recall “any interesting work on a play or part of a play.” Her description of these improvised exercises, which were often based on specific dramatic scenarios, such as „The Snake“,¹¹² reveal a direction Stanislavski had already begun to explore twenty years previously (Knebel 1967: 62):

Creative bravery was what a sketch or an exercise could not be performed without. [...] Chekhov was looking for excessively straight ways to the subconscious [...] Chekhov liked sketches on “self-extraction” where the unexpectedness of what was happening did not give any time for analysis. These exercises, which he learnt from Stanislavski, were very appealing to him as he was an actor of great spontaneity.

Knebel (1967: 69) states that at first Chekhov's students could only execute “a logical scheme of actions, that in turn created a schematism of feelings,” later “the proposed circumstances with which the imagination encircled the plot of a sketch became the most important.” This gave them a “feeling of a whole,” as Chekhov (*in* Knebel 1967: 69) termed it, and once they decided in what genre or style to perform a sketch, they could “bravely [begin] the improvisation.” Chekhov (*in* Knebel 1967: 69) stated he approached all his roles in this manner, for the reasons stated below:

¹¹² In her book Knebel describes Chekhov performing „The Snake“ exercise as a “very old man” who “seemed to be mortally tired” and another as a Chaplinesque vaudevillian, but pointing out that it “was performed by Chekhov in several different ways” (Knebel 1967: 64-69).

One needs to treat a role like material requiring a large work of the imagination. That is why an actor should undergo extensive improvisation training and learn to use the plot for the unrestricted manifestation of creative individuality. [...] Every moment spent on stage, an actor must feel like a co-creator of the author.

The use of improvisational sketches to explore a play's content and to stimulate an actor's creative imagination may not have been a new approach for Stanislavski, but under Meyerhold's influence he began to view them as a means of also engaging with physical form. In this respect the etudes used in biomechanical training provided the basis of a performer's scenic actions, and mastering physical behaviours in various scenarios enabled them to quickly adapt to any given circumstance. A straightforward etude like „Throwing a Stone“ for example, consisted of twenty actions that had to be individually perfected before the sequence could be executed with precision, but once a performer mastered this they could use the whole or parts of it in any context. More so with complex etudes like „The Slap“, a duet requiring a great degree of balance, coordination and a sense of rhythm from both parties.¹¹³

Although Stanislavski's use of sketches centred on actors recreating natural human behaviour rather than stylised representations thereof, the underlying principle was the same, namely that the basis of acting was action, and once a role's physical aspect was determined it provided a stable foundation for a performance score. Whereas he had previously focussed on actors finding suitable tasks and actions aligned to the super-objective, he now began to consider that their proficiency at performing dramatic sketches might provide more effective building blocks for this arduous process. Stanislavski's final response to Zon's single-minded questioning¹¹⁴ on 19 May reveals his thinking in this regard (*in Zon 1955: 484*): “One must perform sketches throughout

¹¹³ A detailed description of the solo etude appears in Law & Gordon's *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia* (1996, pp. 234-235). A detailed description of „The Slap“ is provided by Jonathan Pitches in his book *Vsevolod Meyerhold* (2003, pp. 127-140).

¹¹⁴ It is clear that Zon was „not on the same page“ as Stanislavski. His confusion regarding the point at which actors should start to speak the playwright's lines is a central theme in most of his discussions. Even after Stanislavski stated that sketches are the foundation of acting, Zon asks (1955: 484) if this can be achieved “by perfecting and examining old performances,” to which Stanislavski replies: “Yes, of course, but, isn't it more interesting to watch a good sketch compared to a singer dwelling on one note?” Zon misses the point however, and considers “formalising the best sketches literarily” (*ibid*).

one's entire life. [...] Performing sketches is the primary work of an actor. As long as he performs sketches, he will never lay idle." During their meeting the following day Lilina asked for help with a scene from *The Cherry Orchard* that she was working on with two students.¹¹⁵ Zon's account of the event (1955: 487), reveals the disconnect between Stanislavski's theoretical notions and the Studio's day-to-day activities, as well as the fact that even his closest assistants lacked a clear understanding of the „system“:

[Stanislavski] never worked with these studio members directly before, however they are not shy and jauntily answer his questions and jauntily confuse the terms which they know off by heart. Maria Petrovna prompts them, comes to their rescue, touchingly becoming confused herself.

Considering that Stanislavski's wife, a much experienced actress, was still unsure of the „system's“ terminology, it is understandable why so many different interpretations had evolved. The level at which the students engaged with it was also problematic, as revealed in the final master class he conducted with them in June. In his address at the end of the session, during which it was again quite apparent that they lacked clarity on elementary principles,¹¹⁶ he gives a further indication of his thinking at that stage, a mere seven weeks before his death (Stanislavski in Benedetti 2008: 147-148):

Your main task is technique, technique and more technique ... [which] requires daily, systematic work. [...] You have to train yourself to control everything – voice, speech, movement etc. You must train at the Studio, at home, every free minute. There's no time to work on your physical apparatus when the show has begun. [...] We are getting nearer and nearer to the subconscious and the more subtle our work, the better trained our physical apparatus must be to develop it.

Besides his mention of the subconscious, Stanislavski's emphasis on a disciplined physical technique might well have been attributed to Meyerhold. The Studio's ethos was rapidly changing, with his full consent, although few realised it at the time.

¹¹⁵ Both Lilina and Zinaida were “mostly involved in the [Studio's] pedagogical line” (Zon 1955: 460).

¹¹⁶ Stanislavski asks the actress playing Hamlet what his supertask is, to which she responds, “Man in conflict with life,” but he corrects her, stating (*in* Benedetti 2008: 145, his italics): “That's the content. We talked about the Supertask earlier – *understanding existence* i.e. *to discover the secret of life.*”

2.23 Reviving the true lost art of the actor ¹¹⁷

When the *Tartuffe* rehearsals resumed in the spring of 1938 Stanislavski was moving with difficulty and accompanied by a nurse. According to Toporkov (2001: 105, 111) “[by] now his system was entirely based on physical action and he tried to eliminate anything that prevented actors understanding that clearly.” In this respect, because he now “considered physical actions as the prime element in theatrical expression,” he drew “[their] attention to the importance of control, clarity and polish in the most insignificant physical action,” demanding “clarity and skill in their execution,” and urged them to acquire a “diction of physical actions,” for the reasons he explained as follows (*in* Toporkov 2001: 113, 116):

Signing a piece of paper may seem like a single action, but for the actor who is a true artist, it may be one hundred and one actions, according to the circumstances. The act of signing a piece of paper may have no meaning in itself [...] But, on other occasions, it can be the most significant moment in a role and then he will need a hundred or more nuances to perform this basically simple action.

Stanislavski had therefore combined the pragmatics of biomechanics with units and objectives to conceive a comprehensive approach to structuring a performance score. The actor’s grasp of the elements comprising a particular action and their technical mastery of them meant they had total control over a character’s physical behaviour on stage, and could alter their psychological nature simply by adjusting the rhythm in which they performed these action sequences. This was a key to Meyerhold’s system, as his following explanation (*in* Schmidt 1980: 155) indicates: “A performance of a play is an alteration of dynamic and static moments of different kinds. [...] Dragging out or speeding up an act can completely change the character of a performance.” During work with his biomechanical performers he used “two enigmatic words,” as the Soviet director Leonid Varpakhovsky explains (*in* Schmidt 1980: 171), namely “retard” and “reject”. The first referred to “any hindrance, any slow-down and stop that arose in the path of the determined movement,” while the second “was used in the most varied circumstances,

¹¹⁷ According to the playwright and director David Mamet (1998: 21), “the true lost art of the actor” is when an audience witnesses “the truth of the moment,” namely “a lovely, unexpected, unforeseeable beautiful exchange between the two people onstage.”

sometimes in a psychological sense and sometimes in terms of spatial composition” (Varpakhovsky *in* Schmidt 1980: 176-177). The reason Meyerhold could direct in such an efficient manner is that his actors were taught that there were three aspects to an action: the preparation (*otkaz*), the act itself (*posil*), and “the moment when all the force ... is brought back under control and the actor is once again balanced,” and ready for the next action (*tochka*) (Pitches 2003: 124). Although his motives as an autocratic director looking for an effective means to instruct actors was the opposite of Stanislavski’s intention to provide them with creative autonomy, the following statement he made to the *Tartuffe* cast (*in* Toporkov 2001: 122) reveals a shift from his initial idea of „tempo-rhythm“¹¹⁸ to Meyerhold’s interpretation: “You can’t master the method of physical action if you don’t master rhythm. Each physical action is indissolubly linked to a characteristic rhythm. If you always do everything in your own personal rhythm, how will you be able to characterise different people?”

Once the *Tartuffe* cast had established their physical actions through active analysis and improvisations, the next phase entailed script work, a transition which “seemed to happen, gradually, out of a growing inner need,” as the patterns of action “discovered and rehearsed needed to be given greater expression and completeness by thoughts and words” (Toporkov 2001: 129). Stanislavski now stipulated that they had to create mental images for everything they said, and “didn’t let one empty phrase, one word that was not justified by an „inner image“ pass” (Toporkov 2001: 129). They therefore had to create a „movie-in-the-brain“¹¹⁹ for their characters (*see note 92*), as well as conveying their images, or thoughts, to each other. Stanislavski placed great emphasis on this process, as his following statements (*in* Toporkov 2001: 140-141) indicate:

¹¹⁸ The origin of the term can be traced to Stanislavski’s work on Pushkin’s play *Mozart and Salieri* in 1915. Despite living over Salieri “deeply and correctly,” he “had neither voice nor diction, plastics, nor rhythm, nor tempo” to play the role (Stanislavski 1980: 549). His early definition of the term was more psychological however, as his following statements reveal (*ibid*: 562): “The process of sight is the raying out of spiritual juices that come from us and enter into us. These rayings out have movement, and once there is movement, there is also its tempo and its rhythm. The same thing is true of the sense of touch. In order to differentiate silk and velvet one needs another tempo and rhythm than in differentiating the bristles of a clothesbrush. To smell ammonia one needs another tempo and rhythm than in smelling lilies of the valley.”

¹¹⁹ Damasio (2004: 198, 199) asserts the brain makes images that are synchronised and edited into what he calls the “movie-in-the-brain”, pointing out: “You could construct anything you fancied, as does the brain because it has the component pieces for every sensory modality.” He furthermore states (*ibid*: 199-200): “The images we have in our minds, then, are the result of interactions between each of us and objects that engaged our organisms [...] And yet, the images we experience are brain constructions *prompted* by an object ...” This echoes Stanislavski’s belief that imagery is the basis of communion.

Verbal action is an actor's ability to touch another actor with his mental images. [...] Conveying thoughts – that is an action too. Your thoughts, words, inner images exist for the other actor. [...] You have to convey your inner images, you have to make him see things through your eyes. Don't speak for his ears, but for his eyes. [...] Only do it for him, your partner and no one else. See the results of what you are doing by the expression in his eyes, don't let anything mentally come between you. [...] Never pre-plan a word or an action. You'll have self-consciousness, not intuition. [...] The most important thing when working on a role is mental images. [...] Your actions are only convincing and organic when you have concrete, detailed inner images.

Although the process of actors attempting to “transmit” mental images to each other, as Stanislavski (*in* Toporkov 2001: 143) termed it, was based on „radiation“ (*see note 16*), before they were required to make “a sincere effort to exchange living human feelings with other actors,” as Tortsov states in *An Actor Prepares* (1984: 205). The new approach took the pressure off them forcing their emotions however, instead collaborating with their organic processes so that impulses arising from their actions, mental images, and interaction with objects in the scenic environment would be in-the-moment. The aim was therefore to prime them for maximum spontaneity, as Toporkov's following description (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 528) of the “amazing rush of creative freedom” he felt while experiencing Orgon's “ecstasy of joy” during a rehearsal session, clearly reveals:

I confess that never before had I thought of playing the scene that way. It came to me by *intuition*, as a result of the creative freedom I had acquired through the right method of work. This improvisation was a bonus given to an actor for his strenuous work. [...] It seems to me to be the very essence, the soul of the art of the theatre of life – the high point of the actor's creation on stage. Improvisation is subconscious creation that comes into being by virtue of the actor's conscious work, once he has mastered psychotechnical techniques.

This approach is what Chekhov was renowned for, but it was considered a unique ability due to his active imagination and volatile temperament. Stanislavski arguably devoted his final years to probing the basis of his talent, using a variety of methods to achieve similar results with others less gifted. By grounding their scenic behaviour in actions that were in sync with their organic natures, supported by their power of logic, in direct communion with others, and bolstered by the state of „I am being“ derived from a total belief in what they were doing, Stanislavski had formulated an extremely robust technique to ensure they were ready to react when inspiration struck, whether an upwelling of their unconscious or emanation from the metaphysical realm. Yet the foundation of his approach remained the actor’s sense of truth, despite the obvious untruth of the stage, which was the crux of Meyerhold’s argument against naturalism. Thus, although examining the methods of others and integrating their principles with the „system“, Stanislavski’s unease with theatricality remained his biggest struggle, a shortcoming he was well aware of as the following reveals (Smeliansky 1999: 114):

Stanislavsky was once watching a capable young actress at work and remarked with bitterness that the disadvantage of his method was that it led to actors being afraid of genuine stage truth: they would only go as far as its boundary. In order to experience this boundary you have to cross it, that is, move into the sphere of „un-truth“, then step freely back and forth. This is in fact the actor’s supreme art.

It was this liminality that Chekhov, Meyerhold and Vakhtangov intuitively grasped and explored, whereas Stanislavski struggled to find his footing in this artistic terrain. So too with embracing form as a symbol full of abstract meaning. After his passing on 7 August Kedrov took over the direction of *Tartuffe*, which the MAT premiered in December 1939. It was well received as “human voices were heard” in performance (Toporkov 2001: 158). While Kedrov and Toporkov had worked closely with him, it was Meyerhold Stanislavski chose to continue his legacy, instructing his deputy Yury Bakhrushin (quoted in Law and Gordon 1996: 69): “Look after Meyerhold, he is my sole heir in the theatre, not only ours, but in theatre as a whole.” The question was what direction the dark genius¹²⁰ would take after being handed the Studio’s reins?

¹²⁰ *Temny geny (Dark genius)* is the title of a biography of Meyerhold written by Yury Elagin in 1955.

2.24 The tragic culmination of a theatrical epoch

During a general meeting of the Studio workers on 27 August 1938, three weeks after Stanislavski's death, the chief director Boris Vershilov (cited in Law and Gordon 1996: 68) told Meyerhold: "[Stanislavski] said we should study physical actions with you,"¹²¹ and as a result he was appointed to the post in October 1938. In March 1939 he staged *Rigoletto* and invited Sergei Prokofiev to premiere his opera *Semyon Kotko* at the Studio. During a speech he made to the entire company in April he quashed any ideas regarding his responsibility to uphold Stanislavski's legacy, as the extract below reveals (*in* Braun 1998: 298-300):

[S]ome people here are wrong when they talk of preserving the basic principles of Konstantin Sergeevich, that is, his credo, his creative method. [...] You should strive to isolate the spirit of his teaching, its kernel, its foundations. Once you have succeeded in this, you are free to build six columns instead of four if you wish – so long as you keep the same foundation. [...] He was a fine teacher, an artist endowed with great initiative. [...] But does that mean that we must preserve his four columns? To hell with them! I'm not going to start defending four columns with you. [...] You can persecute me from pillar to post and I may leave. But I'm not going to start preserving columns.

At a conference of the Union of Soviet Writers in May Meyerhold delivered a speech lauding a biopic by Aleksandr Dovzhenko, which Stalin had commissioned, about the Red Army commander Nikolay Shchors. His act of contrition came too late however, and despite Aleksandr Fadeyev, a member of the Central Committee, making a case for him, Stalin disclosed his intention of having Meyerhold arrested as a foreign agent (Senelick 2003: 160). In June Meyerhold attended an All-Union Conference of Stage Directors and delivered a speech which was a far cry from his former defiant attitude. Although the violinist Yury Elagin, who supposedly attended, published his version of what transpired

¹²¹ Stanislavski told Bakhrushkin that his reason for recruiting Meyerhold was to teach the performer "how to use their bodies effectively, stating (*in* Law & Gordon 1996: 68): "I'm counting a great deal on Meyerhold. He's a master of that. If emotions influence the physical actions of a person, then physical actions must to an equal degree influence the emotions."

in a book entitled *Taming of the Arts*¹²² after defecting to the West, claiming Meyerhold went “on the attack, peppering the assemblage with rhetorical questions” (*in* Senelick 2003: 163), the truth emerged in 1991 when a transcription of the minutes was published in *World of Arts (Mir Iskusstv)*, including a transcript of Meyerhold’s handwritten notes for his speech. In a forty-five minute verbal ramble “veering between apologetics and platitudes,” he criticised his own works and those of his followers, including Vakhtangov’s *Turandot* (Senelick 2003: 165). The image that emerges is that of a man broken in spirit, who afterwards “slipped out of the hall, aware that his talk had missed its mark” (Senelick 2003: 166). A week later he was arrested by the People’s Ministry of Internal Affairs (NKVD) police, and placed in solitary confinement where he was beaten into confessing he was indeed a „foreign agent“. On 14 July Zinaida was brutally murdered in their apartment and only a file of Meyerhold’s personal papers taken. On 2 February 1940 he was executed in the Military Collegium of the Soviet Supreme Court’s basement, after which his body “was removed to an unknown place” (Braun 1998: 252).¹²³

As if to remind everyone of their artistic roots, an eighty-three year old Nemirovich-Danchenko, with forty-two years’ experience at the helm of one of the most successful ensembles in the modern era, “created what may well have been the best production of *Three Sisters* in the Art Theatre’s history” (Smeliansky 1999: 48). This “legendary production,” which opened in 1940, proved that he was still “a first-class artist” and someone who had “collected talented actors and understood them from top to toe” (Smeliansky 1999: 48, 72). In August 1940, during a dictation of his ideas on acting simply named „For Myself, Various Thoughts“,¹²⁴ he questioned several premises on which Stanislavski had based his „system“, especially the notion of „experience“ (*see note 9*), as the extract below (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 498, his inserts) reveals:

The actor of experience [one who lives the role] and the actor of performance
[one who presents the role] do not seem to be antipodes, i.e. opposites, to

¹²² New York: E.P. Dutton, 1951, pp. 169-173.

¹²³ After searching through the recently opened KGB archives in 1991, a journalist working for the newspaper *Vechernyaya Moskva* learnt that Meyerhold’s body was cremated and his ashes interred in „Common Grave No. 1“ in the cemetery of Moscow’s Don Monastery (Braun 1998: 252).

¹²⁴ An edited transcript appeared in *Ezbeodnik MKHAT 1944 (The Moscow Art Theatre Yearbook for 1944)*, pp. 19-24, entitled „Simplicity in Acting“.

such a degree as was supposed when Stanislavsky first began to direct his pedagogical-theoretical thoughts into a clear, definite channel. The fact that we often see an actor of performance going through a realistic experience or an actor of experience skilfully and ably performing, leads us surely to the conclusion that something else should be substituted for the definition of “experience”.

Although more subtle than Meyerhold’s outright dismissal, Nemirovich-Danchenko’s challenge of the core premise on which Stanislavski built his ideological temple is no less significant. In 1943 he founded a Theatre School attached to the MAT, perhaps hoping a new generation might ask similar questions about the „system“. On 25 April he too passed away, after which the MAT “became Sleeping Beauty’s castle, once the site of glory but now a cobweb-filled wax museum full of moribund dignitaries” (Senelick in Smeliansky 1999: xv). After WWII a wave of repression hit the Soviet theatre, and despite practitioners who had been exposed to the ideas of the former generation attempting to continue this lineage, their sanity “was severely tested,” as Smeliansky (1999: 4) explains below:

The whole of Soviet theatre was drug-dependent. In many of the major houses, especially MKhAT, the drinking reached heroic proportions. It became a way of life. It was not just a social phenomenon, it was an aesthetic one. To take up a life in the theatre and survive in it one had to be in a state of permanent optimism.

Stanislavski’s vision of developing a science of acting that would benefit actors of all nations was thus thwarted by conditions in his own country, but as the Iron Curtain descended, estranging East from West, the artistic seeds that he and his followers had transplanted began to bloom, as practitioners in other countries started applying the „system“. In the USA in particular, the former Group Theatre members all embarked on personal journeys of exploration after the seminal ensemble’s dissolution, and it is there that it would continue to evolve.

Chapter Three The ‘system’ after Stanislavski

3.1 Chapter overview

The evolution of the „system“ Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya taught at the Laboratory Theatre in New York during the mid-1920s was the most significant development of Stanislavski’s ideas outside Russia. It was here that Adler, Clurman and Strasberg encountered his theories and led to the formation of the Group Theatre in 1931, which modelled itself on the MAT, with all of its members, including Carnovsky, Lewis and Meisner, considering “the system vital as a method of training, a way of organizing the study of parts, and above all as a means of achieving concrete results in the interpretation of plays” (Clurman 1983: 43). The Group was therefore founded on principles Stanislavski abandoned in the late 1920s, in particular his former reliance on affective memories, the very element Strasberg, the principal director and trainer, emphasised, as Clurman (1983: 44) attests: “Strasberg was a fanatic on the subject of true emotion. Everything was secondary to it. He sought it with the patience of an inquisitor, he was outraged by trick substitutes, and when he succeeded in stimulating it, he husbanded it, fed it, and protected it.” It was this obsession with displays of „real“ emotions on stage that contributed to the collective’s gradual artistic fragmentation and eventual dissolution in 1941, after which Adler, Carnovsky, Lewis, Meisner and Strasberg started formulating their personal approaches to actor training. Their subsequent findings will be individually evaluated in this chapter.

An important contributor to the further development of the „system“ post-Stanislavski was Michael Chekhov, who first performed on Broadway in 1935 in *An Evening of Anton Chekhov* sketches, with a makeshift troupe named the „Moscow Art Players“.¹ Although his “expressive, rhythmic, rich style met with mixed critical response” (Clurman in Cole and Chinoy 1970: 518), and some Group members considered him “too mystical and diffuse,” others, like Adler, hailed him as “the greatest actor of the twentieth century” (Rotté 2000: 37). Unable to procure work in America he accepted an

¹ The troupe included Andrius Jilinsky-Oleka and his wife Vera Soloviova, both former MAT 2 actors. She joined the MAT at 17 and was a founding member of its First Studio and left the Soviet Union in 1929 after he became Director of the Kaunas National State Theatre in Lithuania, where Chekhov and he taught the „system“ between 1932 and 1934.

offer from the actress Beatrice Straight to establish a theatre school on her family's estate in Dartington, Devonshire, England. In December 1938 however, following the outbreak of WWII, they transferred the school to Connecticut, and in 1941 he opened a New York studio, "giving classes for well-established professional actors," including former Group members (Powers in Chekhov 2004a: xl). It was here that Carnovsky developed an acting approach that Chekhov described as "the fullest ... most beautiful proof of the method."² This method will be analysed in-depth to determine whether it "offers a direct route to the actor's creativity by the simplest means," as the British actor Simon Callow (*in* Chekhov 2004a: xxiii) claims it does.

Besides the former Group members spreading Stanislavski's artistic theories in America, the Russian born actress Sonia Moore who trained at the MAT's Third Studio in the early 1920s became an ardent propagator of the „system“, opening a studio in New York in 1961, and founding the American Center for Stanislavski Theatre Art (ACSTA) in 1964. Although more concerned with preserving Stanislavski's unadulterated legacy, her interpretation of the psychotechnique and Method of Physical Actions, to which she had no direct exposure, are worth considering given that in her book *Stanislavski Revealed* (1991: 9),³ she claims to have spent her whole life studying the art of acting. In this respect she attempted to kept abreast of the „system's“ evolution in the Soviet Union, as her assertion below suggests (1991: 11):

The introduction of Stanislavski's early teachings into American theatre was unquestioningly beneficial. But it is time to stop accepting Stanislavski's early experiments as the Stanislavski System. It is time that our theatre experts become acquainted with what theatre scholars and scientists in Russia acknowledge to be the heart of the Stanislavski System.

In Europe, with its more established theatre traditions, Stanislavski's acting approach had far less of an impact. Considering that *My Life in Art* and *An Actor Prepares* first appeared in English, British actors were exposed to his theories before their peers on mainland Europe, yet it was here that the most resistance to the „system“ occurred. In an

² Chekhov, M. 1983. Michael Chekhov on Acting. *The Drama Review*, 27 (3): 58.

³ Initially published as *Training An Actor* (1968).

article entitled *The Stanislavski Myth*,⁴ the English actor Michael Redgrave (*in* Cole and Chinoy 1970: 404) summarised their response to latter book as follows:

Quite a few actors have, I know, read it and found it immensely stimulating. Other actors have read it, or partly read it, and find it fairly frustrating. Some others again say they have read it when what they mean is that they have always meant to read it. Some have read some of it and will, frankly have none of it. Some would sooner be seen dead than reading it. For all I know some may even have died reading it. Very few have read it again.

Redgrave's assessment conveys the reaction to Stanislavski's artistic theories among many European actors. At the heart of their rejection was fear, as he clarifies (*in* Cole and Chinoy 1970: 405): "[T]here are those who feel that the very existence of this book implies some criticism of their own achievements and acting experience." In this respect many actors equated technique with "the easy, effective, conventional mode or trick[s] of self-expression," the very thing the „system“ was intended to counteract, and also reflects audience expectations at the time, as Redgrave (*in* Cole and Chinoy 1970: 406, 407) explains: "Many prefer to see the wheels going round. They would often rather see an actor "acting" acting, which I suppose makes them feel they know where they are, than acting the part without any concession to convention." It is thus understandable that the idea of „epic theatre“ espoused by Erwin Piscator and Brecht, in which alienating effects "acted as a cold douche for those whose sympathies were becoming involved" (Willett 1978: 132), found more favour among those preferring to remain emotionally detached during a performance.

Stanislavski's theories therefore fell on deaf ears in Europe, even after the Group staged *Golden Boy* by its resident playwright Clifford Odets in London in 1938 and the respected British theatre critic James Agate (*in* Clurman 1983: 225) stated: "The acting attains a level which is something we know nothing about." It took several decades for this outlook to change, partly due to Grotowski openly acknowledging Stanislavski as his most important influence. In an article he published in *Flourish*, a newspaper of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Club in 1967, which is included in *Towards A Poor Theatre*, he stated the following (1991: 85): "[Stanislavski] was the first great creator of a method

⁴ The article was published in London in *New Theatre*, Volume III, Number 1, June, 1946, pp 16-18.

of acting in the theatre, and all those of us who are involved with theatre problems can do no more than give personal answers to the questions he raised.”

Grotowski’s endorsement prompted serious-minded theatre practitioners to reconsider Stanislavski’s theories, despite the poor translations of his writings available in the West. Given that Poland formed part of Soviet Eastern Europe, Grotowski had access to his original writings however, both whilst a student in the State Theatre school in Cracow (1951-1955), and at the State Institute of Theatre Art (G.I.T.I.S) in Moscow, where he undertook a yearlong directing course. During a meeting with actors and directors at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1969, Grotowski (*in* Salata 2008: 32) explained this influence during his formative years of artistic development as follows:

When I was beginning my studies in the acting department of the theatre school, I founded the entire base of my theatrical knowledge on the principles of Stanislavsky. As an actor, I was possessed by Stanislavsky. I was a fanatic. I believed that it was the key opening all the doors of creativity. I wanted to understand him better than others did. I worked a lot to know as much as possible about what he had said or what was said about him. This led – according to the principles of psychoanalysis – from the period of imitation to the period of rebellion, by which I mean the attempt to find my own place.

Besides having access to the Russian editions of Stanislavski’s writings, Grotowski was also familiar with his work during the 1930s, as conveyed in Toporkov’s book *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*. The significance was that most Western practitioners were unfamiliar with the Method of Physical Actions due in part to the „cold war“ (1947-1991), which meant that two avenues of investigation based on Stanislavski’s theories were being pursued by the former Group members and Grotowski. While their work focussed on spontaneity during performance, he focussed on physical discipline and emotional control. This no doubt stemmed from Zavadsky, his tutor at G.I.T.I.S., instilling in him the imperative of rigor in artistic expression; namely “a demand for iron discipline, modesty, hard work, and a lack of personal gain” (Zavadsky in Vendrovskaya and Kaptereva 1982: 236). This principle would inform Grotowski’s subsequent attempt to formulate a system of training that might rival Stanislavski’s, and in this respect, his artistic and personal ideologies will also be examined in-depth in this chapter.

3.2 Stella Adler, and the founding of the Group Theatre

The daughter of Jacob Adler, “the Jewish Henry Irving” of Yiddish theatre (Cole & Chinoy 1970: 601), Stella performed in her parent’s productions from the age of four. Following a public school education and studies at New York University, she debuted on Broadway in 1922. In 1925 however, she saw Boleslavsky’s production of *The Sea Woman’s Cloak* which greatly affected her, as she (in Hirsch 2002: 59) explains: “It was important, I knew that at once. It had size and background. It was in a tradition. It represented the kind of acting that hadn’t been seen in America before.” As a result she enrolled at the Lab, “hoping that some of the greatness would spill onto [her],” searching for “something “bigger” than what the commercial American theatre offered” (Adler in Hirsch 2002: 59). This notion of size and tradition became the cornerstones of her performance aesthetic, as her student Joanna Rotté (2000: 36, 42) explains: “Adler wanted us each to become “a giant for expressing large ideas” by detaching from everything commonplace. [...] Her aim was for us to dispense with smallness.” Adler’s schooling in the „system“ therefore did not lead to dismissing the theatre tradition she was raised in, rather an assimilation of realism as the foundation for epic performances. In her own words (in Rotté 2000: 68): “Realism is not about getting up on stage. It is also not the style of acting to the minimum. Realism is about acting a theme propelled by big ideas.” It is for this reason that Method scholar David Krasner (2000: 23) suggests she should be compared to Brecht, as “[she] introduced social conditions as motivating factors,” namely that “[t]he actor secures the performance by giving over to events in the play’s social background.”

In 1930 Adler became part of a group of actors that met regularly under Clurman’s leadership, who (1983: 28) described her as having “all the imperious flamboyance of an older theatrical tradition – European in its roots.” During the ensuing months they “lay the foundation of a new theatre” whose aim “[was] to combine a study of theatre craft with a creative content which that craft was to express,” which Clurman (1983: 31, 34) framed as follows: “[O]ur interest in the life of our times must lead us to the discovery of those methods that would most truly convey this life through the theatre.” In June 1931 twenty-eight actors and the Group’s three directors, namely Clurman, Sheryl Crawford and Strasberg, left Manhattan for rural Connecticut to spend the summer working

together, hoping to discover a method that would unite them and provide a foundation on which to base this new theatre (Clurman 1983: 39).

Given Strasberg's training at the Lab⁵ and his greater directing experience,⁶ as well as Clurman believing that "[he] knew more about acting than anyone else in the world" (Crawford in Hirsch 2002: 71), he became the Group's principal director and trainer during the ten weeks they rehearsed Paul Green's *The House of Connelly*. Dealing with "the decadence of the old South and the emergence of a new class from among the poor tenant farmers," it reflected "the basic struggle between any new and old order," yet "concern over the play gave way to the actors' far greater absorption in it as a vehicle for strengthening their craft" (Clurman 1983: 40). Foster Hirsch (2002: 74) explains the result of this synthesis between social consciousness and art below:

[H]ere was a carefully chosen company trying out a new System, and if that meant discarding everything they knew, overturning the bad habits, the shortcuts, and the tricks they had acquired as an almost inevitable result of working according to the American "system," they were willing to do that – to start from scratch, if need be.

The American "system" related to the economically orientated „show business“ that had evolved due to syndicates like the Shubert brothers mounting productions after a minimal rehearsal period, and box office returns outweighing any artistic credibility. In this commercially driven industry "acting deteriorated as the long run star system triumphed," leading to "the spiritual emptiness of the theatre" (Cole & Chinoy 1970: 539). As a result most young actors lacked personal training and few had worked in an ensemble. These were the Group's founding principles according to Adler (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 602-603), namely "the actor [had] to become aware of himself," and "develop himself as an actor through his craft," because it was only when actors "use the same basic craftsmanship" that they achieve "a real ensemble and through the ensemble, a creative interpretation of a play." During the first summer together they "loved each

⁵ From January 1924 through to February 1925.

⁶ After training at the Lab Strasberg experimented with amateur productions at the Chrystie Street Settlement House, staging Racine's *Esther* (1926) and Copeau's *The House into Which We Are Born* (1927), with the Frenchman attending a dress rehearsal. His off-Broadway work included Scott Fitzgerald's *The Vegetable*, and two experimental productions, namely Waldo Frank's *New Year's Eve* and the Irish poet Padraic Colum's *Balloon*, both in 1928.

other, for the most part,” according to Carnovsky (*in* Hirsch 2002: 74), because “[they] believed the Method could change [their] lives.” However, from the start “Strasberg stressed improvisation and work in affective memory” (Hirsch 2002: 75), techniques that were unfamiliar to everyone except Adler and Clurman, and at first the results were promising, as Clurman (1983: 44-45, his insert) explains below:

The first effect on the actors was that of a miracle. The system (incorrectly identified by some actors as the use of the exercises) represented for most of them the open-sesame of the actor’s art. Here at last was a key to that elusive ingredient of the stage, true emotion. [...] [It] was something new to most of the actors, something basic, something almost holy. It was a revelation in the theatre; and Strasberg was its prophet.

Despite the initial positive response many actors began to detest rehearsals as they were constantly required to dredge up painful episodes in their lives. Phoebe Brand (*in* Hirsch 2002: 77), only twenty-three at the time, explains her experience of these „exercises“: “Lee insisted on working each little moment of affective memory; we were always going backwards into our lives. It was painful to dig back. [...] Lee crippled a lot of people.” Margaret Barker (*in* Hirsch 2002: 77), then only twenty-four, had the following to say about his approach:

He had me do an enormous amount of emotional memory work on my role in *Connelly*. He had me going over and over a painful experience – my roommate had been killed the year before – until I thought I was going to crack. [...] On one of the last rehearsals, I flung my purse in Strasberg’s face. He had me doing an emotional memory, and I felt I wasn’t playing the play.

Thus, already in the first season, a schism began to form between those who accepted Strasberg’s approach and those who opposed it. None more so than Adler, who was familiar with the „system“ due to her training at the Lab. In this respect the following extract from an article she wrote for the first edition of *Actors on Acting* (1949) entitled „The Actor in the Group Theatre“, is revealing (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 605):

Many of the actors from the beginning suffered strain, despite the importance of relaxation in an actor’s work. To a large degree, this was because the actor

was asked through the use of this “Affective Memory” or emotional substitution to deal consciously with that part of himself which was intended to remain unconscious.

Adler identified a central problem with using memories as the basis of performance, namely that these emotionally evocative objects were best left to become “psychic genera,” as Bolas (2009a: 31) refers to them, effectively “gathering points” that first “desire organisational mastery in order to achieve the pleasure of representation.” Strasberg’s summoning of painful personal memories as yet unworked by the psyche, especially in the Group’s younger members lacking life experience to dull the effects, meant they were often traumatised through revisiting these episodes. Meisner, who also opposed this approach, explained his reasons as follows (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 59):

I told Lee that when he was alive. I said to him, „You introvert the already introverted. All actors,“ I said, „like all artists, are introverted because they live on what’s going on in their instincts, and to attempt to make that conscious is to confuse the actor.“ Needless to say, he didn’t pay any attention to me, but that’s the reason I’m a better teacher than he was.

Despite these objections *The House of Connelly* received glowing notices, especially insofar as the ensemble acting was concerned, with one reviewer (cited in Clurman 1983: 59) stating: “I cannot remember a more completely consecrated piece of ensemble work since the Moscow Art masters went home.” In Clurman’s view (1983: 60) this was because the Group “had succeeded in fusing the technical elements of their craft with the stuff of their own spiritual and emotional selves.” In his book *The Fervent Years* he described Strasberg’s approach as follows (1983: 60-61):

He is a director of introverted feeling, of strong emotion curbed by ascetic control, sentiment of great intensity muted by delicacy, pride, fear, shame. The effect he produces is a classic hush, tense and tragic, a constant conflict so held in check that a kind of beautiful spareness results. Though plastically restricted, his work through the balance of its various tensions becomes aesthetically impressive, despite its crushed low key and occasional wild transitions to shrill hysteria.

In Adler's view (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 605-606) however, the "performances were often excellent because of the rehearsal methods; each scene was given an architectural solidity which was difficult for anyone to break down, and no matter what their individual acting problems were, they nevertheless helped enormously to achieve the ensemble excellence." Strasberg therefore required actors to wholly give of themselves and accept the dramatic structure he imposed on them, which allowed him to orchestrate the psychological nuances of their performance. In this respect he was an autocrat intolerant of any questioning of his methods, which alienated many in the ensemble. The Group's second production *1931* opened at the Manfield Theatre on 10 December 1931, and closed nine days later. Again directed by Strasberg, it was "a total failure," according to Clurman (1983: 70, 80), as was *Night over Taos*,⁷ in which he tried to achieve a "contemplative, cloistral tone," but later admitted it was the wrong approach. At the close of their maiden season the fledgling ensemble thus had one hit and two misses. Adler, who played minor roles in all the productions was particularly disenchanted with Strasberg's directing methods, but Clurman (1983: 83, 85) defended him against her "many just criticisms," sensing an idealism in her "that craved such a theatre as [they] promised," with the result that she stayed on and her younger brother Luther also joined the Group.

The second season's repertoire consisted of John Howard Lawson's *Success Story*, directed by Strasberg with Luther in the lead, and Dawn Powell's *The Party*, directed by Crawford. Despite Lawson wanting Stella to play "the sensuous and glamorous wife of the corporation head," a role perfectly suited to her flamboyant personality, Strasberg cast her as "the meek Jewish secretary who was secretly in love with the stock boy," detecting in her "the emotional colours needed to create a controlled but dynamic character" (Strasberg 1988: 87). His decision to deliberately cast her against-type is revealing, considering she was his most outspoken opponent. In this respect Meisner later confirmed (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 182): "Stella and Strasberg were enemies even before we started the Group. She said, „He's a fake“ before we ever began."

In his book *A Dream of Passion* Strasberg (1988: 87-88) asserts that "[he] wanted a deep emotion – which Stella had – but contained in a pure, lovely, ethereal quality," which

⁷ *1931* was written by Clare and Paul Sifton and originally entitled *Son of God*. *Night over Taos* was written by Maxwell Anderson, a close friend of Clurman.

was difficult to get from her because of her innate tendency “to burn up the stage.” To help her adjust to the role he had her imagine that all her scenes occurred on a ship’s deck in moonlight, with the result that the usually “emotionally facile” actress, as he described her (1988: 88, 90), gave “probably her most distinguished performance.” This shift from using affective memories to the actor’s imagination in the given circumstances, „given“ by the director in this respect, not the playwright, who had set her scenes in an office, was an important change in Strasberg’s approach, just as Stanislavski had to adjust his own with the imaginatively gifted Chekhov in *The Inspector General*. This may have been due to the fact that “Strasberg, who had received copies of newly arrived publications about the recent Soviet theatre, had a Russian acquaintance ... translate these volumes for those who were interested” (Clurman 1983: 91). These writings included Sudakov’s lecture notes, emphasising attention to objects and the use of tasks. In this respect Brand (*in Hirsch 2002: 77*) pointed out: “That second summer we had speech and body classes, and Lee worked with us on actions and objectives.” This change in emphasis confused many however, as Brand (*in Hirsch 2002: 77*) elaborates: “What did emotional memories we had been working on have to do with action? It was complicated. Here was emotion and sense memory, there was action: „I’ll never be able to join them,“ I thought.” The nett result was that a schism developed “between those who believed in the value of inner work that was Strasberg’s speciality, and those primarily interested in training their voices and bodies to project their roles” (Hirsch 2002: 77-78).

Success Story did not live up to its name, with reviewers stating the production was “confused;” yet in Clurman’s view (1983: 99, 101), Luther gave “one of the finest performances the present day theatre has housed” due to a “theatrical flair” matched by Stella’s “poignantly sensitive and powerful” portrayal that had “something of the grand line of the heroic tradition” to it. The siblings therefore resorted to the acting style of their family tradition rather than Strasberg’s subtle psychological approach, with results in their favour. Critics also detected “a certain amateurishness” in his direction due to him “disastrously miscast[ing]” one of the leads (Clurman 1983: 100-101). Strasberg (1988: 87) nonetheless took full credit for Luther’s performance, supposedly having introduced him to „emotional substitution”⁸ which enabled him “to produce the

⁸ Emotional substitution, the cornerstone of Uta Hagen’s technique, the wife of Herbert Berghof who founded an acting studio in New York in 1945, equated with „transference“, based on Stanislavski’s use of

character's destructive energy." Despite mediocre notices the production ran for sixteen weeks, whereas *Big Night* closed after only nine performances.

After the failure of *Big Night* "doubts began to arise over the wisdom of some of the directors' decisions" among the actors, who campaigned "for greater participation in the Group government," and led to the formation of an Actor's Committee (Clurman 1983: 122-124). With this new „government“ in place, the Group began to rehearse Sidney Kingsley's *Crisis*, later renamed *Men in White*, for their third season in June 1933, with Strasberg directing. Based on medical and surgical practices in the 1930s, it dealt with illegal abortion, a topical issue at a time when the high unemployment rate meant that many considered this option. Although "the company as a whole was not convinced of the play's merit," Strasberg worked "carefully and confidently" on it (Clurman 1983: 127). The cast included the Hungarian actor Joe Bromberg who had trained under Lyoff Bulgakov, a Russian actor who had worked with Stanislavski. As Strasberg was also of Austro-Hungarian extraction, their collaboration may well have contributed to the play's success. Despite Bromberg previously being associated with comedic character roles, Strasberg (1988: 88-89) "had him imagine that he was an FBI agent who had been sent to investigate the Group Theatre," which "created a strange, new quality appropriate to the character." This „FBI adjustment“ worked in a similar manner as Adler's „shipboard adjustment“, in that Bromberg's jovial nature was replaced with "a much more contained, much more mysterious, and much more assertive quality" (Strasberg 1988: 89). He also made extensive use of improvisations during rehearsals, as Clurman (1974: 99) explains below:

Strasberg thought the actors playing the surgeons and their assistants ought to witness an operation at a hospital. He then asked them to repeat what they had observed. The play script itself called for no more than a short scene preceding the operation, after which the curtain fell. The actor's improvisation or recreation of the operating procedure, the washing-up routine, the pulling on of surgical gloves, the handling of the instruments,

the „magic if“ and affective memories. In this respect actors use whatever experiential resources they have, even if the degree of emotional intensity is not as strong as the role requires, but then imaginatively build on this authentic substrate until it conveys the necessary psychological intensity, as Hagen (1991: 62, her emphasis and italics) explains: "[Y]ou slowly **begin to make transferences from your own experiences to those in the play until they become synonymous with them.**"

was so awe-inspiring that it was incorporated in the production and lent it something close to grandeur.

This approach meant the actors also improvised their dialogue, and “after five weeks of rehearsal, the whole play was acted with hardly a word of the author’s dialogue spoken” (Clurman 1974: 100). Considering that Stanislavski formulated the Method of Physical Actions around the same time, in which a play’s text took second place to actors exploring its thematic content by means of improvised scenarios, Strasberg’s experiments were perhaps due to him studying the translated Russian texts, bearing in mind Sudakov’s assertion (*in* Cole 1995: 101) that executing simple actions on stage “expeditiously means to work in harmony with one’s histrionic apparatus; it means to discover one’s ground and to plant oneself firmly on it.” It was nonetheless a bold experiment given the tensions within the troupe and animosity towards him, as well as the fact that the play’s theatrical impact “was barely evident to more than a handful of people before it reached the final moments of production” (Clurman 1974: 51). The upshot was the Group “had its first artistic and financial triumph on Broadway,” creating a new theatrical genre, namely the so-called „hospital drama“, and garnering its first time playwright the Pulitzer Prize (Strasberg 1988: 88). More importantly it dispelled the actors’ doubts in Strasberg’s abilities, albeit a short-lived victory.

The Group’s next production was Lawson’s *Gentlewoman*, about an affair between a Marxist poet and “a sensitive, educated woman of wealth who had grown neurotic through emotional disuse and lack of connection to the world” (Clurman 1983: 132), with Strasberg directing and Adler and Carnovsky in the leads. Premiering in March 1934 it should have been a success given its theme of a reconciliation between the classes in a difficult time for all, yet it “struck the audience as merely the depiction of a rather stupid love affair” (Clurman 1983: 133), and as a result closed after only nine performances. Although some of the blame can be attributed to Lawson’s Communist Party sympathies at a time when the entertainment industry moguls were blacklisting its members,⁹ it also “lacked thematic and dramatic definition” according to Clurman (1983: 132, 134). Whatever the reasons for the failure, it was a blow to Adler’s self-esteem, and

⁹ Lawson (*formerly Levy*), along with Lester Cole and Samuel Ormitz, founded the Screen Writers Guild in 1933 and as a result were blacklisted by the major Hollywood studios until 1947. They were also members of the „Hollywood ten“ who refused to answer questions about their Communist Party activities at the House of Un-American Activities trials during the McCarthy era.

it was in this state that she travelled to Moscow, and then to Paris, where she and Clurman finally tracked down Stanislavski. In her book *The Art of Acting*, she describes their initial encounter as follows (2000: 236):

Mr. Stanislavski spoke to everyone and perceived I was reticent. [...] He finally turned to me and said, “Young lady, everybody has spoken to me but you.” That was the moment I looked at him, eye to eye. I heard myself saying, “Mr Stanislavski, I loved the theatre until you came along, and now I hate it!” He looked at me a little longer and then said, “Well, then you must come to see me tomorrow.

In her account they worked together for “many, many weeks” and “he made it clear that an actor must have an enormous imagination, uninhibited by self-consciousness,” making her realise “he was very much an actor fed by the imagination” (Adler 2000: 237). The fact is they worked on a scene from *Gentlewoman* she had difficulties with, during which time Stanislavski tried to impress on her that everything that happens on stage “is intended *for a through action and the super task*” (Zon 1955: 464, his italics). Her interpretation is as follows (Adler 2000: 237, her italics): “He explained in detail how important it was to use circumstances. He said *where* you are is what you are, and how you are, and what you can be. You’re in a place that will feed you, give you strength, give you the ability to do whatever you want.” Clurman, who left Paris to rejoin the Group to start rehearsals on Melvin Levy’s *Gold Eagle Guy*, gained his impressions of Stanislavski’s ideas from shorthand notes Adler’s French assistant kept during their interactions. His account below, taken from his book *On Directing* (1974: 152, his inserts, italics and quotes), no doubt benefited from his later insights, but is nonetheless an astute interpretation of the „system“ at the time, two years before *An Actor Prepares* was published:

[The] motive power of acting, the entire System, is based on *action*. [...] “One must be a virtuoso in these physical actions,” Stanislavski told Stella Adler, “believe in what we do. But everything must be completely true – *to the very end*.” Stanislavski chose the physical actions implicit in the play. “For emotion,” he went on, “I search in the *given circumstances* [the particularities of each of the play’s situations] never in the feelings. “If I try and do the psychological, I force the action. We must attack the

psychological from the point of view of the physical life so as not to disturb the feeling. [I translate literally from the French he spoke.] *In each psychological action there is some physical element.* Search for the line, *in terms of action*, not in feeling. For example: I want to drink water but I am told there is poison in it. Before I drink, I question myself: “Who has put it in, do I want to die, why should I drink, why should I die?” Your imagination must understand each of these things.

Although Stanislavski may have emphasised the need for actors to have a conscious understanding of a character’s motives in each moment of scenic action, both Adler and Clurman’s interpretations miss the fact that their through line of action must be based on a clear understanding of the role’s function in terms of the super-objective, and not merely a creation of an actor’s imagination in the given circumstances. In this respect the thematic disharmony, or confusion, that marked many Group productions stemmed from a lack of unified vision, resulting in clashing performance styles and attention to detail which failed to serve the central idea. Strasberg’s focus on each actor’s individual performance in his carefully orchestrated offerings meant he often lost sight of the overall picture. In her doctoral thesis *The Angst of American Acting*,¹⁰ C. J. Pang points out the following in this respect (1991: 223-224, her quotes):

Instead of searching for the objectives and through-line of action and breaking down the scene into units of action as Stanislavsky would do, Strasberg concentrates in finding “what is taking place” in each scene. Strasberg proposes using short stories to train the actor’s awareness and understanding of the situation. He deems Stanislavski’s approach as “intellectual”.

As with Adler’s assertion that Stanislavski was „fed by his imagination“, Strasberg’s referral to his approach being intellectual is equally off the mark. The fact is they misunderstood his ideological influences, and “[i]n both cases, they took one tenet of the System and stretched it beyond the limits of its place in the System” (Pang 1991: 232, her emphasis). In this respect Adler’s dominant interest during the encounter with Stanislavski was not to assimilate the „system“, but to refute the import of using affective

¹⁰ Cecilia Jessica Pang, *The Angst of American Acting: An Assessment of Acting Texts*, 1991, Berkeley: University of California (PhD Dissertation).

memories, a technique which she personally struggled with. The alternatives Stanislavski suggested, namely applying the imagination in the given circumstances, or focussing on physical actions, were solutions for an individual actor's difficulties when using the „system“, and not an answer for all, as she reported to the Group. Her confrontation with Strasberg, when he asserted “Stanislavski doesn't know, *I* know!” (Hirsch 2002: 79), may therefore have been avoided. Instead he permanently alienated several members, including Carnovsky, Lewis and Meisner; a rift that would be far-reaching, as Hirsch (2002: 79) elucidates below:

Affective memory or no affective memory, to the members of the Group this was a life-and-death matter, the occasion of a bitter civil war that continues to the present.¹¹ Stubborn, high-strung, querulous, deeply committed to their art, Group actors were people for whom a craft issue became a battle cry; being on opposite sides of the affective memory standoff was enough to sustain a lifetime of animosity.

Despite the ensuing artistic conflicts, fuelled by tensions that had been brewing since the Group's formation, the result was positive in terms of the „system's“ further development as individuals felt compelled to make sense of it for themselves, even if this meant they focussed on elements suited to their artistic temperaments rather than the whole. Years later Clurman (1974: 145) pointed out the result of this divisionism:

I myself am convinced that the Stanislavsky System, or, if you will, the Method, has never really been practiced in the United States. It is understood by some, it is taught by many, but it has never been completely employed. It has influenced the American theatre more than any other outside of Russia [...] But I would also emphasise that its practical implementation has always and everywhere been sporadic and piecemeal.

After her confrontation with Strasberg Adler began giving classes to those who wanted to learn what Stanislavski had taught her, including Meisner, who worked with both her and Clurman to conceive an alternative approach. According to him “[a]mong other things,

¹¹ Hirsch's book, *A Method to Their Madness: A History of the Actors Studio*, from which this extract was taken, was published in 1984, fifty years after the outbreak of this ideological „civil war“.

she brought back „given circumstances“ – how you get to the essence of „given circumstances“” (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 182).

Perhaps understandably *Gold Eagle Guy* was poorly received by the critics and public alike and led to an early close of the Group’s fourth season. Although Clurman (1983: 142) again attributed the failure to a flawed script, it was most likely due to Strasberg’s direction. In this respect he made use of a „group adjustment“ to elicit the appropriate emotional response he wanted from the entire cast to an earthquake at the end of the second act. Using “sensory cues” triggered by lights, he orchestrated “a sharp, vivid reaction to the event,” but the actors “felt stifled, put upon, and confined in rehearsal” (Strasberg 1988: 89-90). This reveals his focus on creating dramatic effects based on displays of „real“ feelings, when the actors were in fact reacting to circumstances not connected to the play itself, in this case imagining they were WWII refugees trapped in a conflagration. It is thus understandable that the notion of deriving authentic behavioural responses from the actual given circumstances, not unrelated scenarios, appealed to many Group actors.

Although Adler brought back valuable perspectives from Paris to enrich the Group’s working methods, in particular how to “use the circumstances of the play,” and the idea that “starting from the outside, from creating the outer line of a role, planning it in terms of a series of actions, would take you inside the character’s mind” (Adler *in* Hirsch 2002: 78), there was a disconnect between the Russian version of theatrical realism, and the American one. For Stanislavski (*in* Toporkov 2001: 149) an actor’s responsibility was “to satisfy the spiritual needs of people,” by bringing great ideas and thoughts to them. In this respect Group members may have been concerned with the socio-economic conditions, but the super-objectives of their plays remained on a mundane level. On 5 January 1935 however, “an event took place to be noted in the annals of the American theatre” (Clurman 1983: 147), namely the premiere of a one-act play written by Clifford Odets called *Waiting for Lefty* that dealt with the taxi driver’s strike of 1934.

Co-directed by Meisner, *Lefty* was an unprecedented success as the “delirious” audience roared “Strike! Strike!” when asked what the solution to the worker’s situation was, “a testimony of the audience’s hunger for constructive social action” (Clurman 1983: 148). In February Odet’s first three act play *Awake and Sing* premiered, “written out of the

distress of the 1932 depression (not to mention Odets's whole youth)," according to Clurman (1983: 149, his insert), who directed it. Thus, although the Group's resident playwright's work "[had] in it a fervor that derived from the hope and expectation of change and the desire for it," it was "profoundly of the middle class" (Clurman 1983: 150, 151). This preoccupation with middle-class values informed the outlook of many Group members, especially Adler (2000: 238), as her definition of realism below reveals:

The main objective of Realism is to overthrow the lies of public and private life. Realism deals with the middle class. It finds out why the middle class is infected with the disease of inherited values, that is, values received through gossip, through the church, through education, through government. Realism gets at and uncovers the truth of the human being, of the middle class and its way of life. When you approach the style of Realism, which is written in prose, you must approach it as a poetic form. Realism is based in language, but you need training to get the real meaning of what's being said.

For Adler the actor's art therefore equated with an ability to "activate" facts derived from a playwright's text, namely to truthfully live in the character's circumstances and "put life into them" (Paris 2000: 97). This meant actors had to conduct extensive research of their roles down to the most seemingly insignificant details to give life to these facts, aided with their imaginations. Even a passing reference to a tablecloth, for example, meant they "determine how old it is, how wrinkled, how threadbare, how fresh, how starched," because "facts will remain dead until you realise that each thing has a life" (Adler 2000: 67). Although stating (2000: 65) that "[t]he ideas of the great playwrights are almost always larger than the experiences of even the best actors," a broadside against Strasberg's use of affective memories, she was not a purist in terms of dialogical content, as her following explanation (*in* Paris 2000: 76-77) reveals:

The lines belong to the literary side. Many great things come out of that side, but it belongs to the author, and if he is dead, that's great, because he cannot bother you. The best author is a dead author, because he's out of your way and you own the play. Take what he has given you and use it for what you need. [...] The *real* play is in the actor and behind the words.[...] The playwright gives you the circumstances. The actor has to fulfil and make the circumstances important, no matter how strange.

Adler's contribution to the „system's“ ongoing evolution, or rather the advancement of realism as a legitimate acting „style“, is that she championed actors utilising the full potential of their mental faculties in role preparation and performance. In this respect there are parallels between her view of actors as moral guardians and social educators and Brecht's notion (*in* Willett 1978: 279) of them as “dialecticians”,¹² mustering their knowledge of men and the world to ask their questions dialectically, as her following statements (*in* Paris 2000: 79-81) confirm:

In the school of realism, you and the audience must think about the moral situation and take part in the discussion. If you act in the school of realism, it is not because you have a good technique. It is because you understand the issue. [...] Thoughts provoke understanding. The author can only appeal to the actor's thoughts. The thoughts lead to the actor's experiencing the emotions inside. To know the thoughts is to feel and experience the idea of the play. [...] Understand as an actor, you have one thing and that is your mind. If you cannot think, do not act. You cannot be an idiot and act. [...] Think about your social institutions. That is your first job as an actor. Don't be dumb and go to the lines. [...] How does your character *think*? There is a necessity of knowing a character fully.

Adler's emphasis on actors engaging with their materials and socially contextualising their interpretations is therefore more aligned to Nemirovich-Danchenko's notion “of an intellectual theatre, a theatre of social ideas,” than Stanislavski's attempt to reveal the human spirit on stage, yet lacks the “lofty spirituality” that he too tried to create (Feidkina in Vendrovskaya and Kaptereva 1982: 213). Adler's scepticism of spiritual matters is apparent throughout her writings,¹³ which reduces the actor's function to that of a mere social commentator. In this respect she urged her students to embrace “the “big

¹² In the last year of his life, “Brecht seemed to be overhauling his entire theory yet again with a view to presenting it under the new label of „dialectical theatre“” (Willett 1978: 281). After his death twenty sheets of notes were found amongst his papers which were intended to form an appendix to his treatise *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1949), but were never published. In the penultimate paragraph he states that efforts must now be made “to move on from the epic theatre to the dialectical theatre” (*ibid*).

¹³ Clurman (1983: 289), who had called the thirties a period of “spiritual activity” later admitted that “[a]ctually however, the thirties were almost as scornful of the very word as the twenties had been,” because the term “smacked of mysticism and was therefore an anathema.” The result was that “[i]n the thirties the demands of the spirit for the younger people could only be satisfied by action that in some way became social and political [...] hence the appetite for meetings, collections, demonstrations, petitions, and parades of some cause in which a specific social issue was at stake” (*ibid*).

ideas” of the collective human consciousness” as this “mental stretching ... was essential to actor training,” based on her belief that modern drama deals with “the dilemma of people stranded in a world in which nobody wins, nobody loses, and there is no solution,” and that “the modern character [is] subject to arbitrary fortune or fate” (Adler in Rotté 2000: 64-65). In this context the human mind ruled supreme, and nothing was stronger or more important than “The Idea – not Stella, not anybody, not even God” (Adler 2000: 26).

After the Group Theatre’s dissolution Adler taught at Piscator’s Dramatic Workshop in the New School for Social Research in New York, where she consolidated her philosophy. In 1949 she founded her own studio, significantly a year after Strasberg became artistic director at the Actors Studio. Her studio was renamed the Stella Adler Conservatory of Acting where she taught play analysis and characterisation. The programme, which she designed, included classes in speech and voice production, movement, improvisation, fencing, make-up, Shakespeare and musical theatre. In 1966 she became an adjunct-Professor of the Yale Drama School where she taught first year acting students. Despite her larger-than-life personality and reputation for scathing criticism, she is considered one of the greatest American acting teachers, who, together with her arch rival Strasberg, was reported, in 1979, “[to] have taught a combined total of 50,000 students” (Pang 1991: 209, 239). Imperfect as her legacy may be, her emphasis on actors employing realism to give psychologically grounded performances of an epic proportion contributed to rehabilitating an acting approach that many Western practitioners had considered anti-theatrical.

3.3 Morris Carnovsky, and the actor's Self

Carnovsky, nicknamed the “Dean” by the Group members, was “deeply devoted to its ideals” (Cole & Chinoy 1970: 613), and its oldest founding member at thirty-five. He had already played several character roles for the Theatre Guild before casting in his lot with the newly formed ensemble to rediscover himself, as he elaborates below (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 614-616, his insert, italics and quotes):

In the twenties, when I first came to New York and to the service of the theatre, the stage was ... dominated by “stars” who were expected to be exhibitionists par excellence. [...] I learned ... by imitation, from the “technique” of these older actors. [...] Tension of the body, mirrored by inner tension, leading inevitably to forced, mechanical, exhibitionist action (Get that laugh! Nail down that effect!), with here and there the saving grace of truthful feeling ... I was considered a good actor, too, and *that* made me ashamed. I was fed up with fumbling. [...] I had misplaced my Self ... I yearned for my own return and I didn't know how to get it back. I think it could be said of me then, as now, that I was *seeking my Image*. Call it a wholeness, integrity; *my life in Art*, if you will.¹⁴

Although he experimented with affective memory and “discovered some things of value in it,” Carnovsky (*in* Clurman 1983: 42, 76) concluded it had no value as either a rehearsal method or a performance technique, and “could be harmful.” During an interview Hirsch (2002: 79) conducted with him decades after Strasberg's outburst in 1934, a “bristling” Carnovsky had the following to say about the incident: “Such arrogance. I had no further use for him after that.” As a result he began giving speech classes to the Group members “based mostly on the reading of verse” (Clurman 1983: 139). The 1934-35 season therefore represented a watershed in the Group's history, given that Meisner and Odets had successfully directed *Lefty* and Clurman revealed his potential with *Awake and Sing*. As a result Strasberg's status as a director waned along with the relevance of his ideas on training, a breach which allowed other Group members to formulate their own views of the „system“, none more so than Carnovsky.

¹⁴ The article from which the extract is taken was entitled „Design for Acting: The Quest of Technique“ that appeared in the *Tulane Drama Review*, in the Spring volume, 1961, pp. 68-85.

Like Chekhov, Carnovsky had a penchant for portraying character parts, particularly older men, and appeared in most of the Group's productions. In *Awake and Sing* he played Stella's father, and during rehearsals engaged in an improvisation that greatly influenced his understanding of the „system“, as Clurman (1974: 99) explains below:

[I asked him] to sew the torn visor of his cap ... and recount to his grandson some hitherto unrevealed episode of his life, something which might serve as a cautionary tale for the boy. Carnovsky profited more from this improvisation than from anything I might have said by way of description or explanation of the old man's nature. The sewing of the cap was later used as a minor stroke of characterisation in the performance.

During the *Dead Souls* rehearsals Stanislavski used the same approach with Toporkov (2001: 66) based on the principle that an actor “[cannot] create a whole character until he had defined, precise, active tasks,” even though “[it is] extremely difficult to find these tasks, to hear, as it were, the character breathing.” Whether it was an accidental finding of Clurman's or a result of Stanislavski's work with Adler, there was clearly a shift to a greater emphasis on physical actions to reach a psychological identification with a character. This may also have stemmed from Sudakov (*in* Cole 1995: 91, 95) asserting, in the manuscripts the Group had translated, that “*attention* and *object* are the elements and conditions of the emergence of elementary action,” and grounding a performance on these acts means complex behavioural patterns can be constructed. Carnovsky grasped this principle and realised it also applied to engaging with other actors. During a matinee of *Connelly*, in which he played a Southern gentleman, he related to Adler as herself, not merely her character, resulting in a performance that “was true, very true, beyond what it had been,” and had “a certain exciting actuality about it,” according to Adler (*cited in* Funke & Booth 1961: 120). This was another breakthrough, as Carnovsky (*in* Funke & Booth 1961: 120-121) elaborates below:

It has to do again with the sense of self, one self relating to another. [...] I'm only interested in Bessie Berger, the character that Stella is playing. And within that particular image there is an essential Stella whom I know and to whom I relate with my eyes, with my ears, with my senses, with my attitude. She at the same time is doing so to me in the same way – I hope. And this is what makes a scene. This is what makes it pulse. [...] But it was necessary

for me to repeat it, to do it again and again. That meant to have faith in that discovery. Just as I had to have faith that relaxation really works, that ease is terribly important, that the relationship to an object is terribly important. And when that happens, action then is released, and action is the all-important thing in a play ...

What Carnovsky discovered was a fundamental principle of the „system“, the essence of „Concentration and Attention“, the chapter in *An Actor Prepares* in which Tortsov states (1984: 93-94) “the most necessary, important and living emotional material on which your main creativeness is based [are] those impressions which you get from direct, personal intercourse with other human beings,” and elucidated as follows:

This material is difficult to obtain because in large part it is intangible, indefinable, and only inwardly perceivable. To be sure, many invisible, spiritual experiences are reflected in our facial expression, in our eyes, voice, speech, gestures, but even so it is no easy thing to sense another’s innermost being, because people do not often open the doors of their souls and allow others to see them as they really are.

Stanislavski (1984: 205), as Tortsov, called this “the active principle underlying the process of communication,” in that “the inner, invisible acts of spiritual communion” are “one of the most important sources of action.” The result of this discovery was a greater emphasis on interaction between Group actors as a primary source of impulses to stimulate authentic scenic behaviours rather than individuals reliving past events, or relying on their imaginations in the given circumstances. For Carnovsky (*in* Funke & Booth 1961: 112) it meant that “at the core of every part is the self of the actor who is doing it,” and “the acceptance and use of your own individuality, no matter what part you may be playing,” is a fundamental lesson for the actor. He therefore believed an artist’s objective was finding out “how to say himself” in relation to the world, and as “the actor is the material of his own making,” he must “use his soul as well as his body” to do so, because “body technique and inner technique, form the material for the actor’s craft” (Carnovsky *in* Funke & Booth 1961: 102). Although his views stem from a 1960 interview when he no doubt had gained a deeper understanding of the „system’s“ psychophysical unity, he clearly started to assimilate its elements during the 1930s. Chekhov’s Broadway appearance may have been a catalyst in this regard, as Carnovsky

would have identified with his ability to create highly theatrical roles yet remain truthful. Adler certainly grasped the significance of this synergy between form and substance, and suggested Group members might benefit from taking lessons with him, which did not go down overly well as Clurman (1983: 158) explains below:

We all considered Chekhov a true acting genius, though the New York press had been unable to recognize it. The actors felt that they had achieved some measure of honesty and truth in their work, but Chekhov's gift for combining these with sharply expressive and yet very free color, rhythm, and design was something in which they knew themselves to be deficient, and which they therefore envied. [...] a few suggested that Chekhov be persuaded to return to the Soviet Union ...

Meisner was equally impressed by his acting in which "[he] witnessed exciting theatrical form with no loss of inner content," making him realise "that truth, as in naturalism, was far from the whole truth" (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 10). The most significant realisation for the Group however, was the imperative of well-directed actions, which Clurman (*in* Chekhov 2004a: xxvi) framed as follows: "Through him we learn once more that we have but to watch any moment of concentrated behaviour to be fascinated. The smallest action thoroughly carried out seems to contain a kind of universal essence. This, in little, is the mystery of acting." It may have been a mystery for Clurman, but for Carnovsky (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 617) it was clear, as his following assertion reveals: "For the actor there is only one "mystery" and it lies in the interrelationship of the refractory body with the wayward soul. The particular solution may determine *anyone's* life in art. The key that Stanislavsky placed in the hands of the actor was – the actor's own consciousness." This became a key principle in Carnovsky's artistic makeup, as he explains below (*in* Funke & Booth 1961: 114):

I think consciousness is what an artist has to achieve in order to make a mark on canvass, in order to make a sound. The word technique is not a superficial one. The word technique involves one's whole life, the inner history and set of sensibilities that the actor possesses. For a man – for an actor to exert himself in the act of concentration means that he brings his whole history to bear on the act of concentration.

Concentration equated with a “marshalling of all the resources” for Carnovsky (*in* Funke & Booth 1961: 120), in order to induce a heightened state of awareness so that all an actor’s psychic processes were focussed on the character’s objectives during performance, summoning what Chekhov (2004a: 87) termed “a higher-level *I*; [which] enriches and expands the consciousness.” This echoed Stanislavski’s assertion (1980: 465, 527) “that creativeness is first of all the complete concentration of the entire nature of the actor,” and “the creation of the proper creative mood is based in its most important parts on the process of will.” Concentration on stage, as a manifestation of the will, is a precondition to „I am being“, and in Chekhov’s view (2004a: 63-64, his italics and insert) the key to willpower was “*movement* (action, gesture),” because “the *strength* of the movement stirs our will power in general; the *kind* of movement awakens in us a definite corresponding desire, and the quality of the same movement conjures up our *feelings*.” This idea was exemplified in his use of „psychological gestures“ “to influence, stir, mold and attune your whole inner life to its artistic aims and purposes” (Chekhov 2004a: 66).

Carnovsky, who trained with Chekhov in 1941, gained a sound understanding of the interrelationship between action and intention, as his following statement (*in* Funke & Booth 1961: 121) confirms: “[I]ntention – that is it, that’s action; intention that gives rise to dynamic activity. Actions are inner things; therefore it has to do with intention.” In connecting the act with the intent behind it, or volition with the will, and realising that integrated psychophysical actions stirred one’s feelings, Carnovsky found a solution to performing with the body-brain organism and all its mental processes functioning in harmony. The start of this process was to first engage the will however, and while Chekhov used consciously created gestures to stimulate his creative resources,¹⁵ Carnovsky opted for a more direct approach, as his explanation below, taken from *The Actor’s Eye*, a book he co-wrote with Peter Sander, suggests (1984: 23):

The first vital element in the makeup of the actor is the *Will*. Actors have to have strong Wills [...]. It’s terribly difficult and takes a lifetime of practice to learn how to really concentrate on the matter at hand. Normally I have a pretty good Will on stage. Off-stage, you can do anything you want with me

¹⁵ Chekhov’s identification with forms no doubt stemmed from his father’s skill at drawing caricatures which “in a few strokes” managed to “capture the person’s inner character and casual mood” (Chekhov 2005: 21). He too became proficient at drawing caricatures, and from the start his acting had a graphic quality, so much so that Markov (cited in Marowitz 2004: 57) stated his depiction of Eric “could be put on paper and fixated (*sic*) in the form of a clear drawing.”

– but on stage I do have a determination which comes from the understanding of what I want to do and the drive to achieve it. [...] ... one of the most important buttons that you must learn to push is the ability to summon up what power you have, to control your Will, to be able to say “this shall be” and lo, it is.

Carnovsky’s emphasis on willpower stemmed from an aspiration for continual self-improvement, believing that developing his potential as a human being and an artist were inseparable aspects of his „Self“, namely the core of his being from which the psychic materials for his characters emanated (Carnovsky and Sander 1984: 31). He was therefore not averse to the notion of a human „soul“, and integrated it with his view of the actor’s art as his next comment (*in* Funke & Booth 1961: 102) confirms: “Behind every movement of the actor, whether it be a movement of his hands, of his body, of his voice, of his eyes, of his face, of anything – is an inner movement which I regret to have to call his soul. If you don’t like the word, well, find another ...” He similarly accepted man’s spiritual nature, as is evident in the extract below from his 1961 article (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 616-617):

The creative impulse – like Ariel – is essentially wild and homeless, chaffing against limitations. Somewhere in the heart of this impatient shimmering movement is a spirit, heedless of normal lots and hindrances. It craves to release itself, in a burst of music. All the more, therefore, unless it is to be allowed to attain freedom beyond all recognition, does it need the bondage imposed upon it by some master-force and will. The name of Setebos will have to yield to Prospero – Prospero Sergeitch .¹⁶

References to *The Tempest* aside, in which he played Prospero in a 1960 production of the American Shakespeare Festival Theatre at Stratford, Connecticut, Carnovsky’s summation encapsulates the fundamental aim of the actor’s art, as Stanislavski (1984: 14) defined it, namely that the expression of the inner life of a human spirit must be contained in an artistic form lest it appear meaningless. In this respect form equates with conscious control of the actor’s expressive instrument, the body, which requires discipline, or willpower, qualities that meant little unless actors knew how to respond to

¹⁶ The next line of the article starts with “Stanislavsky ...”, which suggests that the adjunct to Prospero should perhaps have been „Sergeevich“.

creative impulses, revealing their inner beings through their characters. Carnovsky therefore embraced what Chekhov (2004a: 159-160, his italics) described as “all kinds of *intangible* powers and qualities,” which he believed should permeate “life, and especially the arts,” as he elaborates below:

[W]e pay dearly for our refusal to recognise the necessity of sanely balancing the practical tangibles with the artistic intangibles. Art is a sphere which suffers most easily and acutely from such an imbalance. Nobody can exhale without inhaling. Nobody can be truly “practical” merely by clinging to the ground and refusing to be strengthened and uplifted by the seemingly “impractical” intangibles which are basic to the creative spirit, which are a kind of psychological “inhaling.”

Whereas the time Carnovsky spent with the Group was about “[attaining] a conscious technique,” as he (*in* Funke & Booth 1961: 100, 101) framed it, during the 1940s he explored the more intangible aspects of acting, first at Chekhov’s New York studio and later at his Actor’s Laboratory in Los Angeles. Chekhov (*in* Pang 1991: 271-272) had the following to say about Carnovsky’s acting approach:

To my eyes he is always surrounded on the stage by tremendous waves – a big, powerful aura which is much bigger than he himself believes. I seem to see everything in his acting – a clear objective as a gesture; a strong atmosphere; very clear radiation [...] He always has the archetype. I get the impression – whether this is instigated by his acting or my own feelings – that his acting is a most complicated composition of gestures.¹⁷

Carnovsky therefore assimilated both the inner and outer techniques that comprise the „system“. While most Group members further developed certain elements with their students, he tried to holistically integrate them, realising that “the whole equipment of the actor is such an organic composite that if you were to isolate one you are bound to affect all the others” (Carnovsky *in* Funke & Booth 1961: 111-112). In the 1950s he was blacklisted because of his Socialist convictions, but in 1956 John Houseman, the artistic director of the American Shakespeare Festival Theatre, invited him to join the company.

¹⁷ This extract appeared in an article entitled „Michael Chekhov on Acting“, posthumously published in the Fall 1983 edition of *The Drama Review*, vol. 27, no. 3, p 58.

In his second season Carnovsky played Shylock and “scored a resounding national success” (Houseman in Carnovsky & Sander 1984: 13). In ensuing years he portrayed Claudius, Prospero, Malvolio and Lear in 1963, the crowning achievement of his career. Although his pedagogic activities were not as prolific as other Group members, and his contribution to the ongoing development of the „system“ was relatively insignificant, his acting testified that it worked in any theatrical genre. Through merging his essential self with his artistic temperament, and bringing this integrated being to bear on his art, he showed the imperative of „work on oneself“ as a precursor to „work on a role“, as well as the imperative of continually refining one’s technique to meet the supreme challenges of the actor’s art, such as taking on Lear. In this respect, as he so succinctly put it (*in* Carnovsky & Sander 1984: 127): “Craft provides the means whereby intuition may be released.”

3.4 Robert Lewis, and the dissolution of the Group Theatre

At twenty-two Lewis was the Group's youngest founding member with little acting experience besides training at the Civic Repertory Theatre in New York from 1929. He was therefore initially a novice-in-training, yet already in 1932 revealed a "special talent" in classes "designed to stimulate the actors' imagination and resourcefulness" (Clurman 1983: 87). Based on improvisation, Group actors were asked to take poems and create sketches unrelated to their original meanings. Lewis took Walt Whitman's song "I Sing the Body Electric" and transformed it "into a farcical scene in which a peculiarly unheroic character prepared for the day, brushing his teeth, taking a shower, and so on" (Clurman 1983: 87). Strasberg (*in* Hethmon 2003: 106-107), who initiated these exercises, later recalled the incident as follows:

[Lewis] did a little clerk who is always cold when he gets up in the morning but nevertheless always takes a cold shower. When he got into the shower and said the words of "I Sing the Body Electric," of course the result was completely different from Walt Whitman's intention. It was, in fact, hilarious.

Lewis (1984: 49) also initially benefited from affective memory exercises, but later he evaluated the technique as follows:

[It] created a sense of truth that, while being genuinely derived from the inner life experience of the actor himself, often represented his emotional reaction to a situation rather than the character's. Further there developed an unnecessary concentration on emotional preparation in moments where the simply playing of the points of the scene would generate a sufficiently truthful task.

His is an incisive evaluation of the principal problem when actors rely on affective memories during performance, and echoes Adler's assertion (2000: 64-65) that "[y]ou must begin entering into other people's lives, to help you get beyond that boring, personal, egocentric quality you take for "real" life." This was also Brook's objection to a subjective acting approach, which he (*in* Moffitt 2000: 68-69) elucidates below:

[T]ry to understand this character as a real human being, and yet this human being has a motivation, has a uniqueness, that is way beyond the ordinary; he has to be understood, but the everyday psychological understanding is not enough. Once you've faced this, then you are forced to go beyond. [...] Then you have weeks and months of work.

Using affective memories reduced a role to the level of an actor's imagination, which, as Brook (*in* Moffitt 2000: 68) pointed out, "is fed up to there with all the clichés of today about Freud and psychoanalysis and everything else, so he is bringing his baggage, which is 90 per cent rubbish, to bear on something which is much greater than that." Although many dismissed the use of affective memories Lewis considered the potential benefit in an article entitled „Emotion Memory“.¹⁸ In it he makes a case for its application in circumstances when "a sudden switch in feeling from gaiety to agony through the receipt of terrible news by the character" is needed, and unless "[it] is the kind of performer who is content to "fake" or "indicate" the required emotion," he must summon an authentic response (Lewis *in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 630-631). He also states it should "be used sparingly, in cases where a special, strong emotion is required that does not arise from the natural playing out of the scene, or is needed *before* the actor comes on the stage," cautioning that "[indulging] the feeling derived from the affective memory exercise and disregarding the specifics of the scene, the behaviour of your partner, etc., is a malpractice of certain misguided actors who claim to be using "The Method"" (Lewis *in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 631, 632).

Lewis's dig at Strasberg aside, his appraisal of the „system“ was in-depth, and rather than dismissing elements he was averse to, he tried to understand the value of each in terms of the whole, realising that performance outcomes often justify the means by which they are achieved. This objectivity regarding a realist acting approach also extended to other genres. In 1936 the Group staged *The Case of Clyde Griffiths*, "a crudely didactic rendering" by Piscator of Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* (Hirsch 2002: 99). Directed by Strasberg it "had a drastically simplified approach to character," requiring "a presentational acting style, ironic and objective" (Hirsch 2002: 99). Despite "reviewers generally detesting the play" (Clurman 1983: 174), it featured "an outstanding bit of stylised acting" by Lewis, an adjustment none of the other actors could make

¹⁸ This article appeared in the *Tulane Drama Review*, VI, in the Summer 1962 edition, pp. 54-60.

despite being coached “to walk in rhythm to music” (Hirsch 2002: 99). This shortcoming in the Group’s technical abilities was again evident in *Johnny Johnson*, which opened in November 1936, “an anti-war musical fable about a holy innocent who holds onto his sweet naiveté as he’s bombarded with evidence of man’s folly and cruelty” (Hirsch 2002: 99). Again directed by Strasberg, it proved a costly failure, which in Crawford’s view (*in* Hirsch 2002: 100) was due to the fact that “none of the actors were really singers.” It is more likely they overreached their abilities and found they were out of their artistic depth however. In January 1937 the Actor’s Committee presented the directors with a “very long paper” stating Crawford should concern herself with “tasks of general finance and promotion,” Strasberg “should be relieved for some time of all but purely artistic tasks,” and Clurman, who “[worked] under the spell of inspiration, crumbling just before rising to heights,” needed to “*have an iron-clad and completely worked-out plan*” for their organisation (Clurman 1983: 193-195, his italics). As a result they resigned and a joint committee was formed, but the meetings were “an utter failure,” and in January 1937 Clurman (1983: 197) “proclaimed in an article for the *New York Times*” that their production activities had been discontinued until the following season. For many this read as a dissolution, an option suggested by the actors “to allow a new and more fit Group [to] rise from the ashes, to start on a clean slate” (Clurman 1983: 196). The upshot was that both Crawford and Strasberg resigned leaving Clurman in charge with the actor’s committee to advise him.

If the period after Adler’s return from France was a watershed, events two years later was a great divide. Not only had two of its founders resigned, but many Group actors left „for the coast“, namely Hollywood, to work in the film industry. After he too spent time there Clurman returned to New York in August 1937, a month after Odets began working on his “most clearly articulated writing,” and “the greatest success in the Group’s history,” namely *Golden Boy* (Clurman 1983: 209, 211). Despite running for 247 performances on Broadway after its November 1937 premiere, it lacked the social significance of Odets’s early works, and “[anticipated] the narrowed focus and diminished power of the work to follow” (Hirsch 2002: 96, 98). In this regard his lead character, a prize-fighter who wanted to be a violinist, “[revealed] more about Odet’s strictly personal conflicts between art and money, between holding on and selling out” (Hirsch 2002: 96). Although the psychological depth of all the characters meant “it was acted with the magnetic realism that was now the Group’s hallmark,” it was nonetheless “a setup job,

manufactured and self-conscious” (Hirsch 2002: 96). By falling back on the formula that first brought them success, Clurman, as the director, did not address any of the troupe’s shortcomings, merely delayed the consequences.

The Group’s penultimate season began in November 1938 with *Rocket to the Moon*, Odets’s new play co-directed by him and Clurman. It was not well received however, as neither could agree what it was about, affecting the actors’ understanding of their roles. Carnovsky in particular, as Ben Stark, struggled to find his super-objective, despite Clurman stating it was „to find love“. This general notion failed to stimulate his creative impulses, but during a talk-through of the play on the opening day, he heard Luther, playing his father-in-law, mention that Stark grew up in a children’s home, and he suddenly realised it was the most compelling fact about the character, as Carnovsky (*in Carnovsky & Sander 1984: 126-127*) explains below:

I heard it fresh, for the first time; [...] I saw myself as that same boy looking out at the world through bars. The image of this, combined with everything I already knew about Ben Stark, was very moving; and it accounted for my relationship to my father-in-law ... my relationship to the girl in the office; especially my relationship to my wife, a difficult marriage, tainted somehow or other by the image of those bars, the yearning towards life, at the same time being separated from it, and so with my relationship to everything in the play. That’s why I say the Spine is that which will excite in the actor the greatest number of Actions.

Although his reviews “were splendid, highly unexpected” (Carnovsky 1984: 127), the play itself was not a success. Odets blamed poor direction, but the fact that Clurman (1984: 234) “never received the third act till ten days before the opening” certainly contributed. Irwin Shaw’s *The Gentle People* followed, which premiered in January 1939, again directed by Clurman. He persuaded Franchot Tone, a founding member of the Group who pursued a film career and subsequently became a matinee idol, to play Harold Goff, a gangster. Although “prepared in less than three weeks” due to Tone’s Hollywood obligations, it “brought out the movie fans as never before at a Group play” (Clurman 1983: 239). The press was unreceptive however and Clurman (1983: 240) acknowledged he had not “found the correct style for the play.” Thus, as with Strasberg

before him, he too discovered the limitations of psychological realism when applied without a stylistic context, for in short, a common misunderstanding which he explained as follows (Clurman 1974: 145, 147, his italics):

The System is not a style. [...] The system *is* a technique, it is not an end in itself. Nor is it a *theory*. [...] [It] wasn't conceived to produce a particular stylistic result, such as realistic truth; it is a means whereby a particular artist or group of artists may most authentically and completely manifest whatever they wish in the theatre.

The failure of his directorial efforts meant Clurman was willing to let others try, and as Lewis had “a taste for fantasy and the non-realistic forms generally,” he asked him to direct William Saroyan’s *My Heart’s in the Highlands*. Although few had any faith in this experimental play by a first time playwright, after its May 1939 premiere the *New York Times* (cited in Clurman 1983: 249) reported: “[I]t is the finest new play the Group has put on stage this season – an amusing, tender, whimsical poem which the Group Theatre has translated into the lightest sort of beauty.” Although Saroyan had opposed Lewis’s delicate stylisation at first, “he did not fail to borrow from it later in his production of *The Beautiful People*” (Clurman 1983: 250).

Lewis therefore achieved what Strasberg (1988: 92) described as “an excellent example of fantasy realism,” directing a company of newcomers, as “there were no Group regulars in the cast” (Hirsch 2002: 101). Not only was this the synthesis that Vakhtangov aspired to, but he also intuited the zeitgeist on the eve of WWII, when fantasy was a relief from the oppressive reality. After his maiden play’s success Saroyan wrote *The Time of Life*, and offered it to Clurman, who turned it down. Staged by the Guild, it won both the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, capturing “the wistfulness and humour of many Americans during this zero hour in history, when very few were quite sure what they thought except that they wished each other well, hated evil, sorrowed, wondered, and blinked” (Clurman 1983: 252).

In November 1939 the Group premiered Robert Ardrey’s *Thunder Rock*, directed by Kazan, which closed after only 23 performances due to “a less than lukewarm press” (Clurman 1983: 259). This brief run gave Odets time to finish *Night Music*, which

premiered in February 1940 at the large and pricey Broadhurst Theatre on Broadway, at his insistence, and ticket prices to match. Reviews of the „comedy in twelve scenes“ were poor and it only ran for three weeks with Odets covering overheads. Clurman (1983: 262, 263, 266), who directed, “could not understand why Odets wished to make everything about this show have a “big time” quality,” but later attributed this to what he called “the desire for this-and-that”, as he elaborates below:

Odets wanted to run with the hares and hunt with the hounds; he wanted to be the great revolutionary playwright of our day and the white-haired boy of Broadway. He wanted the devotion of the man in the cellar and the congratulations of the boys at “21”.¹⁹ He wanted the praise of the philosophers and the votes of *Variety*’s box-score.

As with his mentor the Group’s wunderkind was unwilling to acknowledge his own shortcomings, and during a conversation between them “asserted bluntly that he was tired of the Group actors” and “had no intention of allowing a lingering loyalty or the occasional resurgence of personal affection to stand in the way of his development as a man or artist” (Clurman 1983: 274). Thus, by 1940 the ensemble was in trouble on all fronts as Clurman (1983: 268) attests: “Right after *Night Music* Odets was sore, the Group was sore, and I was sore.”

The fall of Paris in June 1940 no doubt struck a chord in Clurman, whose idealism as a future theatre practitioner was forged during his student years at the Sorbonne. In many respects he had become the very thing his idealistic, youthful self had opposed; a dogmatist who equated success with box-office returns. In this respect, even before *Night Music* opened, he issued a statement stating that he would henceforth run the company alone, “with the advice and collaboration of whomever inside or outside the Group [he] saw fit to consult” (Clurman 1983: 268), and in July 1940 told the actors he would continue alone. His first independent production was Shaw’s *Retreat from Pleasure* in 1941, which he later admitted “was worse than bad,” and “hardly noticed at all” (Clurman 1983: 278), and thus, the last Group production closed, “not with a bang but a whimper.”

¹⁹ The 21 Club was a prohibition-era speakeasy located at 21 West 52nd Street in Manhattan that later became an exclusive celebrity „watering hole“.

After the Group's collapse Kazan and Lewis, who "were more [politically] radical than the directors wanted to be" (Hirsch 2002: 102), tried to form a "people's theatre," "at popular prices with a strong social accent" (Clurman 1983: 280). Called the Dollar Top Theatre they "bought a script, issued a bulletin, published a preliminary article of faith, and disappeared" (Clurman 1983: 280). The venture's failure was mainly due to bad timing, a fate that also befell an undertaking between Odets and Strasberg, who he had approached to direct his new play *Clash by Night*, produced by the Broadway impresario Billy Rose and featuring Tallulah Bankhead. Premiering on 27 December 1941, three weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbour, it ran for 49 performances before closing in February 1942. Clearly, time was no longer at a standstill, and the window for escapist fare had slammed shut, "[silencing] everything that wasn't entertainment or a contribution to the war effort" (Clurman 1983: 279).

After a period of artistic compromise in Hollywood during the 1940s, during which time he made a name as a character actor able to transform himself into different nationalities, Lewis returned to New York. In 1947 Kazan suggested they organize a workshop "where actors and directors could experiment endlessly and privately, and where they could fail, because you have to fail in order to succeed" (Bosworth 2001: 31). The idea appealed and they founded the Actors Studio with Kazan teaching beginners and Lewis conducting advanced classes. Although "consciously attempting to carry on a tradition established by the Group Theatre" (Hethmon 2003: 14), "the Studio was Kazan's property," believing "[i]t was his reputation as a brilliant actor's director that lured actors, and it was his version of the Group's method that they received" (Hirsch 2002: 122).

Joan Copeland, the playwright Arthur Miller's sister and a member of Kazan's first year class, described his approach as follows (*in* Hirsch 2002: 123): "He presented the Group to us as the spiritual parent of the Actors Studio. [...] He wouldn't let anyone hold back. Teaching us what he had learned at the Group, he forced us to work at digging into ourselves. It was often painful." She also sat in on Lewis's classes, describing his work as follows (*in* Hirsch 2002: 123): "He's interested in heightened, stylised plays, just as he is himself beyond realism. He's like a caricature, bigger and broader than life. He's sweet and kind and dear and patient – with him acting is fun: not with Kazan." Marlon Brando,

one of several actors he taught,²⁰ “discovered that Lewis wasn’t stressing the psychological; he was stressing the classics,” analysing Chekhov and Shakespeare “and talking about intention and style” (Bosworth 2001: 55). Lewis’s artistic outlook was clearly wholly different to Kazan’s, and it is little wonder he resigned from the Studio after only a year.

During the ensuing years Lewis taught at the Lincoln Center Repertory Company, the State University of New York at Albany, Boston University, Rice University, Sarah Lawrence College and Yale, where he was a professor in the School of Drama from 1967 to 1976. His three books on acting, *Method-Or Madness?* (1960), *Advice to the Players* (1980), and *Slings and Arrows* (1984), reveal a thorough understanding of the „system“ and the interrelationship of its elements. Although not so much a contributor as a clarifier of its principles, his fusion of realism and theatricality, or psychological content with physical form and presentational style, continued Vakhtangov’s line of enquiry. In Lewis’s view (*in* Pang 1991: 250) this equated with “Total Acting”, in which the function of technique “is to free the spirit” (Lewis 1960: 20), quoting Martha Graham. In his foreword to *Creating A Role*, Lewis (*in* Stanislavski 1975: v-vi, his insert) asserted the following: “Unlike some modern self-styled practitioners of what they call “The Method” (no such arrogance will be found in Stanislavski’s own writings) there is more than lip-service paid to beauty of language, lightness of verse, rhythm, imagination, and all the theatrical and artistic means of expression.” A succinct encapsulation of his holistic appreciation of the „system“ and his “reasonable and sane approach to acting,” as Stella framed it.²¹

²⁰ The students that he taught during the year he spent at the Actors Studio include Herbert Berghof, Montgomery Clift, Karl Malden, Jerome Robbins, Maureen Stapleton and Eli Wallach.

²¹ Cover comment in *Advice to the Players*, 1998 edition. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

3.5 Sanford Meisner, and the imperative of spontaneity

After high school Meisner enrolled at the Damrosch Institute of Music to study piano, but six months later his father “pulled [him] out to find work that promised security” (Shepherd 1977: 38).²² While working “as a stockboy in a pants factory” he decided to become an actor, an ambition that had persisted since childhood (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 6). After auditioning for the Theatre Guild he was cast as an extra in Sidney Howard’s *They Knew What They Wanted*, starring Richard Bennet and Pauline Lord, which premiered in November 1924 and ran until October 1925. Studying these experienced actors at work served as his apprenticeship, and afterwards he received a scholarship for the Guild’s School of Acting, directed by Winifred Lenihan, “a stock-company technician,” as he referred to her (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 7). It nonetheless allowed him to take part in Guild productions, and during rehearsals of Lawson’s *Processional – A Jazz Symphony of American Life*, which opened in January 1925, he met Strasberg, an avid theatregoer who had seen Eleonora Duse, Giovanni Grasso, Laurette Taylor and other stars perform on Broadway. However, it was the MAT’s 1923-24 tour that decided him to become a professional actor, having been astounded by the entire ensemble’s “intensity, reality, belief, and truth” (Strasberg 1988: 40). As a result he enrolled at the Lab in January 1924, but “[struck] out for Broadway” (Hethmon 2003: 14) after a year, and was appointed as an assistant stage manager on *Processional*.

The fact that Meisner and Strasberg were both of Eastern European Jewish extraction meant they related on several levels. For the younger Meisner it was a life-altering relationship as his following account reveals (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 7): “Strasberg had a great, uplifting influence on me. He introduced me to quality actors and artists of various kinds, and this helped enormously to solidify my emotional needs. I learned from him. I solidified my natural tastes and inclinations with his help.” In the Spring they took part in Pirandello’s *Right you are (if you think so)*, in which Clurman (1983: 10) first saw them on stage, which he described as follows:

Meisner was picturesque in his role, but the leading part was played by a young, pale-faced man of intellectual demeanour. He was very short, intense-

²² He made this comment in an interview with Suzanne Shepherd, a former student, which appeared in *Yale/Theatre* vol. 8, no. 2 (Spring 1977), simply entitled „Interview with Sanford Meisner“, pp. 38-43.

looking, with skin drawn tightly over a wide brow. He spoke with a faint foreign accent, had a large head ... and a face that expressed keen intelligence, suffering, ascetic control, with something old, withdrawn, and lofty about it. Though he was well cast for the typical Pirandello hero, he did not seem like an actor, so that something disagreeable though effective resulted from his performance. His name was Lee Strasberg.

Although the same age, Clurman (1983: 11) acknowledged that Strasberg “was more passionate about the theatre ... better informed, and already equipped with practical study and work.” Meisner, who had been introduced to Clurman by the composer Aaron Copland, thus found himself in stimulating company from the start. In May 1925 he was cast in the chorus of *Garrick Gaieties*, a revue in which Strasberg performed in sketches and Clurman stage managed, consolidating their friendship. Disenchanted with the Guild training Meisner became involved with Strasberg’s amateur activities (*see note 6*), acting in *Esther* under his direction, in which “[he] was first introduced to the guiding principles of Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre, albeit through the filter of Lee Strasberg’s interpretation” (Holub & Clayre 1994: 65). It was a significant experience, and forty years later Meisner (*in Shepherd 1977: 40*) credited Strasberg as being “[t]he biggest single influence in [his] life.”

Although Meisner was initially a spear-carrier for the Group, learning from the more experienced actors, his direction of *Waiting for Lefty* was a turning point. Billed as „a play in six scenes“ it entailed a series of vignettes which allowed the actors to create a range of characters. Seated in a semicircle on stage they stepped forward to enact scenes, often addressing the audience directly, while others planted in the auditorium reacted as though it was a union gathering. The producer Robert Herridge, who saw the production in 1935, described his experience (*in Easty 1992: v-vi*) as follows:

[The play] changed a lot of lives, including my own. It began when I walked into the theatre and felt a tenseness, an animal excitement in the air that I associated more with a sports arena before a championship fight than with a rustle of playbills and small talk that preceded the few commercial plays I had seen. [...] What followed ... was not so much a play as an experience, a galvanizing, unforgettable experience that had all of us on our feet at the end

wholly involved in one of the life and death social realities of the ,thirties, shouting: “STRIKE! STRIKE! STRIKE!”

Although the play’s success was an ensemble effort, it is significant that Odets alerted Meisner that the Neighbourhood Playhouse School of Theatre (NPSofT) in New York needed a director for their year-end production in 1935, and afterwards he joined the faculty. Despite his involvement with NPSofT Meisner remained a Group member until its dissolution, and acted until 1958, when he appeared in S. M. Berhman’s *The Cold Wind and the Warm*, directed by Clurman. It was at NPSofT that he discovered his true vocation however, as his comments below (*in* Shepherd 1977: 42-43) reveal:

The only time I am free and enjoying myself is when I am teaching ... I love the analysis of technique. I like to work with people who bring a certain seriousness and depth to what they’re doing. I feel alive and related (*sic*) when I’m teaching. I get an emotional release from it.

Meisner’s decision to channel his creative instincts into teaching, rather than acting or directing, is significant. While Adler and Carnovsky taught as part of their theatrical activities and “Lewis strived to fuse the best elements of his teachers” methodologies with his own contributions, Meisner aimed to diffuse their influences and went off in a different direction” (Pang 1991: 287). William Esper, who served as his apprentice for seventeen years and “worked nearly thirty years more to experiment with the technique,” explains why it is unique (Esper & DiMarco 2008: 5-6): “[V]ery few teachers have developed a concrete, step-by-step approach to training a truly creative actor – a system that takes an artist as raw material and builds the skills necessary for him to excel at his art from the ground up.”

Instead of adapting the methods of others Meisner identified what he considered the ,system’s” key elements and began experimenting in the classroom to determine how they might best be conveyed to his students. Although initially imitating “[the] kind of theatrical concentration that [Strasberg] had,” he disagreed with many aspects of his method (Meisner *in* Shepherd 1977: 42). Besides opposing the use of affective memories, he dismissed Strasberg’s use of improvisational exercises in which actors gave “general verbalisations of what [they] thought was an approximation of [their] situation in the play,” which he deemed “intellectual nonsense” (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 36, 59). He

therefore set about creating an alternate approach based on his conviction that “the source of all organic creativity ... is the inner impulses,” as he explains in the following extract taken from his book *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, which he co-authored with Dennis Longwell (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 36):

I decided I wanted an exercise for actors where there is no intellectuality. I wanted to eliminate all that „head“ work, to take away all the mental manipulation and to get to where the impulses come from. And I began with the premise that if I repeat what I hear you saying, my head is not working. I’m listening, and there is an absolute elimination of the brain.

The result was the Word Repetition Game, in which pairs of actors exchange simple observations (“You’re wearing jeans” “I’m wearing jeans”; “You look tired” “I look tired”) without attempting to analyse what they may infer until deeper motives reveal themselves. Despite the apparently inane nature of this exercise, “it wasn’t until the late 1950s or early 1960s that it took the form” it had when the book was written²³ (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 184). Considering that Meisner began teaching in 1936, this suggests a period of two decades to refine his technique, which is deceptive in its simplicity, largely due to a pedagogic outlook he framed as follows (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 37):

I’m a very nonintellectual teacher of acting. My approach is based on bringing the actor back to his emotional impulses and to acting that is firmly rooted in the instinctive. It is based on the fact that all good acting comes from the heart, as it were, and that there’s no mentality in it.

Meisner’s perspective is further clarified in an interview Sydney Pollack, his assistant for eight years, conducted with him for the documentary film *Sanford Meisner: The American Theatre’s Best Kept Secret*,²⁴ in which he stated that the aim of his training was “to eliminate all intellectuality from the actor’s instrument, and to make him a spontaneous responder to where he is, what’s happening to him, [and] what’s being done to him.” This encapsulates his technique, namely learning how to instantly react to one’s instincts, and in this respect he believed that “talent comes from instinct” and “working

²³ The book traces the training of a group of students from 29 September to 13 December of the next year. It would appear that these classes occurred on Mondays and Fridays, and the years were 1986-87.

²⁴ It was directed by Nick Doob, produced by Kent Paul, and distributed by Columbia Pictures in 1985.

from your head” has no part in acting (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 30-31). This anti-intellectual attitude extended to work with scripts, and he asserted that the only way a text can be filled with emotional truth is if it is learnt “coldly, without expression, in a completely neutral way,” thus avoiding “academic” interpretations (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 68, 70). Actors then exchange lines in a neutral manner until “emotional dialogue” ensues, in which the objective “is the picking up not of cues but of impulses,” and the words are secondary, as he elaborates below (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 22, 72, 145):

The text is like a canoe, and the river on which it sits is the emotion. The text floats on the river. If the water of the river is turbulent, the words will come out like a canoe on a rough river. It all depends on the flow of the river which is your emotion. The text takes on the character of your emotion.

Meisner’s student David Mamet, whose use of minimalist dialogue in his plays echoes a repetition exercise, in that his character’s spoken words are merely the proverbial tip of a subtextual iceberg, describes the effect of this spontaneous interaction, which he terms “the true lost art of the actor” (Mamet 1998: 21): “[T]he audience [is] treated to the truth of the moment, to a lovely, unexpected, unforeseeable beautiful exchange between the two people onstage.” This encapsulates Meisner’s core belief that “[a]cting is all a give-and-take of those impulses affecting each person” (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 62).

Meisner’s focus on spontaneous exchanges between actors as the principal source of emotional impulses in performance thus marginalised the use of affective memories and the imagination in the given circumstances, as well as those stimulated in pursuit of the character’s super-objective. This meant actors had to be emotionally primed before engaging on stage, even though he pointed out “that preparation lasts only for the first moment of the scene” (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 79). Despite believing “[t]he greatest piece of acting ... always has its roots in the truth of human emotion,” he considered “self stimulation of your emotion [...] the most subtle problem in acting,” one he was personally averse to, as his next statement confirms (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 45, 74, 118): “Preparation is the worst problem in acting. I *hate* it.” In this respect he told his students to employ “wishful thinking,” based on Freud’s proposition “that all fantasy comes either from ambition or sex,” but pointing out the “fantasy of the daydream is the most personal, most secret of the acting values” (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 76, 81, 85).

This approach to self-stimulation, which Vakhtangov (*in* Cole 1995: 145, 146-147, his italics) called an “*agitation from the essence*,” namely that “[t]he actor must take for truth whatever he creates out of his own fantasy,” no doubt appealed to Meisner because he lived “in a world of fantasy” during his childhood (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 5-6). Although less psychologically demanding than using affective memories it is arguably a less affective approach. In this regard there are shortcomings in Meisner’s technique, as Esper suggests in his book *The Actor’s Art and Craft*, co-authored with Damon DiMarco (Esper & DiMarco 2008: 9), especially questions regarding form and style, which are mental considerations and thus contributions of an actor’s ego, not the id, which remain largely unresolved.

Although foregrounding communion as the foundation of his approach, Meisner did not dismiss other elements of the „system“, but mostly referred to them in passing, as though they were peripheral rather than integral to his technique. In this respect it should perhaps be considered part of an actor’s overall training, and it is worth noting that many of his students, like Robert Duvall for example, went to work at the Actors Studio after training with him. Despite acknowledging this, Meisner asserted that they went there (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 183): “To work on [themselves], not to learn to act! It’s quite different.” Yet his approach is arguably more suited to a „work on oneself“ process as it helps actors overcome self-consciousness and a fear of self-revelation by learning to place their attention on others, both important challenges during initial training. It is also a technique suited to acting in front of a camera when authentic, spontaneous behaviour is imperative. This is perhaps Meisner’s most valuable contribution regarding the ongoing evolution of the „system“, as Esper clarifies (Esper & DiMarco (2008: 8): “The art of acting has been in a state of perpetual change since the day it began. A lot of it has to do with the way society develops, but a large part of it has to do – interestingly enough – with technology.”

3.6 Lee Strasberg, and the American Method

Despite his many detractors Strasberg's exploration of the actor's art and craft over a period of sixty years is arguably only eclipsed by Stanislavski's investigation. The reason he was so vilified in his time, and remains an easy target for practitioners who oppose a psychological approach to acting, is largely due to his prickly, oversensitive nature. In Meisner's view he was "a terrible actor [...] a librarian" (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 184), an astute summation of his essential nature. Although Strasberg dabbled in acting at various cultural institutions for émigré Jews during the early 1920s, "the professional theatre seemed foreign, far away, something done by other people somewhere else," and his principal motive was "looking for female companionship" (Strasberg 1988: 7, 11). Yet while observing Walter Hampden, a British trained actor, perform *Hamlet* on Broadway in 1919, Strasberg (1988: 13) realised he "possessed a good observation and awareness of acting," able to "tell the difference between what was real and true, and what was only external skill." This ability was piqued by Duse's first Broadway appearance in 1922 as Ellida in Ibsen's *The Lady of the Sea*, "a great historical moment" for him, which set the standard for his future investigation, as the following extract from his book *A Dream of Passion* reveals (1988: 16-17):

Duse demonstrated to me that acting was not only emotional outbursts or even the presentation of the depth of emotion. In her, I saw a moment-to-moment awareness of the life of the character ... just sitting on the stage and creating a person who was thinking and feeling, without that particular intensity that ordinarily characterizes emotional behaviour.

He also saw her portray Mrs. Alving in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and was equally taken aback by her mastery of signification and theatricality, as he elaborates below (1988: 18):

Duse was able to find gestures which were not simply natural, but most expressive of what would be difficult to suggest any other way. [...] With her gestures, Duse was not only real, she was also revealing the theme of each play, or each scene. [...] Her gestures often became a heightened expressiveness.

Strasberg therefore had a good idea of what constituted superlative acting even before he saw the MAT perform on Broadway in 1923, but what struck him about their acting, besides the unprecedented ensemble work, was that “there was never anything maudlin or pathetic or sentimental” about it (Strasberg 1988: 39). In *Uncle Vanya* for example, “his eyes slightly misty with drink, music in the background: Stanislavski suggested an entire dance without ever moving his feet,” and in *The Cherry Orchard* Knipper “[remained] utterly still, without any suggestion of pathos or tragedy, but capturing the inner rhythm of the loss with no effort,” after receiving the news that her family’s estate had been sold (Strasberg 1988: 39). The gradual accumulation of these impressions meant that Strasberg could no longer ignore his attraction to the art, and in 1924, at the age of twenty-three, he decided to become a professional actor.

Strasberg’s decision to embark on a career in the theatre despite his physical stature and accented voice, the very antithesis of leading men at the time, reflects his passion for acting. It was perhaps this acknowledgement that made him determined to fully grasp the actor’s creative process in order to enhance his prospects. It was with this aim that he went in search of training, not so much as an actor, but a scholar wanting to understand its mechanics. He attended the Clare Tree Major School of the Theatre for three months, “[practicing] speech, voice, ballet, and other generally recognised requisites of the actor’s basic training” (Strasberg 1988: 41), but “feeling vaguely dissatisfied all the while” (Hethmon 2003: 13), before enrolling at the Lab.

Although not overly impressed with Boleslavsky’s acting in the MAT productions, he considered Ouspenskaya’s portrayal of the governess in *The Cherry Orchard* a “brilliant characterisation,” but his main incentive for enrolling was that both had worked with Stanislavski’s “great pupil Vakhtangov”²⁵ (Strasberg 1988: 64, 70). The Lab’s training programme was based on “Boleslavsky’s notion of a unified system,” including “[v]ocal training, relaxation, movement work, [and] affective memory etudes,” namely “a sequence of exercises that would physically and mentally develop the necessary stimulus for creativity in the actor” (Strasberg 1988: 78-79). The first year thus entailed „work on oneself“, and the “emphasis in the system set forth by Boleslavsky was on concentration

²⁵ Although it is unlikely that Strasberg knew much about Vakhtangov at the time, Ouspenskaya had trained under him, and from his notes of her classes it is evident that she often referred to him.

and affective memory,” but with a focus on sense memory, as Strasberg (1988: 73) elaborates below:

The purpose of affective memory training for Boleslavsky was not simply to help the actor become more adept at handling props which he will have to deal with on the stage, but more essentially to train and develop the actor’s imagination so that he can deal with the nonexistent reality which is the primary characteristic of the stage.

Strasberg’s subsequent investigation into the use of affective memories diverged from the technique taught at the Lab however, as his following account reveals (1988: 75): “Our exercises with Boleslavsky and Madame²⁶ were confined to the area of analytic memory. They were designed to train the actor’s imagination. It was later in my own work with the problems of the actor that exercises dealing with “emotional memory” were developed.” The training also emphasised that the “real action of the scene is expressed by the character’s intentions,” but “the way in which they are accomplished depends on the emotional action of the scene,” which effectively meant that “actions with the same general physical pattern of movement would result in quite different behaviour on the part of the actor” (Strasberg 1988: 76-77). The character’s actions therefore depended on their objectives, but the actor’s scenic behaviour was determined by the given circumstances. Strasberg was thus introduced to the „system’s“ key principles, as well as the psychophysical interrelationship between action and emotion. Boleslavsky’s effort to create a holistic approach is reflected in lecture notes he made in 1923 prior to founding the Lab, in which he identified eighteen qualities²⁷ that had to be developed in students, stipulating that “the actor has to realise the three different planes of his development: the *spirit*, the *intellect*, and the *body*” (Boleslavsky in Cole & Chinoy 1970: 511, his italics). It is therefore somewhat puzzling that Strasberg elected to pursue a purely psychologically-orientated approach to acting and training.

²⁶ Ouspenskaya was called „Madame“ by her students, and her course The Technique of Acting was the Lab’s most popular. Despite her limited English “[s]he was a superb teacher,” according to Adler (*in* Hirsch 2002: 62), because: “She knew the truth – from a Russian sense, not an American sense.” Beatrice Straight, who also studied at the Lab, had a different opinion however, claiming that she “was austere and remote, and so fiercely critical that some students felt crippled by her” (*ibid*).

²⁷ These were: Talent, An apt mind, Education, Knowledge of life, Observation, Sensitiveness, Artistic taste, Temperament, Voice, Good enunciation, Expressive face and gestures, Well-built body, Dexterity, Plastique of movements, Tenacity in work, Imagination, Self-control and Good health (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 510-511). These notes were never published during Boleslavsky’s lifetime.

During the 1920s Strasberg (1988: 27) supplemented his theatre-going by „devouring“ books on the subject, and Craig’s writings “became the strongest intellectual stimulus for [him] to devote [his] life to the theatre.” In this respect his assertion that an actor “must possess the precision and skill that the marionette *is capable of*,” and thus “able to exercise [control] over his art,” guided Strasberg’s search (1988: 29, his italics). It is surprising that he would choose Craig as his role model, given that he opposed emotional displays on stage and actors forefronting their own personalities, including realism, as his statement (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 382-383) below suggests:

Do away with the actor, and you do away with the means by which a debased stage realism is produced and flourishes. No longer would there be a living figure to confuse us into connecting actuality and art; no longer a living figure in which the tremors of the flesh were perceptible.

Strasberg’s self-claimed “[obsession] with finding out as much as [he] could about the problem of the actor” led to him reading Denis Diderot’s anti-emotionalist tract *The Paradox of Acting* (1773), which provided him with a focus for his investigation, as he (1988: 29, 34-36) elaborates below:

The Paradox of Acting began with the problem, If an actor experienced real feeling in a first performance, he would be worn out and cold as marble by the third. This was not a theoretical assumption; it is precisely the problem that has faced all actors since time immemorial. [...] The real problem for the actor, therefore, is how to create in each performance the same believable experiences and behaviour, and yet include what Stanislavsky called “the illusion of the first time.” [...] But with all the reading that I had done and all the observations of great actors I was fortunate to make, plus my reading of psychology, especially Freud and the Behaviourists, I was not aware of any solution.

Strasberg (1988: 34, 36) therefore set out to resolve the conundrum which “everyone in the theatre had been aware of,” namely: “Can the actor laugh or cry at will?” And, “[the] decisive step in [his] search for a solution to the actor’s problem was the appearance of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1923-24.”

Strasberg's training at the Lab, or rather the ideas he was exposed to, were therefore filtered through his personal ambition. In this respect, at the time of enrolling he "had already arrived at the essential principles," having "read all the books about acting," but he still didn't know "how the hell you do it"; yet during the very first lecture he had an epiphany that would determine his life's course, as his following explanation (*in* Hethmon 2003: 144, 145) reveals:

[Boleslavsky said:] "We posit a theatre of real experience. The essential thing in such experience is that the actor learns to know and do, not through mental knowledge, but by sensory knowledge." Suddenly I knew, "That's it! That's it!" That's the answer I had been searching for. The point is that I had already read Freud and already knew the things that go on in a human being without consciousness. I had already picked up everything Boleslavsky said, but he showed me what it meant.

Despite this early breakthrough he spent a year at the Lab to gain an understanding of how emotional experiences stored in the unconscious could be wilfully summoned. The penny dropped during a lecture Boleslavsky conducted on 30 January 1925, in which he stated the following (cited in Strasberg 1988: 79, ellipses in original):

The preparation of every art must be conscious – you must know how and what you are going to do. Don't trust your inspiration ... but look to your own conscious understanding of what you are going to do. Then being trained in the method do to the best of your ability – this factor of ability must be unconscious. Conscious preparation – unconscious result. The unconscious in performing, in projecting the part, is the most precious moment of the play.

As a result, after only a year's training, Strasberg left the Lab as he believed he had sufficient know-how to explore on his own. In this respect his directorial experiments at the Chrystie Street Settlement House prepared him for his work with the Group, and in the years prior to his resignation, he consolidated his ideas, despite adversity. This self-conviction was both his strongest and weakest personality trait, allowing him to continue on his path without being swayed, yet unable to strike a compromise. During the 1940s he worked as a freelance director and also gave classes at Piscator's Workshop, but they

“had many battles about the Method, objective acting, and Brecht (whose work at that time Strasberg felt was falsely theatrical and lacking in human dimension)” (Hirsch 2002: 119, his insert). Following Lewis’s resignation from the Actors Studio however, Kazan invited “his Group theatre mentor, to join his fledgling workshop,” and from 1949 onwards “the Studio became Strasberg’s personal domain, his citadel and his temple” (Hirsch 2002: 124).

At the Studio Strasberg worked with professional actors who performed scenes for him, and in this respect he claimed (*in* Hirsch 2002: 124) “he was not a teacher but a moderator working along with Studio members in a close study of actors’ problems,” insisting that it “was not a school but a lab for actors who have already had voice and body training and who were now ready to do inner work on themselves to see what was getting in the way of fluent expressiveness.” It was therefore a tailor-made role for him, dealing with mature actors who wanted to work through their personal issues with someone who specialised in identifying psychological blockages, with a range of practical measures to address them. It was also one-on-one training, which suited him perfectly, as Robert Hethmon (2003: 17) confirms in his book *Strasberg at the Actors Studio*, based on transcriptions of taped recordings of his classes:

Strasberg has the great teacher’s ability to adjust himself personally and fully to each individual actor with whom he works.²⁸ This is the central element of his effectiveness. [...] And he has an extraordinary ability to observe and analyze an actor’s work objectively and accurately. [...] Seventy-five per cent of Strasberg’s work is concerned with helping an actor find out how he works individually, what his particular problems are, how he can go about solving them for himself, how he can develop a technique that will take into account the potentialities and the idiosyncrasies of his own “instrument”.

Shelley Winters, who sat in on Strasberg’s classes for six years before joining the Studio in 1956,²⁹ echoed this notion of a personal Method, stating (*in* Funke & Booth 1961:

²⁸ The book was first published in 1965, hence Hethmon’s use of the present tense, given that his subject was still alive and teaching.

²⁹ She was under contract to a Hollywood studio and wasn’t allowed to join the Studio as a result. In this respect professional actors, regardless of their industry status, auditioned to get into the Studio, and although over a thousand did per annum “a mere five or six actors survive[d] the auditions each year” (Hethmon 2003: 18).

155) that “[a] method of work means a method for you,” because “[c]ertain things are meaningful for some actors, and for some they have no use.” Her problem was „playing for results“, namely understanding what would be most effective in a particular scene and “[doing] it that way without any of the internal work” (Winters in Funke and Booth 1961: 147). Strasberg helped her overcome a fear of losing control, hence pre-planning what she did, by realising acting “is allowing things to happen to yourself, not editing it, so that the audience shares the experience” (Winters in Funke and Booth 1961: 149). Her new approach entailed using affective memories to find a sense of truth in her role, “not the director’s truth, not the playwright’s truth, but [her own] truth” (Winters in Funke and Booth 1961: 156). Thus, despite Strasberg (1988: 143, 147) also employing ancillary techniques like the „private moment“ (aka „public solitude“) exercise to “permit a fullness of expression,” and animal exercises to encourage physical characterisation, the basis of his Method was affective memories.

Edward Dwight Easty, the author of *On Method Acting* who trained with Strasberg for over a decade, states (1992: 24,165) it is “left up to the individual to choose which part of the Method is best-suited to the problem and to his instrument,” but points out that “[s]ense memory is the most vital component of the Method.” He also asserts (1992: 97, his italics) that “as Stanislavsky’s method has progressed, there has been a definite relaxing of discipline regarding *physical action*,” thus dismissing the Method of Physical Actions in favour of Strasberg’s psychologically-orientated Method. He also dismisses “professed teachers of the Method who stress complete freedom to the actor’s impulses,” as “it leads toward excessive self-indulgence which then moves toward conventional and cliché attitudes” (1992: 97), no doubt a snipe at Meisner’s approach. Despite both Easty and Winters claiming they had the freedom of choice to fashion their own techniques, the fact is that the Method they were exposed to already excluded elements of the „system“ that other practitioners had based their approaches on. In this respect, during a class in the 1970s,³⁰ Strasberg (*in* Cohen 2010: 28) stated: “I believe emotional memory is the key to unlocking the secret of creativity that is behind every artist’s work, not just the actor’s.” His convictions therefore remained unchanged throughout his life. The irony is that when his wife Paula invited Brando, often considered the epitome of a Method actor, to supper after the premiere of *On The Waterfront* (1954), to enquire how he had

³⁰ While Hethmon’s book is based on recordings between 1956 and 1964, Lola Cohen’s book *The Lee Strasberg Notes* (2010) is based on recordings made during the final seven years of Strasberg’s life.

prepared for the final, climactic scene in which he is ruthlessly beaten by union thugs and has to drag himself to a group of dockworkers, she expected him to say he had “used a series of Affective Memories, Personalizations, Sense Memory, Physical Exercises, etc.,” instead he told her he had been cold, tired and irritable after twelve hours on set waiting for the weather to clear so they could film the scene, and “allowed all of these sensory and emotional feelings to flow through his every action, word, and movement creating for the audience the torture and hell endured by the character” (Easty 1992: 168-169). This is an example of an actor applying the principle of „here, now, today“, and endorses Adler’s belief that using the creative imagination in the given circumstances is a far more effective means to induce authentic emotional reactions. Strasberg’s claim (*in* Cohen 2010: 27) that “emotional memory is the actor’s weapon to create a complete reality on stage,” is therefore debatable, even if it does allow a subject to “relive those emotions and feelings with surprising intensity” (Damasio 2004: 98).

Stanislavski’s insistence that actors should “experience dramatic events afresh, first-hand each time” is, in fact, the antithesis of the Method, as his following statement (*in* Toporkov 2001: 110), made during the *Tartuffe* rehearsals in 1938, confirms: “My method is to get involved with the feelings I have today. Here, today, now.” Strasberg’s claim (1988: 175) that the “continuation and consolidation of Stanislavsky’s and Vakhtangov’s discoveries became the basis of the Method” is thus questionable. In this respect Richard Hornby, in his book *The End of Acting*, hit the proverbial nail on the head with his following statement (1992: 173): “Strasberg provides a good example of the tendency to take personal meanings from Stanislavski’s theories. Strasberg’s teaching was a radical adaptation of Stanislavski’s ideas, in a manner suited to Strasberg’s own background and personality, and to what he perceived as the needs of the American actor.”

Despite the problems associated with the use of affective memories in performance, their value should not be discounted however, in particular sense memory, or „sensory perception“ as Lewis termed it (1998: 44), because “without well-developed sensory perception, there can be no truth in your acting.” Uta Hagen, in her book *A Challenge for the Actor*, also points out (1991: 81, her emphasis) that “[s]ensory recall must be used with faith and accuracy **to condition the character’s actions**,” and in her book *Respect for Acting*, asserts that “a physical sensation such as heat or cold can produce emotions

such as irritation, depression or anxiety” (2008: 47). These „healthy“ uses of affective memories support Strasberg’s following postulation (*in* Cohen 2010: 33):

I believe the emotions and the senses work exactly alike. There’s only one difference. The emotion is sensation at a point of high intensity. Say something hurts you and you say, “I feel a little pain.” Something hurts you sharply and you cry, you weep, you say, “Oh God, it was so terrible.” What’s the difference? There’s no difference in the pain except to a certain degree. [...] At a certain point something changes to a more intense experience. That to me is emotion.

Although Strasberg’s contribution to the „system’s“ ongoing evolution is debatable, to dismiss his findings outright would be foolhardy in terms of equipping trainee actors with a personal technique for meeting any performance contingency. In this respect, as Hornby (1992: 185-186) points out: “Strasberg’s emotion memory is a worthwhile innovation in acting. The fact that he applied Stanislavski’s name to what was really his own technique in no way detracts from its validity. Every actor should learn Strasberg’s emotion memory and be prepared to use it in the proper circumstances.”

3.7 Michael Chekhov, and the imperative of form

Separating „Misha“ Chekhov’s acting approach from his temperament is impossible, as his autobiography *The Path of the Actor*, which documents his childhood through to leaving Russia in 1928 clearly indicates. Raised by his mother, due to his alcoholic father often leaving home for lengthy spells, his personality was shaped by two vastly different influences, as he explains below (Chekhov 2005: 32-35, his italics):

[Their influences] upon me were so different that it was as though I was living in two different families. [...] Many contradictions lived *within me*, but for a long time I was unable to reconcile them *outwardly*. [...] And subsequently, when I came to be working on my roles, I was unable to imagine the character I was representing as a primitive „mask“.³¹ [...] Everything that lived within me as fear, confidence, love, passion, tenderness, coarseness, humour, a gloomy disposition of the soul, etc., was imbued with an intensity which seethed within me. The passion of my nature did not merely intensify all these qualities, it combined them into fantastic patterns and forms.

In December 1917 Chekhov’s instability came to a head when he suffered a nervous breakdown³² while playing Frazer in *The Flood*, abandoning the performance during the interval as his “nerves were stretched to an extreme degree,” and for a year thereafter he “hardly left the house,” preoccupied with “the horror and absurdity of human life” (Chekhov 2005: 74-75). It was a turning point similar to Stanislavski’s breakdown in 1906, after which he began to formulate the „system“. In this respect Chekhov (2005: 26, his insert) had also relied on his intuition and instincts in creating a role, a process he described as follows:

When I was about to play a part ... I was strongly gripped by this feeling of the *whole that was to come*, and with full *confidence* in it, I began without the

³¹ His notion of a „mask“ was based on people projecting “*straightforward and simple mentalities*,” as he believed “that to be truly human means to be able to reconcile opposites” (Chekhov 2005: 33).

³² Several factors contributed to his breakdown. In December his first wife Olga left him, taking their daughter with her, and his favourite cousin committed suicide. He also drank heavily, often performing in an inebriated state. The outbreak of the Second Revolution cannot be discounted either, and he also had a major disagreement with Stanislavski in the Autumn due to their conflicting interpretations of Treplev in *The Seagull*, which he was meant to perform, resulting in the production being abandoned.

slightest hesitation to carry out what was occupying my attention at the time. Out of this *whole*, the details emerged of their own accord and appeared objectively before me. I never invented the details and I was always merely an observer of what came to light out of the sense of the whole. This future whole (out of which all the details and particulars were born) was not exhausted or extinguished however long the process of coming to light lasted.

Chekhov (2005: 26) believed this feeling was essential as it allowed a role's details to be "broken down into thousands of small pieces," then "bound together by a feeling of the *single whole*." He thus possessed an innate sense of artistic form and wholly surrendered to it, which meant that he "[suffered] greatly from an inability to work systematically," and "hardly took any pleasure from the *process*" (Chekhov 2005: 20, 114). It is therefore understandable that he initially opposed the „system“, because a methodical approach was alien to his creative nature. Instead he relied on an ability to "dream about a character," or rather, "to actively expect the character" (Kirillov in Chekhov 2005: 204), an approach that began to fail by 1917. During his recuperation a friend persuaded him "[to] open a drama school and thus receive a steady income," which led to him regaining this ability as he elaborates below (Chekhov 2005: 77-78):

From its first steps, my ensuing pedagogical activity was given a true direction. That wonderful *intuitive feeling for the whole*, which I had almost lost in recent times, took hold of me again. [...] I never prepared my lessons: when I arrived at the school I was gripped anew every time by the idea of the whole, and there and then I deduced *from this whole* which individual aspects were to be developed that day. I will never permit myself to say that I taught the system of Stanislavsky. That would be too bold an assertion. I taught what I *myself* experienced from working with Stanislavsky, what I learnt from Sulerzhitsky and Vakhtangov. [...] I have to confess ... that I was never one of Stanislavsky's best pupils, but I must say with equal sincerity that I made much of what Stanislavsky gave us my own forever and I placed it at the foundation of my subsequent and, to some extent independent, experiments in the art of drama.

Chekhov (2005: 78-79) thus adapted the „system“ to suit his temperament, "coloured by [his] personal relationship to what [he] had perceived," and, as Stanislavski also taught at

his studio for a year,³³ he had a sound support structure. Knebel (1967: 59), who joined at its inception, describes Chekhov's pedagogic approach below:

[He] never had the aspiration to create a theatre. He did not even have the desire to make each one of us an actor. [...] Just in a certain moment of his life he needed those, who he could give everything to that was boiling and overfilling his soul. [...] His classes did not contain continuity which was possibly necessary for our systematic growth. [...] He did not teach us, but gave us an opportunity to participate in his search ... [...] Looking through my diary of those years, notes of lectures, sketches, exercises, I am marvelled how deeply he understood Stanislavski's ideas!

Knebel (1967: 59-60), who worked as an assistant at Stanislavski's Opera-Dramatic Studio in later years, states there was a gradual shift in Chekhov's approach, but does not specify what it was. It is apparent that he emphasised „work on oneself“ however, as “in the three years of the studio's existence he never approached a play,” instead advocating an “improvised feeling of oneself,³⁴ which he considered to be the top and the base of acting skills;” claiming (*in* Knebel 1967: 60, 62): “[T]hat if an actor would adopt a psychology of an improvising creator, he would self-actualize as an artist.” His training consisted of improvisational sketches that explored various acting styles, yet always informed by “the most amazing component in art,” namely “a premonition of the whole,” which he termed a role's “grain” (Chekhov *in* Knebel 1967: 63-64). He therefore translated what he had been taught into a personal language, so that his term “atmosphere”,³⁵ for example, “was connected not only with what Stanislavski called “the grain”, but with the “internal object”, “the middle ground” and “physical feeling of oneself”, which Nemirovich-Danchenko paid such attention to in his work” (Knebel

³³ Stanislavski also taught the „system“ at Vakhtangov's studio, as well as the Armenian and Habimah studios, conveying the elements of „work on oneself“ and „work on the role“ to them. For the latter he chose *The Merchant of Venice*, with the intention of staging a production with the united forces of the studios, but these activities were curtailed due to the MAT's tour to the USA (Chekhov 2005: 78).

³⁴ Knebel states (1967: 6, my highlight) that their classes were devoted to “[a] search for **the creative feeling of oneself** in sketches, in other words the first part of the Stanislavski system.” This equates with the state of „I am being“. Chekhov (2005: 82) believed this work “formed a kind of „primer“ for students, and first worked on liberating their creative individualities, or sense of „I am being“, and then on improvised sketches conducted in this heightened state. This endorses what Tortsov asserts in *An Actor Prepares* (1984: 293), namely: “I believe that you should have this experience and use it when you are working on your inner “elements” and “inner creative state”, in all your drills and exercises.”

³⁵ To „act within the atmosphere“ is a tenet of Chekhov's approach and the subject of the fourth chapter of his book *To The Actor: On the technique of acting* (1953).

1967: 75). Although the acting approach that he developed as a result is often considered to be „body-based“, Knebbel (1967: 79) paints a different picture below:

Chekhov did not believe in special “movement-related” disciplines. We asked him many times to allow us to exercise rhythmic, dancing and then fashionable aerobics. Sometimes he agreed, brought in a good teacher, and we started to learn. But very soon he became disappointed. These lessons seemed to him to be a waste of time and he cancelled everything. He went against any training exercises, be it voice-training, diction or movements. One needs to control one’s body, voice, diction from within, he said stubbornly. Only this way one can achieve real results.³⁶

Although Chekhov’s students undoubtedly benefited from their association with him, it was a period of psychological upheaval compounded by his mother’s death in 1919, after which he “seemed to lose the capacity to feel” (Chekhov 2005: 102-103). Still drinking heavily, he sought out alternate philosophies to that of Arthur Schopenhauer, which had initially fuelled his “pessimistic moods and ideas,” as he (2005: 73, 74, 86-87, his italics) elaborates below:

Although I was stirred and excited by the life of the Chekhov Studio, pessimistic ideas and dark moods continued to be characteristic of me. One day I came across [a book] about Indian Yogis. [...] I succeeded in understanding that the keynote of yoga is the *creativity of life*. The creativity of life! This was the new keynote which gradually imbued my soul. [...] After a while, one more thought – one other feeling – began to take possession of me. This was a feeling of the possibility of working creatively within oneself, the creative process within one’s own personality. I dimly divined the difference between people who create *outside of themselves* and those who create *within themselves*. [...] It seemed to me that creativity was not subject to the human will and that its specific application depended

³⁶ Chekhov (2005: 78-79) echoes her assertion in his autobiography, stating: “A distinctive feature of the programme of the lessons in our studio was the minimal quantity of „technical“ subjects: voice training, articulation, declamation, movement and the acrobatics that were so fashionable during those years – all these subjects were either completely absent from our schedule of lessons or they occupied a secondary place in it. My attitude to all these subjects was almost negative. [...] This unresolved question was always very difficult, since at the same time as not finding satisfaction in any of the „technical“ subjects, I also felt with my whole soul the importance of „technique“ on the stage. Only later did persistent work and research in this direction enable me to gain an understanding of this dilemma and resolve it.”

exclusively upon one's so-called „natural“ predispositions. But together with the thought of *self-focused creativity*, there arose quite naturally within me a „will-impulse“, in a certain sense a „will-urge“, to master creative energy in order that I might apply it within myself and upon myself.

The result of this revelation was that “the unity of [his] psyche began to disintegrate and [he] gained a certain access to [himself],” which in turn enabled him to gradually “gain a victory over everything gloomy and oppressive which lay as a thick layer on the surface of [his] soul” (Chekhov 2005: 89-90). This was a fortuitous occurrence as he was asked to appear in a performance of *The Flood*, which effectively meant that he started acting again, but gave less time to his students, which gradually brought the studio to an end (Chekhov 2005: 91-92). The rejuvenated Chekhov who rejoined the MAT in the early 1920s was therefore liberated from many troubles that had formerly beset him. He also had a clear life mission, as “[his] newly awakened will demanded that [he] take certain steps towards bringing renewal in the theatre,” and in this regard he was “gripped by the feeling for the *whole*, and in this whole lived the theatre of the future” (Chekhov 2005: 90). This echoed Vakhtangov's assertion (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 159*), that “the only possible basis for the theatre of the future, [is] a theatre with a profound inner content and expressive external form.”

They were not the only ones who entertained this ideal however, as Knebel (1967: 77) explains: “Those years Stanislavski spoke much about inner and outer distinctiveness. Chekhov and Vakhtangov were interested in it too.” It therefore became a pivotal aim during their collaboration on *Erik XIV*, namely “[liberating] the actor's subconscious potential to achieve, to master new theatrical forms” (Markov in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 159). It was a brave experiment, but after a dress rehearsal in late March 1921 Vakhtangov, “in a state of complete devastation,” considered cancelling the production³⁷ as Chekhov's “[bad] acting had finished him off” (Chekhov 2005: 95). Yet by the next rehearsal he had transformed into Erik, and by the 29 March premiere he

³⁷ Vakhtangov experienced a similar situation during the final rehearsal of *The Flood* in 1915, which he directed, when Chekhov, playing Fraser, panicked before his first entrance because he had no grasp of the role's „grain“. Yet after stepping on stage he instantly transformed into a character based on a Jewish trader they had both encountered months before, in a manner “so natural that it [seemed] that he had never rehearsed in any other way” (Vakhtangov in Knebel 1967: 87). Although this unsettled his fellow actors Chekhov was “so much within the character that he [did] not notice anything,” and when Vakhtangov asked how this had happened afterwards, he could not recall having met the trader (*ibid*).

“conveyed the main character’s doom and anguish” with “clear-cut movements and gestures and an utmost intensity,” according to Markov (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 159). Although this would be their final collaboration, it showed “that gestures and words stirred the audience’s subconscious, which could not always be stimulated by other means” (Markov *in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 159-160). This became a key tenet of Chekhov’s emerging aesthetic, as well as his dying friend’s work during the last year of his life. In this regard it is worth noting that Vakhtangov wrote the „All Saints Notes“ on 26 March, the same day that their mutual experiment came to fruition.

In 1921 Chekhov also played Khlestakov in *The Government Inspector*, a production in which Stanislavski emphasised total creative freedom during performance, a “dream of improvisation” that “passionately” fascinated Chekhov (Knebel 1967: 62). In this respect Stanislavski steered him in the direction of “*freedom* and originality of his creativity” (Chekhov 2005: 40, his italics), based on his belief “that at the moment of inspiration, the techniques are created subconsciously” (Knebel 1967: 92). Chekhov thus simultaneously explored two dissimilar, yet complimentary acting approaches; one focussing on external form, the other on spontaneity. The conceptual basis of the latter is explained below by Knebel (1967: 92, her quotes):

The most important landmarks and main action tasks must remain the same, once and for all, but how these tasks are performed, how the set circumstances are justified and which form of communication develops must be all prompted by the subconscious, only then will the precious impromptu appear and the role will be rescued from stereotyping. “What depends on consciousness, writes Stanislavski, and how depends on unconsciousness. This is the best method of protecting artistic unconsciousness and assisting it; not thinking about “how”, but only directing our attention to “what”, we divert our consciousness from the area within a role, which requires participation in sub-consciousness within the creative process.”³⁸ I do not know to what extent Chekhov was familiar with these ideas. I think that although Stanislavski formulated and wrote down these ideas much later, they were the principles Chekhov was aware of.

³⁸ Knebel’s quote within the extract is taken from Stanislavski’s *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, 1954, p. 459. Her reference to the „main action“ is synonymous with the actor-character’s through line of action in pursuing the play’s super-objective, and her notion of the „set“ circumstances, equates with the „given“.

This approach later evolved into the Method of Physical Actions, whereby tasks were broken down into actions, but always from the perspective of logical function and not form, as Stanislavski told Zon (1955: 463) in 1933: “Know “what” and do not meddle with “how”. Is there a task? Complete it in any possible way, as long as it is unintentional.” The actor therefore focussed on the character’s objectives, not on how they portrayed their actions because it inevitably resulted in stereotypical behaviours, as Stanislavski (*in* Toporkov 2001: 151) told the *Tartuffe* cast, namely that being concerned with the a role’s exterior too soon results in mere copying, “and can be a barrier to the establishment of a living organic pattern of behaviour.”

Although Chekhov and Vakhtangov realised it was imperative to combine inner and outer expressiveness, they favoured “the internal motivation of any *given external stage form*” (Knebel 1967: 78, her italics), thereby rejecting Stanislavski’s thesis that “the external form of the actor’s role should rise naturally as the expression of the inner state of the character he is playing” (Krivitsky *in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 258). Thus, despite the idea of psychophysical unity underscoring Chekhov’s method, his approach was the antithesis of Stanislavski’s, who may have considered the unconscious the source of an actor’s inspiration but did not dismiss conscious work on a role employing discipline, logic and precision. Chekhov’s approach was based on the “high state of inspiration and free inspiration” however, “not just brief and chance moments in performing” (Kirillov *in* Chekhov 2005: 4). It therefore required a belief in “*intangible* powers and qualities,” which “can be made to exist on the stage as concretely as the actors’ bodies or their visible movements and audible voices,” as this enables “the subtlety of the actor to improvise, to appreciate the *how* of acting more than the *what*” (Chekhov 2004a: 159, his italics).

Lenard Petit, who has practiced Chekhov’s technique for over thirty years, considers this its core problem, as he explains below in an extract taken from his book *The Michael Chekhov Handbook: To The Actor* (2010: 5):

Chekhov calls a great deal of the material we rely on in the technique as *intangible*. Because it is intangible, actors reading about it can easily become puzzled. Chekhov’s book *To the Actor* is a great offering to actors but it

remains a difficult book from which to work. He was unable to include the spiritual in his book about acting and still get it published. So something is missing.

Despite the spiritual overtures of Chekhov's belief in intangible powers, Petit (2010: 5, 7) claims it "is spiritual in the way that one feels one is engaged with „something else“, but not spiritual in a religious way," rather it is "conceived around archetypal energies." However, in the second part of Chekhov's autobiography entitled *Life and Encounters*, an account of his experiences after leaving Soviet Russia until his forced departure from Latvia in 1934 due to a nationalistic overthrow, he states that anthroposophy³⁹ influenced him "profoundly on a personal level and with regards to his thoughts and views on the theatre" (2005: 6, 10). His attraction to Steiner's philosophy, which began in 1921 as an extension of his initial interest theosophy, stemmed from the idea that "*each individual* is capable of experiencing ... the spiritual world," and it "is only a „mystery“ to a person who *does not wish* to exert himself sufficiently to gain access to it" (Chekhov 2005: 134, his italics). It represented "a modern form of Christianity" for Chekhov (2005: 133, 135), who believed that "Christ is central to everything that Steiner expounds," and whose inspiration stemmed from a faith in the "processes and Beings of the spiritual world." This meant that his characters "came as something unexpected," as he allowed them "to exist objectively, as though they [were] separate from [him]," but this relied on an ability to still "think logically, clearly and actively" when it occurred, or else the "clairvoyant may become prey to illusions and submerge himself not in the spiritual world, but in the realm of make-believe and self-deception" (Chekhov 2005: 115, 134). The result was an acting approach he spent his life trying to formulate as an objective technique, but finally acknowledged could not exist apart from the „system“, as his concluding comments in *To The Actor* clearly suggests (2004a: 160, his insert and quote):

To the best of my knowledge, theatrical history records the existence of only one method expressly postulated for the actor – that created by Constantin Stanislavsky (and, unfortunately, much misunderstood and often

³⁹ Anthroposophy, which proceeded from theosophy, is a spiritual philosophy reflecting and addressing deeply spiritual questions of humanity, but is underpinned by a scientific perspective on the natural world, effectively an attempt to synthesise art, science and religion (Kirillov in Chekhov 2005: 218). Theosophy is a religious philosophy based on the premise that God must be experienced directly in order to be known. According to theosophy, a direct contact with the deeper spiritual reality of nature and humankind is possible through a state transcending normal human consciousness.

misinterpreted). Let this book, then, be another effort in the direction of a better theatre through better acting. [...] “Organise and write down your thoughts concerning the technique of acting,” Stanislavsky said to me. “It is your duty and the duty of everyone who loves theatre and looks devotedly into its future.”

The value of Chekhov’s literary legacy is that it attempts to clarify elements of the „system“ Stanislavski failed to develop in his own writings, the most important being “the division of consciousness,” about which Chekhov (2005: 148-149) had the following to say: “[H]e often referred to the „subconscious“ in the creative process, but this may perhaps be taken as an incomplete formulation on his part of the division of consciousness in the creative state.” In this regard Chekhov (2005: 21-22) believed that “objectivity is utterly necessary for an artist,” because “one learns to value things in and outside oneself for their true worth irrespective of personal inclinations, sympathies and antipathies.” Not only did it allow him to show the duality of human nature, as his “love and pathos towards his characters was proportional to his ridicule of them,” but “it was this paradox which provided the dual comic-tragic effect of [his] acting for the audience” (Kirillov in Chekhov 2005: 208). Zavadsky describes the extent of his dual-consciousness below (*in* Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 241):

[Chekhov] was able to split his personality in an amazing way: he stunned the other actors in his performance as Caleb, making them cry along with him, not to mention his effect on the audience, and then winked at the people backstage, whispered witty remarks to his partners, fooled around and had a good time onstage.

Chekhov (2005: 122-123, his italics) explained the function of this ability as follows:

[T]he actor who is possessed of a normal state of mind must – while he is on the stage – „see“ himself just as freely and objectively as the audience sees him. He himself must receive an impression from his acting just as he would if he were a spectator. The true creative state consists precisely of the fact that the actor who is experiencing *inspiration* switches off his own self and allows that *inspiration* to work within him. His personality is surrendered to this *inspiration* and he himself can admire the results of its effect on his

personality. [...] It is often said that creativity must stem from the depths of the artist's subconscious life, but this is possible only if the artist knows how to relate objectively to himself and does not allow his coarse thoughts and feelings to interfere with the work of his subconscious.

Chekhov search for a means of inducing an objective creative state, synonymous with „I am being“, stemmed from an experience in 1929 on the opening night of *Artisen*, a production directed by Max Reinhardt, in which he played Skid, a clown. This was his first German role and he had to learn the language and how to dance and perform stunts in record time. Yet as with Eric and Fraser, he transformed into the role in the eleventh hour, this time able to objectively observe himself acting, as he elaborates below (Chekhov 2005: 174-175):

Skid was speaking, and it suddenly seemed to me that I really understood for the first time the meaning of his words ... [...] For the first time I saw that my fellow actors had a real, living interest in Skid's words and in the drama of his soul. I noticed with astonishment that I was beginning to anticipate what would happen next inside him. [...] Now I was able to conduct Skid's acting. My consciousness had split into two – at one and the same time, I was in the auditorium and standing beside myself and in each of my fellow actors on stage and I knew what all of them were feeling, wanting and expecting.

Chekhov's account is similar to Stanislavski's description of his own experience in *My Life in Art* (1980: 406) while performing Stockman in *An Enemy of the People*, and Hornby's description of his own experience in his book *The End of Acting* (1992: 68). Although Chekhov had undergone this psychic division for years, it was the first time evaluated what had occurred in a sober, detached manner. This distancing from his character was perhaps accentuated by the fact that it was the first time he performed in a language other than his own, as Hornby (1992: 43) explains below:

This feeling of otherness, achieved through speech, underlies many psychological phenomena besides acting. Learning to speak a foreign language ... involves an expansion of the self; a person who speaks more than one language often has noticeably different personalities in each of them. [...] There is also the phenomenon of “possession,” which occurs in

primitive, shamanistic rituals. In traditional societies, the feeling of otherness is taken literally, as if another person, or spirit, were speaking through you.

Schechner (2003: 199), in his book *Performance Theory*, states there is a correlation between shamanic possession and the „system“, in that the function of elements such as “sense memory, emotional recall, playing the through-line of action etc.” were all designed “so that actors could “get inside of” and act “as if” they were other people;” and in this respect “Stanislavsky’s approach is humanist and psychological, but still a version of the ancient technique of performing by becoming or being possessed by another.” He also points out (2003: 315) that in kathakali, the Hindu dramatic dance tradition, good acting equates with the ability to be both a character and an observer, so that the “half actor” who is the role “is the one who has internalised the fixed gesture patterns of kathakali,” whilst the “half-actor” who is himself “is the one observing, manipulating, and enjoying the actions of the other half;” but to achieve this “it is necessary to assimilate into the body the precise second-by-second details in performing.”

These two methods to induce a state of divided consciousness are the essential difference between the psychotechnique Chekhov mastered, and the Method of Physical Actions that Stanislavski formulated after he had already left Russia. Although the outcome of both approaches is similar, namely that the entire organism and all its mental processes come into play, and result in the performer’s “center” or “I,” as Schechner (2003: 316) framed it, being able to observe and control both their affective (feeling) and cognitive (knowing) faculties, it is a question of which is the more reliable in terms of inducing it on demand. In this respect Chekhov (2005: 179) acknowledged his subconscious “wasn’t always as keen to help [him] in his artistic work,”⁴⁰ and there were times “when the connection to the subconscious was severed for long periods.”

Although it cannot be refuted that when Chekhov’s approach worked the results were inevitably superlative, there is a danger to assume what worked for him will work for all actors. Bella Merlin (*in* Chekhov 2005: 197) underlines this caution, pointing out that besides the fact that he was a “genius, and as with all geniuses there’s an element of

⁴⁰ When Chekhov’s character Foma Opiskin failed to materialise during a production of Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Village of Stepanchikovo* at Riga’s Russian Drama Theatre in November 1932, he ascribed it to the fact that he saw Moskvin playing the role “in his unsurpassable manner” at the MAT in 1916, which made such an indelible impression on him that he unwittingly copied it (Chekhov 2005: 180).

inspiration which will always remain ungraspable by the rest of us,” he was also “a highly sensitive individual who responded very personally to the political and social upheaval of the first half of the century;” a quality perhaps lacking in Stanislavski’s outlook. In this regard Chekhov’s attempt to “resolve the question of inspiration and how to gain access to it” led to a further revelation, namely that “the audience [has] the right to influence the actor during a performance and that the actor should not try to avoid this,” as this “is how it will always be for an actor if he is really inspired,” which he believed was the key to a new acting technique, elucidating it as follows (*in Chekhov 2005: 126-127, his italics*):

Why does the poet say that Apollo calls him to a holy *sacrifice*? Why a sacrifice? Because *surrendering* oneself to inspiration and through that inspiration to the *audience itself and to the spirit of the time or epoch*, etc., amounts to offering a *sacrifice*. An actor who loves his own arbitrariness, his personal will in art, does not know what kind of sacrifice is involved in creativity, and he will never be able to respond either to his epoch or the demands of his time. [...] The new acting technique of which I have been speaking is the key to being „in tune with the times“. It is the new actor who works at a deep level, the actor who *sacrificially* offers himself up to the audience, who is the key to the contemporaneity of every era. [...] The new actor must first learn – with the help of this new technique – to *sacrifice* his self-will, his personality, before he can recognize, understand and accept with his new consciousness the wishes of the new kind of spectator.

Chekhov’s conception of active audience involvement in theatrical productions, and the actors’ willingness to bare their souls during performance, established a precedent that later practitioners like Grotowski would further explore. It also represented a divergence of Chekhov’s views from Stanislavski’s, in that the „fourth wall“ was no longer inviolate, and the greater the interactivity between stage and auditorium that could be engendered, the more fulfilling this bilateral experience would be for everyone involved.

After a disappointing two years in Berlin, and two more in Paris, Chekhov accepted an offer to work at the Russian Drama Theatre and the Latvian State Theatre in Riga, in 1932, where he also gave classes at its Theatre School until the Spring of 1934. In

addition he worked at the Lithuanian State Theatre in Kaunas, commuting between the state capitals several times a week, and it was during this highly productive period that he consolidated his acting approach, as Charles Marowitz explains in the extract below taken from his book *The Other Chekhov* (2004: 135):

It was clear that by the time Chekhov was performing in Riga, he had honed his inner technique to such a point that he could conjure up precisely those effects he wished to create. But that always meant a collaboration with the higher realms of his imagination. The “technical actor” rehearses assiduously in order to perfect every detail of the performance he wishes to convey. The “chekhovian actor” realises that the extra dimension that makes the difference between a competent and an inspiring performance depends on a quotient that cannot be drilled into being, but must arrive from some other sphere beyond cognitive control. To the extent that an actor can consciously summon those subconscious resources to bring this about, Chekhov had begun to master that art.

Although in his prime as an actor, he had not matured as a teacher, and his training approach still consisted of “*études* and improvisations” as it had in Moscow, but in January 1934 Chekhov (2005: 184, 185) suffered a heart attack, and afterwards began to pay more attention to documenting his ideas. While recuperating in the country he had an epiphany that helped him translate his intuitive understanding of performance expression into his best-known contribution to the actor’s art, the „psychological gesture“, an event he described as follows (Chekhov 2005: 187-188):

Lying in my garden ... I observed the harmonious forms of the plants, I imagined the process of the rotation of the Earth and the planets, I searched for harmonious compositions in space and gradually came to the experience of the *movement, invisible to the external eye* that was present in all phenomena in the world. [...] I called this invisible movement „gesture“. Finally I began to notice that they weren’t merely movements, but that they were filled with content: they manifested will and feelings that were of a diverse, profound and exciting nature. [...] When I then performed „gestures“ that I myself had created, they invariably called forth feelings and will-impulses inside me that gave rise to creative images.[...] I then turned my

thoughts to using „gesture“, which has such a powerful effect on the psyche in the art of the theatre ... [to] give harmony of composition to the performance and the acting, as well as enhancing the meaning of what is happening on stage.

Chekhov’s revelation regarding the importance of gesticulation during performance had its origin in Steiner’s Eurythmy,⁴¹ derived from the ideas of Francois Delsarte.⁴² In the view of Stanislavski (1986: 73, 74, 75, 76) however, actors had to “achieve an elimination of gestures” so that they did not “repeat the same externals in every part,” reflecting his opposition to habitual actions actors resorted to unless their characters’ behaviours were psychologically motivated, as Tortsov explains below:

Every actor should so harness his gestures that he will always be in control of them and not they of him. [...] By simple use of a gesture one cannot convey either the inner spirit of a part or the main unbroken line of action that flows through its entirety. [...] Nor should an actor forget that the typical gesture helps to bring him closer to the character he is portraying while the intrusion of personal motions separates him from it and pushes him in the direction of his purely personal emotions.

Stanislavski’s aversion to the use of gestures stemmed from his belief that contrived behaviours impeded the flow of organic impulses that led to spontaneous expressions on stage. In this respect he stressed that scenic actions had to be purpose driven, as he told Zon (1955: 467): “Gestures should not be separate concepts, only movement exists. The movement of an actor is restricted when *what* the person is *doing* is not fully understood and when the motor apparatus is not developed accordingly.” During the *Tartuffe* rehearsals, in which a degree of representational acting may well have been acceptable given the play’s association with heightened theatricality, he opposed all inclinations in this direction, as Toporkov (2001: 151) explains below:

⁴¹ Eurythmy “is a form of movement Steiner called the “science of visible speech” (Powers in Chekhov 2004a: xl.vii). Chekhov attended Steiner’s lecture’s “specifically devoted to sound, gesture, colour and Eurythmy” in 1926, which “made a great impression on him” (Kirillov in Chekhov 2005: 210).

⁴² Delsarte (*in* Cole and Chinoy 1970: 187-188, his italics) asserted that an actor moves, interests and persuades an audience “by *gesture*,” and that it was the most powerful means of expression because it “is the direct agent of the heart,” namely “the fit manifestation of feeling.”

Stanislavski tried every way he knew to protect us from the cheap methods of working on physical characterisation ... everything that encourages an actor to cling to what he finds easiest and most familiar, an external expression of a character, which leads not to a fully rounded performance, but only to „acting“ its outer shell, its characteristics, and to „acting“ the character itself. Stanislavski ... considered this harmful. It prevented the development of a living person, or even killed it.

Despite Stanislavski's lifelong rejection of stage behaviour unmotivated from within, in *Building A Character*, Tortsov recalls an incident in which he witnessed Salvini, as Othello, “[take] the entire audience of the Bolshoi opera house into the hollow of his hand ... with a single gesture” (1986: 81), elaborating as follows: “[W]ithout looking at the public, he stretched out his hand, grasped hold of us ... He clenched his fist – and we felt the breath of doom, he opened his hand – and it was bliss. We were in his power and we would remain there to the end of the play.”

Stanislavski clearly did not understand how the famed Italian tragedian achieved this effect, and this led to a shortcoming in the „system“, namely actors simply enjoying their skills as entertainers and performers. This meant he rejected theatrical conventions that Meyerhold and Vakhtangov were more finely attuned to and considered essential. In this respect Chekhov's artistic ideology stemmed from Vakhtangov's, as he kept “a record of everything that he gave to those around him in his amazing thoughts and sometimes in whole speeches” during rehearsals, and when unable to attend himself, he urged others to “write down the thoughts uttered by Vakhtangov” (Chekhov 2005: 95). In a diary entry from October 1918 Vakhtangov (*in* Vedrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 122-123, his insert) noted the following with regard to physical expression on stage:

Nature has plasticity in everything: [...] The actor needs to consciously *train* himself ... in the ability to physically (through the external form) transform himself into the person he is depicting, in his ability to distribute his energy purposefully among his muscles, in his ability to mould himself into anything at all, in gestures, in voice, in the music of speech, in the logic of feelings.

Considering that “Chekhov formulated a general system of acting, including many very particular principles” while in Russia, his work abroad was merely an attempt to further

develop these ideas (Kirillov in Chekhov 2005: 210). In this respect there is a danger in considering his approach to be holistic, as Petit (2010: 2) points out: “[His] methods are actually limited in scope,” as the “purpose of the technique is to inspire, to find a creative state that is both pleasing to be in, and also full of the power of expressing oneself.” Carnovsky (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 618), who was *au fait* with both the „system“ and Chekhov’s method, described their relationship as follows:

Chekhov set out to simplify the vast implications of his Master’s artistic struggles. The basic discoveries having already been made, he took them into his body, so to speak, filtered them through his own powerful individuality and imagination, and gave them an even more elementary character. [...] Where Stanislavski spoke of “Relaxation of Muscles,” Chekhov did not hesitate to call it “Feeling of Ease.” Where Stanislavski broke off his brilliant observations on Action and Objective, Chekhov combined them with Character in his marvellous intuition of the Psychological Gesture. Most of all, he understood the harmony of “Body and Psychology,” as he put it. “Listen to your bodies,” he would say, “and they will interpret the movement of your *inner* impulses.

Chekhov’s contribution to the „system“’s further development should thus always be considered in conjunction with Stanislavski’s essential ideology, which Vakhtangov also interpreted in his own distinct manner. His most significant contribution remains his work on gesture, as Kirillov (*in* Chekhov 2005: 227, his quote) explains below:

Gesture is one of the main, central and universal notions of Chekhov’s theatre system: for Chekhov, gesture is the common denominator on which various aspects of acting such as speech, movement, psychology, etc. can be integrated and unified into the „whole picture“. The ... Psychological Gesture is one of the most central, both in Chekhov’s acting method and in the written explanations of his theatre system.

In many respects Chekhov’s approach is unsuited to trainee actors engaged in self-discovery as its emphasis on „what“ over „how“ can lead to a premature reliance on external expression without substance to enliven the form. Neither is it particularly suited to „work on a role“ as its dependence on inspiration rather than developing a score of

actions places great demands on an actor's psyche, even if this state is merely the product of a heightened imagination. This may be why the maiden production of his Devonshire and Ridgefield students, namely Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, staged on Broadway in October 1939, was panned. In this respect the *New York Times* reviewer Brooks Atkinson (cited in Marowitz 2004: 178) slated it for "[conveying] none of the spontaneity of a work of art," accusing Chekhov of destroying his actors' spirits in a similar manner in which "despotic dictatorship has done toward destroying the spirit of human beings in Russia." It is thus ironic that Chekhov, renowned for his spontaneity, was unable to inspire this same freedom of expression in his students, despite having worked with them for three years. Although they had a modicum of success during subsequent tours to provincial backwaters in the USA, staging revived productions from Chekhov's past, the fact remains that his technique was a personal interpretation of the „system“ so commingled with the philosophies of others, that it eventually became near impossible to convey. To his credit, he had already realised this in 1934, as his account below suggests (Chekhov 2005: 188):

[T]he philosophical system that had started to take shape in my mind as a result of all my reading and thinking was so complex that the idea of applying it to theatre art was out of the question. I myself, possibly, could use it for a production or for acting on stage, but how was I going to explain it to other people? Actors, and in particular good actors, shy away from all the discussions, systems and methods that theatre theoreticians are keen to impose on them. I, too, am frightened out of my wits by them; but lo and behold, to use Dostoyevsky's words, „God had pulled a trick on me“ and I myself had created a system that was probably unintelligible without a knowledge of natural science and astronomy!

Following the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, and America's entry into WWII, many of Chekhov's students enlisted, and in 1942 the troupe disbanded, after which he relocated to Los Angeles. Although he did not establish another school he gave informal classes to well-known Hollywood actors, but as Franc Chamberlain (2004: 33) points out: "[It] is too easy to see a list of big names and then make assumptions about the effectiveness of his teaching," one "must be careful, however, not to attribute the success of these actors to their encounters with Chekhov." There is no doubt that his

technique suited experienced, mature actors like Carnovsky who wanted to access all their creative potentialities, and were therefore ready to engage with questions of aesthetics and ethics beyond those relating to craft. This is perhaps Chekhov's true legacy, as the last remaining spokesperson of the theatre of the future that Meyerhold and Vakhtangov envisioned, in which actors, unafraid of form and style, sculpted their performances in space, manipulated time, and existed on several planes of consciousness at once.

3.8 Sonia Moore, and the quest for psychophysical unity

Moore's decision to open an acting studio in 1961, at the age of sixty, was prompted by her belief that "an artistic theatre in America is hopeless without a uniform method of training actors," by which she meant they had to become "skilled in Stanislavski's final technique," the Method of Physical Actions (Moore 1991: 10, 11), or rather, her interpretation of it. Considering that she arrived in the USA in 1940, the delay in opening her studio meant that she missed the opportunity to contribute to the cultural landscape in her adopted country. By the 1950s the Method had become entrenched due to the cinematic performances of Brando, Montgomery Clift and James Dean, underscored by the Beat Generation's outlook which rejected the traditional values she hoped to instil in students based on her belief that "[e]thics impregnate all Stanislavski's teachings and are indivisible from his technology" (Moore 1984: 4). Furthermore, by the time she wanted to bring the gospel of Stanislavsky to America, the Actors Studio, NPSofT and other studios of former Group Theatre members were deemed the premier places to train. Yet despite her failure to disseminate the original „system“ to counter the popular appeal of its moody offspring, her novel interpretation of its psychophysical interrelationship is worth considering.

Moore's claim to being an authority on the „system“ rests on the fact that she "won a highly competitive entrance examination to the Third Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, which was guided and directed by Stanislavski's most celebrated disciple, the brilliant Eugene B. Vakhtangov," as she stated in her first book, *The Stanislavski Method*, and reiterated in her second, *Training an Actor*.⁴³ Yet bearing in mind that both Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya worked with Vakhtangov for a decade before they founded the Lab, her suggestion of having an exclusive insight is somewhat irrelevant. Furthermore, Vakhtangov's ill health in the 1920s, when she trained, meant that older students worked with newcomers, and it is questionable how much personal exposure she had to his working methods, or Stanislavski's for that matter, who was busy working on *The Government Inspector* at that time, before the MAT embarked on its USA tour. It is

⁴³ The books were first published in 1960 and 1968, but I have consulted their revised editions entitled *The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training of an Actor* (1984) and *Stanislavski Revealed: The Actor's Guide to Spontaneity on Stage* respectively (1991). In this respect the above quotations also appear in the revised editions, namely (1984: 5) and (1991: 9).

therefore unlikely that Moore's knowledge of the „system“ stems from first-hand contacts with them, and may explain the textbook quality of her application of it, especially as conveyed in the second book, based on transcripts of tape-recordings made during classes at her studio. A further factor that may have contributed to her formulaic approach is that from “[her] early years she was interested in directing” (Moore 1984: 5), suggesting that her somewhat detached attitude during interactions with students is perhaps due to limited acting experience. That said, she held firm convictions regarding the „system“'s application during „work on a role“ which are worth examining.

Because Moore's emphasis was that of a director rather than a foundational teacher, a „work on oneself“ process did not feature in her training, and text-based work began almost immediately. Although a case can be made for integrating these two stages by using rehearsals as a vehicle to convey the elements pertaining to both, there are valid reasons why student actors should first develop their potential before starting „work on a role“. Vakhtangov certainly considered this essential, as Birman (*in* Vedrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 190-191, *her italics*) confirms: “*Turandot* was performed *for* its audience, but the audience would not have heard, seen, or felt anything if Vakhtangov had not loved Stanislavsky so passionately in his youth, nor believed in his system, nor understood the meaning of *work on oneself* which precedes *work on the role*.” Zakhava's subtle critique of the shortcomings of the Third Studio's recruits in terms of the sophisticated acting style the production required echoed Birman's observation, as he elaborates below (*in* Vedrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 252, his insert):

Although *Turandot* was a splendid school for mastering acting technique (diction, movement, rhythm and so forth), there was more than external technique to be learned. It would have been totally impossible to have performed *Turandot* as Vakhtangov wanted and demanded without a definite inner state of mind and feeling, without true emotion. The external technique required for the play corresponded to the inner technique. That is why it is so hard to bring new actors into this play.

Although Moore (1984: 5) alludes to having been part of the production, stating that “[w]hen our Studio played *Turandot* in the Moscow Art Theatre itself, Stanislavski came backstage for the express purpose of encouraging the young actors” it does not

necessarily mean that she reaped any great benefit, as Zakhava (*in* Vedrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 252) pointed out the juniors “were still too young and inexperienced to fully carry out their teacher’s creative ideas,” that led to “theatrical irony, merry jokes, and entertaining “play acting”,” which is no doubt why Vakhtangov described *Turandot* as “fizzy water” (Bromley *in* Vedrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 205). Moore therefore joined the MAT’s nursery school at a time when those who would usually have conveyed the „system“ to new recruits were otherwise engaged, and it is perhaps understandable that her approach was one-sided, focussed on „work on the role“.

Despite her apparent unfamiliarity with the „work on oneself“ process, Moore’s claim (1984: 6) of having “closely analyzed [Stanislavski’s] teachings” is supported by her theoretical understanding of the „system“. In this respect she also attended universities in Kiev and Moscow, and had degrees from conservatories in Rome,⁴⁴ suggesting the career of a theatre scholar rather than a practitioner. Her Russian heritage meant she had access to Stanislavski’s original writings however, giving her a distinct advantage over her American peers, yet her timing in publishing *The Stanislavski Method* was unfortunate as *Creating A Role* appeared the following year and marked a clear shift in Stanislavski’s emphasis from a psychological to a psychophysical acting approach. Although pre-empting this in her book, and even using the term Method of Physical Actions,⁴⁵ Moore’s interpretation is wholly different to Stanislavski’s. In this respect the logical progression from determining tasks aligned to the play’s super-objective forming a character’s line of action, which were constantly refined to form the actor’s performance score, so that when this action sequence was psychophysically executed it liberated their unconscious, is a concept apparently lost on Moore (1991: 28) who described its functioning as follows:

This is the basis of the Method of Physical Actions: that we can use our muscles to reach feelings rather than rely on feelings to stimulate our muscles. In particular, there are muscles in the torso, around the spine, attached to mental processes that, when reached will bring you into the correct psychological state in your character’s situation.

⁴⁴ Mentioned in the author profile in the second revised edition of *The Stanislavski System* (1984).

⁴⁵ She may have encountered the term in Toporkov’s *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, despite not referring to it, although she does state the following (Moore 1991: 8): “Late in his life, Stanislavski, in poor health, assembled a group of younger actors and asked them to stage *Tartuffe* to experiment with the Method of Physical Actions. He died during rehearsals, and so never saw his final technique in production.”

Although her premise that there is an interplay between the body-brain organism and its mental processes is essentially correct, her suggestion that specific muscles can be consciously activated to induce a particular psychological reaction, which constitutes the theoretical premise of her approach, is questionable. Yet throughout her classes with a group of students⁴⁶ documented in the second book, she insists that they follow this procedure, as the extracts below confirm (Moore 1991: 17, 39, 47, 48, 55, 75, 105, 135):

You cannot feel at will, but if you locate the muscle attached to that feeling, you will stir the feeling. [...] Find muscles to stir the mental processes and gestures to project them. [...] Concentrate on the muscles around your spine; they must stir images and thoughts. [...] Only when you move the right muscles will your intonations be right ... [...] I want you to move the right muscles of your torso to stir the right inner processes ... [...] Please, work, make an effort to stir what should be in your mind with the muscles of your torso. [...] On stage you must learn to find the muscles attached to the inner experiences in order to stir and convey the turmoil inside you. When you find such a muscle and move it, it triggers the emotion you need and you achieve psychophysical involvement. [...] You must change your objectives, your actions and your images; you must find and move other muscles.

Moore's interpretation of the Method of Physical Actions stemmed from a conjecture that "Stanislavski studied the work of the neurophysiologist I. M. Sechenov," and was *au fait* with Pavlov's theories, yet her claim that science had confirmed "every nuance of emotion is connected with a particular physical action," and using this premise to endorse his "ultimate technique," as she termed it (1984: 17, 18, 19), is a questionable ideological basis for a new approach to acting, which hers is. In this respect she may have employed the „system's“ terminology, pointing out (1984: 8) that Stanislavski had defined it as "The Elementary Grammar of Dramatic Art," and theoretically understood its elements, but her actual praxis reveals a disconnect, which is a perhaps an indication that her knowledge was predominantly acquired through reading. If she had written a book on directing instead of actor training she may well have found her niche, as she was clearly

⁴⁶ Although Moore's students, seven of each gender, are apparently composites with fictitious names, they nonetheless have distinct character traits. Although similar to Tortsov's ten pupils, their names do not reflect their personalities however.

familiar with both Meyerhold and Nemirovich-Danchenko's ideas in this regard, stating (1991: 161): "Stanislavski did not formulate the rules for directing." Instead however, she attempted to integrate the psychotechnique with her notion of the Method of Physical Actions from a director's perspective, which led to an approach riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies that left many of her students bewildered and unable to deliver what she demanded of them. This was no doubt also because they had not undergone any „work on oneself“ training and lacked the ability to enter a state of „I am being“, which meant that they did not know how to use themselves objectively, and she constantly had to instruct them what to do. Her exhortations below, which occurred during their tenth class, reveals this shortcoming (Moore 1991: 149, 152, her italics):

You cannot depend only on me ... You must learn to work independently. [...] We talked about the play; you decided on the name for the scene; you wrote biographies; you said you knew the main objectives of your characters; you said that you searched for your actions. But where is all this? It seems to me that the analysis you did, the study of the characters, the biography, and the rest, is only academic work for you. [...] Unless you *assimilate* the technique, you don't really understand it.

A more significant problem with the training, which also compromised her directorial effectiveness considering that her classes were mainly based on scene studies, was her constant vacillation between adopting an experiential or presentational approach. This was perhaps due to her high esteem for Meyerhold, whose directorial theories provided a conceptual model for her own, as her following assertions suggest (Moore 1991: 157):

Meyerhold demanded that the actor follow the director's score; a slight deviation from this precisely calculated score, he believed, leads to a violation of the composition as a whole. [...] Unfortunately the freedom given to actors often verges on dilettantism and leads to chaos. The director must surmount this chaos through artistic discipline, determined by his understanding of the objective and by his degree of aesthetic sensitivity. [...] As the director you will organise the creative process and define the relationships among the actors.

Clearly, there was little room for actors to contribute as their function was to serve the director, who had to “excite his actors with his ideas” (Moore 1991: 159). This autocratic attitude also underscored her pedagogic approach, and extended to students conforming to her moral values, as her next statements reveal (1991: 54): “Please stop all improvisations that have a definite sexual quality. I shall not tolerate this kind of distortion which has taken place in the name of Stanislavski. [...] Sex is not taught or exploited at this studio. It will not teach you to become actors.” In positioning herself as a watchdog protecting the „system“s ethical standards, she deprived students of the freedom to react to impulses and becoming sensitised to their intuitions and instincts.

Stanislavski’s „precious creation“, whose function was to provide actors with creative autonomy and expressive freedom therefore had its life squeezed out, and it is no wonder that her students struggled to assimilate it, as the hybrid she taught favoured controlled expression derived from an actor’s intellectual interpretation of a text. Moore (1991: 125-126) was aware of the dichotomy however, as her following statements reveal: “Work on the subtext begins with memorizing lines as soon as possible. Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko argued about this. Today Russian theatre scholars agree with Nemirovich-Danchenko: lines must be learned by the actor from the very beginning. I agree with them.” This was the exact opposite of Stanislavski’s approach during the *Tartuffe* rehearsals, as Toporkov (2001: 114) points out: “He absolutely forbade us to learn the lines. That was an absolute condition of our work and if, suddenly, one of us began to speak Molière’s words he immediately stopped the rehearsal. He considered it a kind of impotence in an actor.”

On the basis of this and many other incongruities such as Moore (1991: 21, 128) insisting her students use nouns to describe events instead of verbs, arguably the „system“s most fundamental principle to spur actors to action by using „doing words“ rather than conceptual labels, it is difficult to view her work as a continuation of Stanislavski’s or Vakhtangov’s. Her claim of having “searched, studied, and experimented in an effort to arrive at the final and definitive interpretation of the system and to complete our understanding of Stanislavski’s legacy to the theatre” (Moore 1991: 9), is therefore quite contentious. In fact, the very title of her second book (*see note 43*) is misleading, as her version of the „system“ did not encourage spontaneity, rather turned actors into a director’s servile subjects.

Despite the various flaws in Moore's thinking one is occasionally struck by her insights of the still little-known developments during Stanislavski's final years, such as Active Analysis (Moore 1984: 21; 1991: 151), a technique she might well have introduced to Western practitioners. In this respect her artistic and pedagogic career was stricken by poor timing and lost opportunities, with the result that her aspiration to be remembered as a foremost champion of Stanislavski's unadulterated legacy in the West will most likely not be borne out, and any contributions she may have made to the „system“'s ongoing evolution will ultimately prove to be of little significance.

3.9 Jerzy Grotowski, and the conjunction of opposites

According to Ferdinando Taviani (*in* Allain 2009a: 142) Grotowski's fame as "a revolutionary and undisputed genius in contemporary theatre" is based on four productions, namely: "*The Tragical History of Dr Faustus* (1963) (hereafter *Faustus*), *Akropolis* (five versions between 1962 and 1967), *The Constant Prince* (1965) and *Apocalypsis cum figuris* (three versions between 1969 and 1973)."⁴⁷ In 1968, with the help of Barba, Brook and Schechner, key collaborators in terms of disseminating his ideas on theatre reform in the West, Grotowski published *Towards A Poor Theatre*, a book comprised of transcripts of interviews conducted with him, talks he gave, and articles he wrote during this „Theatre of Productions“ (1959-1969) period, when his ambition was "to play for others the same role in [the] profession as Stanislavski did for [him]," as he asserted in 1969 (*in* Salata 2008: 32). In this respect he and Ludwik Flaszen (2010: 215), with whom he co-founded the Laboratory Theatre in 1959,⁴⁸ had "[plotted] a conspiracy" aimed at "[reforming] the theatre in Poland and around the world." In a mere decade they achieved this by introducing the notion of a sacred, „poor“ theatre denuded of the fripperies of „rich“ commercial theatres, in which actors as craftsmen served as secular priests. In *The Empty Space*, Brook (1990: 66-67) outlined Grotowski's artistic vision as follows:

The theatre, he believes, cannot be an end in itself; like dancing or music in certain dervish orders, the theatre is a vehicle, a means of self-study, self-exploration, a possibility of salvation. The actor has himself as his field of work. [...] In Grotowski's terminology, the actor allows a role to „penetrate“ him; at first he is all obstacle to it, but by constant work he acquires technical

⁴⁷ Taviani, a theatre historian and literary adviser of Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret, suggests (*in* Allain 2009a: 122) that *A Study on Hamlet* (1964) should also be included in this group. This workshoped offering in which Zygmunt Molik (1930-2010) portrayed Hamlet, as "a bookish type, rattling off smart phrases, a gesticulating intellectual, a faint-hearted and cunning casuist, a strident and jumped-up Jew" only ran for twenty performances, with most critics at the time agreeing "[it] was the least successful of Grotowski's productions" (Kumiega 1987: 72, 74).

⁴⁸ The authorities in Opole, a small market town in Poland, approached Flaszen in the spring of 1959 to "take over the directorship of the small Theatre of Thirteen Rows with the aim of revitalizing it," but he "felt that the practical role of directorship was not within his capabilities" and offered the position to Grotowski who accepted (Kumiega 1987: 7). The „Firm“, as they named their company, became The Laboratory Theatre of Thirteen Rows in March 1962, and in January 1965, after they relocated to the university town of Wrocław, they added „the Institute for Research into the Actor's Methods“ to the name. The term „Thirteen Rows“ was dropped in 1967, and in 1970 the Firm became „the Institute of the Actor – the Laboratory Theatre“ (Kolankiewicz *in* Allain 2009a: 57).

mastery over his physical and psychic means by which he can allow the barriers to drop. „Auto-penetration“ by the role is related to exposure: the actor does not hesitate to show himself exactly as he is, for he realises that the secret of the role demands his opening himself up, disclosing his own secrets. So that the act of performance is an act of sacrifice, sacrificing what most men prefer to hide – this sacrifice is his gift to the spectator. Here there is a similar relation between actor and audience to the one between priest and worshipper.

These aims reveal a significant departure from the traditional notion of actors as role-players creating characters for public portrayal, and the „holy“ actor who employs “a technique of psychic penetration” to find his essential self, and whose performance is “a serious and solemn act of revelation,” as Grotowski (1991: 37: 178) described it in *Towards A Poor Theatre*. This technique is not explained in the book however, which details the physical and vocal exercises the troupe developed between 1959-1962, and 1966 on. Yet in an interview with Schechner in December 1967, Grotowski hinted at how it functioned, stating that Zbigniew Cynkutis as Faustus had “mobilised the associations of his life,” so that while he made “Faustus’s confession with the text, he accomplished his own very drastic but disciplined confession” that lead to “something real” and “absolutely tangible” taking place, which Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 50) described as “waves of movement in the room.” In this respect Molik, who played a boorish simpleton in the production, said there were nights “he could smell brimstone in the air,” and Flaszen (2010: 286) once saw “a violet-blue-grey glow from which the human figures and objects seemed to emanate” in the room. He considered this production “the peak of Grotowski’s art of directing,” because the actors’ confessions “were protected by mythical, archetypal associations and the compositional precision of the body and voice’s score of action” (Flaszen 2010: 285).

Two performance approaches thus evolved, one focussed on physical discipline and precision, an objective technique derived from “Stanislavski’s work on “physical actions”” (Grotowski 1991: 16), and another, highly subjective process that relied on an actor’s ability to be totally sincere. This extreme application of the „work on oneself“ process eclipsed „work on the role“, as materials gained from an actor’s psychic

penetration were incorporated into the performance score, even if adjustments had to be made to the text, as Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 53-54) explains below:

The actor must create within the context of his own life and being. [...] One structures the montage so that this confrontation can take place. We eliminate those parts of the text which have no importance for us [...] The acting score is the element of contact. To take and to give the reactions and impulses of contact. If you fix these, then you will have fixed all the contexts of your associations. Without a fixed score a work of mature art cannot exist. That's why a search for discipline and structure is as inevitable as a search for spontaneity.

This approach equated with “[the] **conjunction of opposites** which gives birth to the total act,” as Grotowski (1991: 89, 92-93, his emphasis) believed that when an actor “unveils himself, opens and gives himself in an extreme, solemn gesture ... the theatre is **total** ... [enabling] us to respond totally, that is, begin to exist.” In his view this was “the very crux of the actor’s art,” when “[he] does whatever he does with his entire being,” and in this respect “[he] should not use his organism to illustrate a “movement of the soul”, but should accomplish this movement with his organism” (Grotowski 1991: 91). This total act occurred when “what is elementary feeds what is constructed and vice versa, to become the real source of a kind of acting that glows” (Grotowski 1991: 89). He considered this to be “the true lesson of the sacred theatre,” namely “that spontaneity and discipline far from weakening each other, mutually reinforce themselves,” a lesson he believed neither Brecht nor Stanislavski understood (Grotowski 1991: 89). His assertion is questionable however, as the Method of Physical Actions was specifically created to grant actors total freedom of expression, able to instantly react to impulses emanating from the unconscious realm during performance, as Stanislavski (1975: 240-241, his italics) clarifies below:

As you are *drawn* to physical actions you are *drawn away from* the life of your subconscious. In that way you render it free to act and induce it to work creatively. [...] It is not within the range of human consciousness to carry out this occult work, and so what is beyond our powers is done in our stead by nature itself. And what induces nature to do this work? My method of creating the life of the physical being of a part. *My method draws into action*

by normal and natural means the subtlest creative forces of nature which are not subject to calculation.

Stanislavski's use of the term „occult“ is specific, as is his statement (1975: 246-247, his italics) that the psychotechnique helps actors establish “a true *inner creative state while on the stage*,” yet it is a “*lesser working creative state*,” and only when they engage with their “whole being” will they “feel the living spirit,” which “produces a miraculous transformation in the feelings of an actor, a transfiguration or metamorphosis.” Thus, even if Grotowski (1991: 86) did not attribute his „psychic technique“ to Stanislavski, he nonetheless realised an actor “should transform himself before the spectator's eyes using only his inner impulses,” as “the theatre is an act carried out here and now in the actor's organisms, in front of other men;” namely “that theatrical reality is instantaneous.” This “**transformation as it comes to birth**” (Grotowski 1991: 87, his emphasis) is the magic of theatre, an authentic, spontaneous event that is not pre-prepared for public presentation.

During *Faustus* Grotowski therefore witnessed “authentic spontaneity” for the first time, in that Faust would, for example, tell the audience he was sitting in a chair listening to a song when he first met the devil, and as he demonstrated this and the song started to play, “in front of the spectators someone comes in” (Grotowski in Schechner and Wolford 2001: 50). This „someone“ was not another actor. According to Flaszen (2010: 286) “the performance was an exorcism,” and “[t]he presence of powers, of unleashed energies was so enormous such as [he] – an experienced spectator, a professional theatre-goer – had never before met in [his] life.” The English producer Michael Kustow saw the production in 1963 and afterwards published an article in *Encore* describing *Faustus* as being “in a state of ecstasy, literally possessed,” in an atmosphere of “strange vocalisations,” namely Christian hymns “accompanied by pagan practices and prayers [which] sound like threats” (cited in Osiński 1986: 71). The invocation of whatever manifested itself was thus a result of careful orchestration by Grotowski, who had a fascination with the play's theme, as Flaszen (2010: 285-286) elaborates below:

Faust's motive, a scholar and a magus, with his metaphysical audacity and the insatiability of a seeker of the Absolute, was present throughout the whole theatrical period of Grotowski's work. [...] He understood – after Thomas Mann – that behind a vocation in art there is something that may

conventionally be called „demonism“. That a kind of risky game with the Powers was taking place here, that one has to be a master to control them: to make them servants of art which gives some order – yet with chaos throbbing from below. And how to avoid the destiny of the wizard’s apprentice?

During his work on *Faustus* Grotowski also seemed possessed. According to Flaszen (2010: 285) “he sometimes looked like a visionary, fascinated and frightened at his own visions,” and when he told him that he looked awful, Grotowski confessed “he hadn’t slept all night and he’d had hallucinations,” adding “it seemed to him like the breakthrough night in the life of Adrian Leverkühn,” the central character in Mann’s novel. *Faustus*, which premiered in April 1963 certainly proved “the turning point in international terms of the Laboratory Theatre’s fortunes” (Kumiega 1987: 40). Barba, Grotowski’s assistant for two years, attended the Tenth Congress of the International Theatre Institute in Warsaw in June, while the Laboratory Theatre was on tour in Łódź, and took a carload of delegates to see a performance of *Faustus*. The next day a coachload went to see it, and as “a direct result of these events the Laboratory Theatre was invited to perform in Belgium, Holland and at the Theatre of Nations Festival in 1964 and 1965 in Paris” (Kumiega 1987: 42). Although the visits did not materialise, as “the Polish authorities were not convinced at that stage of the relevance and value of the Laboratory Theatre in international cultural terms and sent other, more official theatres instead” (Kumiega 1987: 42), the Firm’s status as one of the most innovative avant-garde Western theatre ensembles was secured, and „Boss“, as the actors addressed Grotowski, began to work on what would become his *pièce de résistance*, *The Constant Prince*.

Although Molik had been the troupe’s leading actor until *Faustus*, Grotowski selected Ryszard Cieślak (1937-1990), who joined the Firm in 1961 “[with] a puppet maker’s diploma in his pocket, because he had been assessed as physically inadequate to be a good actor” (Taviani in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 199), to play the lead in Juliusz Sowacki’s adaptation of Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *The Constant Prince*. Cieślak, who became an expert at *exercices corporals*, an area of physical training “primarily concerned [with] the crucial relationship of actors to their bodies” (Kumiega 1987: 121), also possessed a primal intensity that was evident in one of the most powerful moments in *Faustus* when his character, Benvolio, “goes mad, begins to run around the auditorium, and tears apart the folding tables ... [and for] a moment it seems the world is

falling apart” (Kustrow *in* Osiński 1986: 71). This entailed him dismantling tables “all the while thinking he is dismembering Faustus,” who subsequently “turns Benvolio into a little child” (Barba *in* Grotowski 1991: 76). This ability to instantly transition from one embodiment to another was Cieślak’s outstanding talent. Stephen Wangh, an undergraduate in NYU’s Theatre Program in 1967, when Grotowski and Cieślak conducted a four-week seminar with acting and directing students, described the latter’s demonstration as follows in his book *An Acrobat of the Heart* (2000: xix):

With incredible ease and precise physical control, he performed a series of headstands, rolls, and backbends, each flowing into the next, each completely centred and yet somehow off-balance and dynamic. His body seemed to be made of liquid muscle, enormously powerful, yet utterly soft and supple. He moved with the strength and precision of an accomplished gymnast, yet there was something in his face, in his searching eyes, that removed his work entirely from the world of gymnastics. It was as if the enormous muscular energy we witnessed was merely the exterior emanation of an even more intense inner life.

Thomas Richards, Grotowski’s „essential collaborator“ during his „Art as Vehicle“ (1986-1999) stage, was a final year undergraduate at Yale when Cieślak gave a two-week workshop in the Theatre Studies Department in 1984. In his book *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*, Richards (2003: 12, 13) recalls an incident in which Cieślak transformed himself into a crying child before their eyes, and only years later realised he “[had] found the *exact physicality* of the child, its alive physical process which supported his child-like scream,” because “with his body he remembered the child’s physical actions.” Bearing in mind this was Cieślak after *The Constant Prince*, which entailed private work with Grotowski from early-1963 until the rest of the cast joined them in June 1964, it is worth noting Barba’s description of him (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 199) both before and after this process:

When I left Grotowski’s theatre, Ryszard Cieslak was already a good actor, but he wanted to be an intellectual. It was as though a great brain was getting tangled up with that body that was so full of life, and flattening it out somehow, reducing it to two dimensions. I saw him again two years later, when he came to Oslo with *The Constant Prince*. Right from the start, it was

as though everything I remembered, everything I had based my ideas on, was disappearing beneath my feet. I saw another being, I saw a man who had discovered his own completeness, his own destiny, his own vulnerability.

The Constant Prince, which premiered in April 1965, was “seen by many as the summit of Grotowski’s acting method, the synthesis of all that [he] had attempted to achieve in his years of research,” and resulted in Cieślak becoming “prominent as the principal exponent of the Laboratory Theatre approach to acting” (Kumiega 1987: 74). The question is how this came about? During his 1967 interview Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 52) stated that the production was an attempt to realise “something impossible: a psycho-physical peak like ecstasy but at the same time reached and held consciously.” In this respect he believed “that if Cieślak treated his profession as the Prince treated his fate, the result would be a similar kind of fullness,” which he articulated as follows (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 52, 54):

I do not believe that one can really create if one is not condemned to create. It must be for us the only thing possible in life, the essential task. But one cannot accomplish one’s life task and be in disaccord with it. If, at certain moments, we do things that are in complete disaccord with our artistic task, something creative will be destroyed.

Grotowski therefore guided Cieślak to embrace his artistry, to respect the art in him, as Stanislavski (1980: 298) termed it, and to be willing to sacrifice himself for it. This was not merely „work on oneself“ to strengthen the actor’s concentration, imagination and emotional responsiveness, but a far more fundamental psychophysical process, which Grotowski (1991: 203) explained as follows:

When the actor begins to work through contact, when he begins to live in relation to someone – not his stage partner but the partner of his own biography – when he begins to penetrate through a study of his body’s impulses, the relationship of this contact, this process of exchange, there is always a rebirth in the actor. Afterwards he begins to use other actors as screens for his life’s partner, he begins to project things on to the characters in the play. And this is his second rebirth. Finally the actor discovers what I call the “secure partner”, this special being in front of whom he does

everything ... [and] at the moment when the actor discovers his “secure partner” the third and strongest rebirth occurs, a visible change in the actor’s behaviour. [...] It gives the actor his greatest range of possibilities. One can think of it as ethical, but it is truly technical – despite the fact that it is also mysterious.

This process required great courage, which Taviani (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 198) considered to be Cieślak’s most defining attribute, stating: “He was not so much an actor with great talent as an actor with great courage.” In a text Grotowski wrote entitled „Statement of Principles“, included in *Towards A Poor Theatre*, he explained the imperative of this quality in an actor (1991: 213, his emphasis):

Art cannot be bound by the laws of common morality or any catechism. The actor, at least in part, is creator, model and creation rolled into one. He must have courage, but not merely the courage to exhibit himself – a passive courage, we might say: the courage of the defenceless, the courage to reveal himself. Neither that which touches the interior sphere, nor the profound stripping bare of the self should be regarded as evil so long as in the process of preparation or in the completed work they produce an act of creation. If they do not come easily and if they are not signs of outburst but of mastership, then they are creative: they reveal and purify us **while we transcend ourselves**. Indeed, they improve us then.

Grotowski’s approach thus incorporated a fundamental tenet of the „system“, namely the imperative of „actor’s faith“, synonymous with courage, which Stanislavski failed to fully define in *An Actor Prepares*, despite devoting its longest chapter to „Faith and a Sense of Truth“. To fully understand what he meant by this term it is worth referring to notes Concordia Antarova,⁴⁹ a Bolshoi Opera student, kept during lectures he gave there between 1918 and 1920, when he stated that actor training began with learning how to concentrate, which he called “the inner action of thought,” then developing “*mental alertness*,” namely “[the] power of your attention,” followed by “*courage* in your

⁴⁹ In his article entitled „Fundamentals of the Stanislavsky System and Yoga Philosophy and Practice Pt. 1“, which appeared in *Stanislavski Studies* (Vol. 1, February, 2012), Sergei Tcherkasski, Professor of Acting and Directing and Head of the Acting Studio of the St Petersburg State Academy of Theatre Arts, states that Antarova first published her notes in Russia in 1952. David Magarshack had already published an English translation of her notes in his book *Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage* in 1950 however, merely referring to their author as “one of the actors” (1950: 78).

creative work” (Magarshack 1950: 166, 177, 184, his italics). In Stanislavski’s definition of this term, which echoes Grotowski’s, a good actor “takes as his starting point the universal human passions that lie hidden in his own heart and brings them into play,” and even when playing someone “[in] pursuit of evil” he must “submerge [his] consciousness in the currents of those agonies and torments that pass through [him] into the audience;” in fact, developing this ability was the principal aim of the „system“, for reasons Stanislavski (*in* Magarshack 1950: 185, 187) explains below:

[You] will no longer have to deal with the accidental circumstances contained in your part, or with stock situations of „how to play a [character]“, but with the most essential part of the whole matter, namely with those passions which you have discovered in your heart and which, as the palpable image of your thought, you put into the words given you by the playwright. [...] In other words, [the actor] first concentrates on the nature of the passions and only then tries to adapt them to the given circumstances of his part. And it is for that purpose and for that purpose only that my system exists. It is based solely on that, its aim being to teach the actor to fuse physical and psychical action so as to achieve the fullest possible harmony between them.

Although Stanislavski made these statements fifteen years before he formulated the Method of Physical Actions, he always insisted (*in* Toporkov 2001: 158): “They are psychophysical actions, but we call them physical to avoid unnecessary discussion, because physical actions are real, they can be set.” In this respect physical actions equated with a painter’s sketch before “[he] can move on to the more subtle complex psychological elements in his picture,” which for an actor meant evoking the state of „I am being“, the key to „the art of experiencing,“ a process Stanislavski (*in* Toporkov 2001: 114, 115) described as follows: “The truth of physical actions will lead you to belief and then to the “I am being” and finally to the flood of creative action.” This was the psychophysical preparation required to perform, when “*the inner and outer feelings of the actor flow in accordance with the laws fixed for them*” and their “*spiritual wellsprings open wide*” (Stanislavski 1975: 237, his italics). Unless actors believed in what they were doing however, they would “annihilate all the intangible *subtleties* of the subconscious experience,” needed “to convey on the stage the living, human, spiritual essence of the character” (Stanislavski 1975: 237, his italics). In this respect it is perhaps

worth mentioning that when Stanislavski (*in* Magarshack 1950: 188) explained the imperative of fearlessness to the Bolshoi students, he used the example of portraying the central figure in Goethe's semi-autobiographical novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, stating: "Your – Werther's – conflict with life, his conflict with God, his fight against various obstacles, all this has to be built on the foundation of the first problem you have to solve: a man's courage."

According to Tcherkasski (2012: 14) Stanislavski was influenced by hatha yoga.⁵⁰ In this respect concentration, mental awareness, courage and "*creative repose*", namely "a state of mind in which all personal perceptions of the passing moment have disappeared and in which life – the whole life – is concentrated, clearly, forcefully and indefinitely, on the circumstances given in your play" (Magarshack 1950: 191, *his italics*), parallel its four steps. There is certainly evidence that yogic principles were incorporated in the „system“, borne out by Stanislavski's statements (*in* Magarshack 1950: 93, 101) that "the foundation of the whole of a man's life, the rhythm given to him by nature, namely respiration, is also the foundation of the whole of our art," which relates to Prana,⁵¹ and that actors must develop "[an] introspective outlook on things and affairs and the search within himself for the powers, causes and effects of his creative work," inferring meditation. Grotowski, who claimed (*in* Salata 2008: 32) to have "founded the entire base of [his] theatrical knowledge on the principles of Stanislavski," would no doubt have been privy to this, and considered it a realm for further exploration. In this respect there are striking similarities between yogic practices and the technique he evolved between 1962 and 1965, the basis of the „total act“. Franco Ruffini, in his article entitled

⁵⁰ There are eight steps in yoga starting with *Yama*, which focuses on behavioural regulation and moral self-restraint, and ending with *Samadhi*, when adepts reach a "pacified superconscious condition of the blissful understanding of one's true nature, [namely] nirvana" (Tcherkasski 2012: 13). The lower four steps, *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Asana* and *Pranayama*, are collectively termed hatha yoga, and the upper four, *Pratyahara*, *Dharana*, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi* equate with raja yoga. Tcherkasski (14, 18) suggests there is a correspondence between the „system's" elements pertaining to „work on oneself" and hatha yoga, and "[it] is from *Raja Yoga* that Stanislavski got the idea of the connection between the creative state and unconsciousness, borrowing the notion of the superconsciousness as the source of inspiration, creative intuition and transcendental knowledge."

⁵¹ The term, related to breath, the life giving force in Hinduism, is used by Stanislavski-Tortsov in the tenth chapter of *An Actor Prepares* entitled „Communion". In his view it was "a kind of vital energy ... which gives life to the body," and its "radiating centre" was the solar plexus, "near the heart" (1984: 198). During the first rehearsal Zon attended at the Opera-Dramatic Studio in 1933, Stanislavski told an actor to „radiate" his intention to another, the basis of communion, telling Zon (1955: 446) that "[he] naively named it „prana" before." Tcherkasski (2012: 11, *his insert*) suggests this reflected "an acute need for passing (outside? For posterity?) from his gala exile in Leontyevsky Lane the most important information about the principles of his work."

„The Empty Room“⁵² (in Allain 2009a: 100), conceptually derived from Barba’s disclosures in his book *Land of Ashes and Diamonds: My Apprenticeship in Poland* (1999), which specifically deals with the period 1962 to 1964, suggests that while „technique 1“, as Grotowski referred to it, involved “the craft of the theatre” he described in *Towards A Poor Theatre*, the mysterious „technique 2“ entailed “the path to liberate spiritual energy.” In a letter that Grotowski wrote to Barba (1999:138-139) in December 1964, after he and Cieślak had worked together for six months, he stated the following: “In the psychic technique the process of concretisation has progressed considerably. I believe we are creating a European version of *tantra* or *bhakti*⁵³ which has its roots in the Mediterranean tradition.” In a letter written in April 1965 he states (in Barba 1999: 145) that this marked the start of a new period in the aesthetic of the Firm, and *The Constant Prince* represented “an attempt to do research on the frontier between *tantra* and theatre.” Thus, whereas Stanislavski used hatha yoga techniques, in which he became interested at the start of formulating his „system“,⁵⁴ for „work on oneself“, Grotowski set out to use the far more sophisticated raja yoga techniques in actual performance to induce an active trance, like the higher states of consciousness attained by Sufi (dervish) dancers, by integrating mystical practices from both the Occidental and Oriental cradles with the performing arts; effectively aiming to create a new yoga, as Flaszen (2012: 279, his italics) elaborates below:

[It] was his speciality to operate in rarely frequented intermediate zones, in passages, in the *in-between*, abundant with temptation. Between theatre, and non-theatre. Between the actor’s technique, elaborated and researched in detail, and the Unknown that opens when one goes beyond technique. [...] In the immediate zone between what we consider spiritual, and what we consider carnal – where both modes enter mutual osmosis and flow into one

⁵² The article was originally published in the Italian journal *Teatro e Storia* 20-21 (1998-99), and an abridged English translation of it is included in a book of a similar title edited by Paul Allain (2009).

⁵³ Tantra relates to a style of meditation and ritual that arose in India in the 5th century CE, in which the Sanskrit root of „tan“ is to expand, extend or stretch, and „tra“ refers to an instrument. Bhakti is the love felt by a worshipper for a personal God, and entails an active form of expression by the devotee.

⁵⁴ Tcherkasski (2012: 4) asserts that “Stanislavski might have got acquainted with the ideas of Indian philosophers [and yogic techniques] as early as 1906” due to meeting Sulerzhitsky, “whose knowledge of Oriental spirituality was quite good, partly thanks to his familiarity with the practice of the Dukhobors.” What is documented is that Stanislavski encountered the writings of Yogi Ramacharaka in 1911, a pseudonym of the American author William Atkinson, an influential figure in the spread of the New Thought movement, when he acquired a Russian translation of his book *Hatha Yoga. Yogic Philosophy of the Physical Well-Being of Man* (1909).

another – where the actor’s body becomes spiritual, and his spirit becomes carnal. [...] In the passage between performing arts, and spiritual practices. Let us add: between Grotowski – a man of the theatre, and Grotowski – creator of his own version of yoga, a spiritual master.

In a text entitled „From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle”,⁵⁵ published thirty years after the fact, Grotowski provided more clues about the process which he followed with Cieślak, stating (*in* Richards 2003: 122) that: “Nothing in his work was linked to the martyr that, in the drama of Calderón/Słowacki, is the theme of the role of the Constant Prince.” Instead they constructed “a *carnal prayer*,” based on “[a] concrete memory from his life,” namely “a time of love from his early youth,” a sensual event, yet “very far from any darkness, any suffering,” and thus “immune from every dark connotation,” which provided the stream of impulses and actions onto which “he put the monologues of the Constant Prince” (Grotowski *in* Richards 2003: 122-123, his italics).

The result was a psychically intense performance from a conventional theatre perspective as is evident in a pirate film of the production,⁵⁶ to such an extent that Grotowski elected to impose a barrier between Cieślak and the audience, “[to] put the spectators in a voyeuristic relationship to the production,”⁵⁷ because “it’s too much,” as he told Schechner during their 1967 interview (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 52). Despite this measure many spectators still found Cieślak’s „total act” unsettling, and instead of his “gift of the self” evoking a similar desire for openness (Grotowski 1991: 99), it alienated them. The English theatre reviewer Irving Wardle (cited in Kumiega 1987: 148) stated he found the “extreme human exposure” discouraged identification, and that Cieślak’s suffering as a Christian martyr figure did not provide any insight into the state.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ This text is a transcription of talks Grotowski gave at conferences in Modena, Italy in October 1989, and the University of California, Irvine in May 1990. He allowed Richards to publish an “extensively revised” version in his book *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions* (1995). In the view of theatre scholars like Ruffini (cited by De Marinis *in* Allain 2009a: 162), this book and Richards’ second, *Heart of Practice* (2008), helps to fill the „empty room” in the middle of Grotowski’s carefully constructed „house” that is *Towards A Poor Theatre*, in order to provide some insights into „technique 2”.

⁵⁶ According to Osiński (*in* Allain 2009a: 44), the production was secretly filmed with a static camera in Italy in 1967. When this mute film was aligned with an audio recording made in Scandinavia in 1965, “they matched almost perfectly,” which attests to the precision of the actors’ performance scores (*ibid*).

⁵⁷ Spectators were “physically cut off from the action,” looking down on the square area of the stage over four wooden walls, thus “[assuming] the role almost of clinical observers, although the spectacle they witnessed had all the mental and emotional blood-letting of a bull-fight” (Kumiega 1987: 79).

⁵⁸ The review, entitled „Big Catch from Poland”, appeared in the 24 August 1968 edition of the *Times* (p. 18), following the Laboratory Theatre’s performances at the Edinburgh Festival.

So too the *New York Times* theatre critic Walter Kerr, who, after seeing the repertoire the Laboratory Theatre took to America in 1969,⁵⁹ concluded (cited in Strasberg 1988: 182) “if it was mime, it was not sufficiently good mime, if it was dance, it was not particularly brilliant dance, and if it was acting, it was not good enough acting,” a view that Strasberg concurred with, who “had expected to see a mythic and transcendental experience and expression,” and instead found “the gestures and movements were not expressive of a deep personal commitment, reaching towards a fresh, spontaneous, individual image or language;” in short, “they were theatrically conventional.” Following a detailed analysis of the Firm’s work, Clurman (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 165, his insert) concluded: “It may always remain a theatre for the few (I do not refer to snobs), even a cult. It’s “message” is well-nigh intolerable and its fanaticism foreboding. But its dedication to its vision of life and art is unparalleled in any theatre of our day.”

Julian Beck, the founder of The Living Theatre with his wife Judith Malina, whose work was deemed to be equally subversive at the time, evaluated his Polish counterpart as follows, in his book *the life of the theatre* (1974: ch. 70).⁶⁰

The Polish Theatre Laboratory Company and The Living Theatre spent a night together talking on the roof of a small hotel near the Piazza di Spagna in Rome, July 1967. We discussed our respective methods: how Grotowski’s is authoritarian and separates the individuals, and how ours tries to be communal. [...] He immediately psychoanalyzes, and pins it, in his style. Things are similar and far more complicated. Genet. In order to create mass mentality, the cult of the individual must be destroyed. Mao. The aware individual creates a lively mass, by stimulating a dialogue between the cells. The mass that crushes the individual makes dead flesh.

Beck’s assessment is revealing in terms of „Boss“’s nature and the strategies he employed as the head of the Firm. In this respect, according to Flaszen (2010: 212, 216, 219), “[he]

⁵⁹ They wanted to perform in the USA in 1968 but were refused entry visas. After a public outcry by several prominent figures in the theatre world the State Department cleared their 1969 visit. Instead of performing at a regular theatre however, Grotowski chose to stage *Akropolis*, *The Constant Prince* and *Apocalypsis cum figuris* at the Washington Square Methodist Church in Greenwich Village. The event lasted for two months and they gave forty-eight performances in total (Kumiega 1987: 98). It should be noted that the number of spectators attending each performance rarely exceeded thirty.

⁶⁰ Beck does not use page numbers in the book, and the title is deliberately in lower case.

had the temperament of a natural born politician,” and “[j]ust as he practiced yoga to keep his psyche and body fit, so he exercised his mind in the field of political technique,” so “[the] exceptional intensity of his „will to power“... was his characteristic feature.” In addition Flaszen (2010: 247) pointed out: “Grotowski had a peculiar gift to be focussed on the concrete, a passion for detail – to the point of craziness. Maybe he suffered from a syndrome similar to an obsessive-compulsive disorder.” What he did suffer from was a chronic liver disease which led to him being hospitalised for a year during his teens when “one indelicate doctor had augured that his patient would live only just beyond the age of thirty,” and as a result “he became a watchful, meticulous observer of the body, its attentive listener, and explorer of its mysteries,” so that it became a privileged area for his “exploration in his passion as a seeker of the Absolute” (Flaszen 2010: 267, 268).

Realising that death lurked in his body and “[he] carried his dangerous enemy within,” Grotowski “protected but also tested his organism” to become an expert on human endurance, fantasising about himself “as a specific kind of therapist, a doctor of some mysterious specialism, a medicine man” (Flaszen 2010: 227, 267, 269). Thus, having become “popular as inventor of a so-called method, modelled after Stanislavski,” a reputation that he actively promoted, Grotowski played his self-appointed role extremely well, as Flaszen (2010: 227) elaborates below:

[Grotowski] had not just versatile – and practical! – knowledge about the functioning of the human organism, about the actor’s techniques and their psychology, but much more: in cooperation with the actors he understood them emphatically, which led patients to acts surpassing all possibilities previously known to them. Some actions during Grotowski-therapist’s séances actually resembled medical procedures and examinations: auscultation, percussion, palpitation, touching the organism, massage of certain points of the body. He entered a secret energetic exchange with the patient, transferring his own energy into him ... A healer, a magus, a shaman ... in a Carnaby Street suit.⁶¹

⁶¹ Flaszen is referring to Grotowski’s dress code once he became popular in the West and was invited to work with actors at various institutions, especially after the spring of 1965, when “[he] began to travel more widely in Europe, sometimes accompanied by one or two of his actors, to attend festivals and seminars and to give practical demonstrations of the theory” (Kumiega 1987: 44).

The ambivalent reception of American theatre establishment to the Firm's two-month engagement in 1969 no doubt disappointed Grotowski, who had meticulously set out to "[construct] his fame as a great man and an artist" since founding "his own institution and a place of worship," effectively an alternate church "during the period of metaphysical drought in Europe and Poland" (Flaszen 2010: 218, 227). In the USA he encountered a (youth) culture that had a decisive influence on him, according to Schechner (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 486-487), and may have contributed to his press announcement in February 1970 that the Laboratory Theatre would not create any new productions after *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, as he believed (cited in Kumiega 1987: 99): "We are living in a post-theatrical epoch." This announcement made at the height of his fame was a perhaps a culmination of events that began during work on *The Constant Prince*. In this respect, in an article he wrote in 1965 entitled „Towards A Poor Theatre“;⁶² he hinted at what had transpired during the process of refining his „technique 2“ with Cieślak (1991: 25, his quotes):

I am not simply the director or producer or “spiritual instructor.” [...] There is something incomparably intimate and productive in the work with the actor entrusted to me. He must be attentive and confident and free, for our labour is to explore his possibilities to the utmost. [...] This is not instruction of a pupil but utter opening to another person, in which the phenomenon of “shared or double birth” becomes possible. The actor is reborn – not only as an actor but as a man – and with him, I am reborn.

While Cieślak's rebirth was apparent to all, Grotowski's was less so, busy as he was constructing his *egregor*.⁶³ At a press conference in Paris in 1966 the first sign of his transformation was apparent as he saw himself in the future, begging for a couple of francs from the latest theatrical *wunderkind*, and telling him (cited in Osiński 1986: 97): “I was once famous myself.” In this regard he “was constantly tormented by various

⁶² The article was first published in *Odra* (Wrocław, September/1965); *Kungs Dramatiska Teaterns Program* (Stockholm, 1965); *Scena* (Novi Sad, May/1965); *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* (Paris, 55/1966); and *Tulane Drama Review* (New Orleans, T35, 1967). Given this widespread coverage, it is a manifesto of Grotowski's artistic, and, to a large extent, his personal ideology, after working on *The Constant Prince*.

⁶³ During an interview with Andrzej Bonarski in the mid-1970s, transcribed extracts which were later published in the Polish journal *Kultura* in 1975 (169/19-44), entitled „Conversation with Grotowski“, he used this term to describe “a manufactured creature” functioning as the external “figure-head which receives the awards, the titles, the honours,” and stated (*in* Kumiega 1987: 222) that if “an individual is not identified with the *egregor*, but it exists, then there are considerable possibilities to have means at one's disposal.” A translated version appears in Jennifer Kumiega's *The Theatre of Grotowski* (1987).

anxieties,” in particular “[creative] sterility,” which occurred during work on *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, when he often awoke Flaszen (2010: 240-241) late at night to conduct “séances of free associations to find uncalculated solutions to no-exit situations,” swallowing “dozens of sleeping pills and tranquilisers, drink[ing] lots of syrups and valerian drops,” and consulting the *I Ching* for advice. Furthermore, whereas “[he] was a dictator” before, according to Flaszen (cited in Kumiega 1987: 91), he now waited quietly while the actors worked, and from then on “there was no more theatre, because theatre to some extent requires dictatorship, manipulation.”⁶⁴ Thus, even before the lukewarm New York reception Grotowski had already begun to doubt his artistic abilities despite the momentum generated in previous years, when the knowledge “that he did not have much time ahead” compelled him to act quickly (Flaszen 2010: 268). After a three year genesis *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, a parable of the Second Coming, premiered in February 1969. Kerr (in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 154-156) assessed the third and last offering in the Firm’s repertoire as follows:

Grotowski forces us into the paradox that what is good for theatre is bad for drama. The two are not bedmates but mortal enemies, unrelated, mutually corrupting. With this either/or fiat, Grotowski declares theatre to be – always and in all ways – a simple thing, not a complex one ... [...] I found myself content with all three performances of the company, content to be there, content to experience this much, content to go away contented after the hour or so of playing time. I did, however, find myself less interested in the third than the first. I did not become bored; I simply found myself thinking my own thoughts oftener. [...] I wondered, as I sat on a bench with my back to a radiator watching a black-clad simpleton carry an apostle in flaring white robes about the open floor on his twisted shoulders, whether my attentiveness might not be diminishing simply because it was given nothing more complex to feed on. The human mind, whether on its way to the moon or to the Washington Square Methodist Church, says more, more. That’s the way of it.

Kerr’s assessment of *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, the epitome of „poor theatre“ in that it was performed in a bare space with hardly any props and the actors (later) performing in

⁶⁴ Flaszen made these statements during an interview with Eric Forsythe, transcripts of which he later published in an article entitled „Conversations with Ludwik Flaszen“, in the *Educational Theatre Journal* in 1978 (Vol. 30/3: pp 301-328).

everyday clothing, raises the question of when a search for the essential becomes overly simplistic. Grotowski's aesthetic evolved from working with limited funds in a small space with few spectators, which suited him as he "had an inclination for theatre without audience" because it allowed him to experiment without intrusion, a "modest, humble and essential activity," as Flaszen (2010: 217, 247) framed it, "like the old crafts that have disappeared in the age of machines." In this respect he, "a servant of the Tradition," used the term „tinkering“, namely "seeking through acting," and described his work as "tinkering with the body" (Flaszen 2010: 219, 247).

Thrust into the limelight in 1963 and fabricating a persona for the world outside his ashram perhaps led to a schism forming in "the tireless seeker of the Essence, [who] was a metaphysically shy person," according to Flaszen (2010: 215, 228, 245). Brook (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 381) framed him in a similar way: "Grotowski is a deeply simple man, who carries out research that is profoundly pure. How is it possible, then, that over the years, the result of this simplicity has been to create both complications and confusion?" The answer perhaps, is that in declaring himself to be "a teacher of craft," stating "the way to the Absolute led through the eye of the needle of craft," "the great trickster and psycho-technician," may have overestimated this aspect, as Flaszen (2010: 248, 265) attests: "I don't know if anybody has noticed that Stanislavski, Grotowski's master, used the term „craft“ derogatively. For Stanislavski, the art of the actor's craft was a lower form of art – a skilful pretending, uncovered in the real „process“."

Grotowski's withdrawal from the theatre because "[he] found himself in a creative deadlock," and complaining he was "exhausted and sterile" since 1968, was therefore also perhaps because he finally realised it is "a stubborn and heavy beast" that "prudently limps along on its Leviathan path" (Flaszen 2010: 215, 242), despite the reforms he introduced. He had nonetheless found "ideal apes"⁶⁵ for his secret investigation, but to continue this path he had to reinvent himself, which he did in a quite miraculous manner. In August 1970, after he had spent six weeks in India and Kurdistan, he rejoined the ensemble in Shiraz, Iran, at the start of a Middle and Near Eastern tour, and "looked like a completely different man: he had lost over eighty pounds and had grown a beard"

⁶⁵ Nietzsche (cited in Flaszen 2010: 191) referred to the actor as an "ideal ape".

(Osiński 1986: 122). This was much more than a mere physical transformation however, as Flaszen (2010: 229) explains below:

I noticed a young yogi in a white Hindu robe who was smiling at me. [...] In fact it was Grotowski himself, yet in a new surprising incarnation. We hugged each other cordially. He was visibly glad that I hadn't recognised him. As if he had done the perfect trick – possibly the best in his life. For here the prankster was not pretending, was not playing someone else, was not mystifying. His body and mind were literally transformed – and it was visible. Under the sun of the Iranian desert Grotowski was light and luminous – Grotowski *transfiguratus* – in a form akin to an ethereal body from sacred paintings ...

Although Flaszen (2010: 231) later learnt Grotowski's weight loss was due to a strict diet "based solely on proteins – namely meat, eggs, bacon, pork fat," which meant he "ate huge amounts of meat, and drank dozens of raw eggs straight from their shells," he had transformed himself into a guru, which proved particularly effective when he next appeared in New York in December 1970 to deliver lectures about his new area of research, dressed in jeans and resembling "a hippy and an ageless Chinese sage," according to Schechner (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 486).

In a text compiled from his notes simply entitled „Holiday“,⁶⁶ Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 216-218) denounces the actor's art as a barren and dishonest pursuit, a career built on lying to oneself which reflected life in contemporary society. Despite acknowledging "that in Stanislavsky, theatre – as the art of the actor – received its apogee," he distanced his own work, describing it as "[a] quest for what is most essential in life," which was to become reincarnated as a total man in "the likeness of God" (Grotowski *in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 218, 220, 221). In his view (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 224, his insert), people had to stop pretending and become sincere, because "[if] one carries one's sincerity to the limit, crossing the barriers of the possible, or admissible, and if that sincerity does not confine itself to words, but reveals the human

⁶⁶ „Holiday („*Swieto*") is based on conferences at Manhattan's Town Hall on 12 December 1970; NYU the following day; a Polish/French seminar in Royaumont, France, on 11 October 1971; and lectures in Wrocław on 23 October 1971. It was thus a declaration of the ideology that informed his post-theatrical work, and served as a manifesto for his subsequent „paratheatrical“ activities. The Polish word *swieto* is directly related to „sacrum“ or „holy“; which does not simply imply a day of no work.

being totally, it – paradoxically – becomes the incarnation of the total man [*człowiek zupełny*] with all his past and future history.” In this respect sincerity began when an individual was disarmed, defenceless, which is why he now opposed all methods, techniques or systems as “one learns *how to do*, one does not reveal oneself; one only reveals the skill for doing” (Grotowski in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 220, 223, his italics). Instead, he proposed one had to learn to be whole, namely “I am as I am,” because once this self-actualisation occurred the individual discovered “[we] are a living stream, a river of reactions, a torrent of impulses, which embrace our senses and our entire body,” which was essentially one’s “creative material” (Grotowski in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 222).

Grotowski’s new research direction, Paratheatre, was conducted with volunteers in projects mainly occurring outdoors and the Firm’s members acting as supervisors. By the mid 1970s he lost interest in this experiment however, because it “descended to some extent into an emotive soup between people, or rather a kind of animation” (Grotowski in Richards 2003: 120). The next stage of investigation, or “the link *after*” paratheatre, as he later termed it (*in* Richards 2003: 120), namely „Theatre of Sources“, entailed a search for “pertinent kinds of traditional techniques” from different cultures that possibly contained “the seed of light received from God” (Grotowski in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 261). In a text of the same name⁶⁷ he acknowledged (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 255, 258, 266, his italics) it was private search to discover “Who-am-I?,” an investigation “towards the source from which the feeling of “I” appears,” and the term „Theatre of Sources“ did not imply “the sources of *theatre*,” but was related to expressions like the “theatre of war.” „Pertinent“ meant techniques “that lead to activity, in action – for example the martial arts techniques related to zen,” rather than “techniques of sitting meditation;” they therefore had to be dramatic, “related to the organism in action,” and ecological, “linked to the forces of life, to what we call the living world” (Grotowski in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 259).

The result of this research was an exercise called the Motions, which entailed “a single sequence of stretchings” Grotowski (*in* Wolford 1996a: 287) described as “an instrument

⁶⁷ The English text, entitled „Theatre of Sources“, is included in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, and is based on his original Polish text from 1981, derived from a talk he gave at York University in Toronto in October 1980, as well as fragments from other talks he gave between 1979 and 1982.

for strengthening the doer's awareness." According to Schechner the Motions resembled Gurdjieff's Movements⁶⁸ (Schechner & Wolford 2001: 479). In this respect they were "dynamic meditational practices that require the doer to cultivate an active quality of attention, maintaining the precise details of an established structure," and "are structured forms in which the adept progressively discovers ever deeper levels of complexity; in both cases, apprehension of the external structure is only an initial step, and is by no means sufficient for full comprehension of the exercise" (Wolford 1996a: 287-288).

By the early 1980s Grotowski had therefore created his own yogic *kata* that enabled those applying it to find their "inner silence" and "solitude *next to others*," a process he called "*work on individual*" (in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 265, his italics). He had appropriated his material from many sources, admitting (in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 255-265) that his life was devoted to a conquest of knowledge which could only be gained "through real confrontation, when an actual transmission is received or stolen – as almost every true teacher is looking to be robbed by someone of the next generation." Using the term „theatre“ was therefore to ensure his funding did not dry up, as he had clearly moved beyond it, reaching the stage when he could openly say "all right, this is my work" (in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 257), as he finally admitted.⁶⁹ In 1981 Martial Law was declared in Poland and in January 1982 he left his country, laboratory and the state funding that had sustained it. Later that year he wrote a proposal for a research programme called „Objective Drama“ with Schechner's help, and was invited to conduct it at the University of California, Irvine, starting in the 1983-84 academic year. On 28 January 1984 the Wroclaw newspaper *Gazeta Robotnica* published an article written by Flaszynski that announced the dissolution of the Laboratory Theatre.

In Irvine Grotowski worked with four „Technical Specialists“ who further developed the Motions by incorporating elements of their practices and the techniques of visiting

⁶⁸ The Greco-Armenian mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff's aim to create an „objective art“ led to him synthesising what he called The Movements from different "dances, exercises, and the ceremonies of various dervishes [mostly Mevlevi] as well as little known Eastern dances" (P. D. Ouspensky quoted in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 479). Ouspensky was his "most influential exponent" (Wilson 1981: 36).

⁶⁹ During an interview with Jean-Marie Drot in the 1977 film *Jerzy Grotowskiou ... Socrates est-il Polonais? (Jerzy Grotowski or ... is Socrates Polish?)* he states: "I don't want to be a director. I am a sort of vis-à-vis for the actor." [Taken from a transcription of the audio content of Marian Ahrne's film *Il Teatr Laboratorium Di Jerzy Grotowski* (1993), as it appears in Allain, 2009a, 223.] In the same interview he states his research began after witnessing the "translumination" of Cieślak's body (*ibid*).

„Traditional Practitioners“, namely “masters of ancient liturgies or rituals of specific old cultures” that included “two Caribbean ritualists from Haiti”⁷⁰ (Findlay in Osiński 1986: 174). One of the specialists, namely I Wayan Lendra, described their work as follows (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 313, 231):

The four of us were accomplished artists in our own cultural traditions, with backgrounds in experimental modern theatre. We learned and recorded the materials of the traditional practitioners, and helped Grotowski formulate new exercises. We then taught and guided participants in both the traditional forms and the new work. [...] Objective Drama was designed to test the impact of selected exercises. The participants were the “guinea pigs,” therefore they were not informed of the direction or plan for each session. Probably Grotowski himself did not know what would need work.

According to Lendra (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 313) the work was “very rigorous,” requiring “physical dexterity and stamina” and “metal perseverance,” as “Grotowski imposed uncompromising discipline.” He was particularly interested in Balinese trance dance and the “movements and songs of Haitian voodoo,” which in Lendra’s view (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 327) were aimed at “the awakening of innate physical power” he referred to as *kundalini*,⁷¹ namely “sleeping energy” in the Hindu tradition. The investigation therefore centred on finding a means “to wake up this energy center which, when awakened, can increase our awareness, sensitivity, and perception,” a state Grotowski believed was “necessary not only in life but in the performing arts” (Lendra *in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 327). Effectively, this marked a return to the “old, heavy burden of detail and precision,”⁷² the legacy of his theatrical work during the 1960s, and meant his investigation had gone full circle. Grotowski (*in* Richards 2003: 121, his italics) however, asserted that although this work “concentrated on rigor, on details, on

⁷⁰ These were Jairo Cuesta-Gonzales from Columbia, I Wayan Lendra from Bali, Du Yee Chang from Korea, and Wei-Cheng Chen from Taiwan. The Haitians were Jean-Claude Garoute and Maud Robart, a specialist in Creole songs and the yanvalou dance. The „Traditional Practitioners“ included a Sufi dancer and a Buddhist incantation teacher.

⁷¹ In Sanskrit *kundalini* literally means „coiled“ and relates to a „corporeal energy“ in yoga; a libidinal, instinctive, unconscious force associated either with Shakti, or to a sleeping serpent at the spine’s base. When perceived as a goddess, the practitioner aims to reunite her with Lord Shiva, the Supreme Being.

⁷² According to Lisa Wolford (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 12), who participated in the Objective Drama programme in 1989, as recounted in her book *Grotowski’s Objective Drama Research* (1996), he made this statement during a lecture entitled „Ensemble since Stanislavsky“ at the University of California, Irvine, in May 1990.

precision – comparable to that of the performances of the Teatr Laboratorium,” it was “not a return toward Art as presentation,” instead it was “*the other extremity of the same chain.*”

Grotowski’s final „Art as Vehicle“ research began in the Tuscan village of Vallicelle near Pontedera, which was named the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski in December 1985. In a text entitled „*Tu es le fils de quelqu’un*“ (1989),⁷³ he confirmed Lendra’s assessment of their work, stating that to awaken the “reptile brain” required technical competency in dance and singing, namely a precise structure within which to work, or else one might lose control when the “ancient body” took over, an imperative he explained as follows (in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 298, 299-300):

In traditional societies, it is the structure of the ritual which keeps the necessary control, so there is not so much danger of losing control. In modern societies, this control structure is totally lacking and everyone must resolve this problem for himself. What problem? That of not provoking a kind of shipwreck or, in Western language, an inundation of unconscious content in which one could be drowned. This means that it is necessary to keep our quality of man [*człowiek*], which in several traditional languages is linked to the vertical axis, “to stand”.⁷⁴

In this respect standing with one’s “[spine] slightly inclined, the knees slightly bent, a position held at the base of the body by the sacrum-pelvis complex,” is the “primary position of the human body” as it is common to both *homo erectus* and *homo sapiens*, “a

⁷³ The title, literally meaning „You are someone’s son“, is derived from a French expression Grotowski (in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 304) explained as follows: “[You] are not a vagabond, you come from somewhere, some country, some place, from some landscape.” It is interesting he used this analogy, given that he grew up without a father and was living abroad at the time. In this respect, when he visited Tokyo in August 1974 and met Tadashi Suzuki, the latter asked him: “What is Poland to you?” In response Grotowski (in Osiński 1986: 141) replied: “Poland is my mother – but not my father. I am looking for my father.” According to Flaszen (2010: 275) “Mother is the basic Polish archetype, typical of the Poles” collective unconscious,” suggesting that Grotowski’s search was for a paternal figure related to the ultimate Source, namely the Supreme Being.

⁷⁴ Philip Zarrilli, in his book *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach After Stanislavski*, points out that during his *kathakali* dance-drama training in India in 1976 one of his greatest challenges was learning how to “stand still”, namely to achieve “a state of heightened awareness and of sensitivity to [his] bodymind and breath in action within” (2009: 24). This is largely because one’s awareness of the physical body must first become integrated with a consciousness of the subtle body, which includes “centers (*chakra*), channels (*nadi*), and dynamic elements, vital or vibrative energy or wind (*prana, vayu, or prana-vayu*) and the cosmic energy (*kundalini* or *sakti*)” (*ibid.*: 70, his inserts).

position so ancient” that Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 297) asserted it was a linked to man’s “reptile” aspect. Hunters in primitive societies also used this position because it allowed “[a] presence at the two extremities of the same register,” namely “that of instinct and that of consciousness,” and in Grotowski’s view, “in the true “performing arts” one holds these extreme poles at the same time,” for reasons he explains below (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 297, 300):

It means “to be in the beginning,” to be “*standing* in the beginning.” The beginning is all of your original nature, present now, here. Your original nature with all of its aspects: divine or animal, instinctual, passionate. But at the same time you must keep watch with your consciousness. And the more you are “in the beginning,” the more you must “be standing.” It is the vigilant awareness which makes man [*człowiek*]. It is this tension between the two poles which gives a contradictory and mysterious plenitude.

Another element of „Objective Drama“ which became a key aspect of „Art as Vehicle“ was the use of vibratory songs from the Afro-Caribbean tradition, which Grotowski (*in* Richards 2008: 6) asserted branched back to ritual sources that were not limited to Western Africa, from where the slaves who sang them originated, but may have had “something in common with the ritual traditions of ancient Egypt, or even with what might have existed before.” In this respect they represented “artistic tools” akin to “a very fine instrument,” namely an “*organon* or *yantra*,”⁷⁵ which had to be mastered for “the executant ... to reach a totality, a fullness” (Grotowski *in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 300-301). The term *yantra* referred to an instrument like “a surgeon’s scalpel,” the same term he employed in *Towards A Poor Theatre* to describe how “the actor’s technique of psychic penetration” functioned, namely that “[he] must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon’s scalpel” (1991: 37). The link between Cieślak’s auto-penetration in 1963 to Grotowski’s final research is therefore apparent. During the interview with Ahrne in 1993 Grotowski (*in* Allain 2009a: 228) acknowledged this connection with his early work:

I watch my old performances, now that I’m not creating performances anymore, now that I work very rigorously with people on ancient songs

⁷⁵ According to Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 300): “*Organon*, in Greek, designates an instrument. As does *yantra* in Sanskrit. In both cases it is a question of a very fine instrument.”

carried by the impulses of the body – vibratory songs, very traditional – [and] I see that I’m searching for the passage, now, 30 years after *Akropolis*. [...] I look at *Akropolis* and at the other plays that I did when I was young, [and] I realise that they were already sung performances. I was not aware of this when I did them. I didn’t even think it was singing. And now when I look at these old materials, I see: it’s sung.

During his interview with Drot in 1977 Grotowski (*in Allain 2009a: 223*) stated that he discovered the “translumination” of Cieślak’s body whilst searching “for what can be called the actor’s personality.” Although he initially intended to include a description of this process in *Towards A Poor Theatre*, stating an “actor can learn this technique and reach a state of trance,” and even describing the steps they had to take and the sensation they would experience, namely “a kind of „warm” pain,” these references were later edited out, according to Ruffini (*in Allain 2009a: 95*). There is therefore no doubt that Grotowski’s principal line of enquiry in his career was how a trance state could be induced during performance, and how this spontaneous expression could best be contained in a disciplined structure. This was the lesson of the sacred theatre Artaud foresaw as the salvation of contemporary theatre, namely “a new meaning, a new possible incarnation,” even if he “saw the image of it through a glass, darkly” as Grotowski (1991: 93) framed it. In trying to determine if the French poet’s vision of “total theatre” in which actors evoked “ancient magic powers” could be pragmatically realised (Artaud 1970: 66), Grotowski perhaps tried to make manifest that which is best left to slumber in man’s unconsciousness, as Artaud (*in Hirschman 1965: 33-34*) himself intimated in his poem entitled *An Actor You Can See ...*:

those who’ve attributed me with more life, judged me to be less far gone,
believed I’d been plunged into an excruciating noise, into a violent blackness
with which I was struggling
are lost in the darkness of man.

When Suzuki met Grotowski in 1974 he noted (*in Osiński 1986: 141*) that they had the same attitude towards their actors, even though he felt that “as a madman, in a conceptual and emotional sense,” his Polish contemporary would always “be isolated from those around him.” In many respects it was an acute assessment by the Japanese master teacher, who also believed “[you] learn with the body, not through questions,” and when

“the performer transcends physical limitations” they “[tap] into surprising or unexpected energy reserves and potential,” including an “animal energy,” which induces “a heightened or raised consciousness” (Allain 2009a: 115, 122). What Suzuki realised however, was that mastery in this type of training did not prioritise either creativity or originality, and that ultimately it “should lead to sublimation rather than exhibition of the techniques” (Allain 2009a: 117, 121). This form of „work on oneself“, if evaluated in relation to Stanislavski’s psychotechnique, may have focussed on the physical body, but the aim of both was to develop the actor-performer’s concentration and willpower, and it was “the application of the awareness generated” during this training that was essential in performance (Allain 2009a: 119, 121). In this respect the „pre-expressive”⁷⁶ aims were perhaps similar, but mastery of the elements, or rather the “psychotechnical techniques” that comprise the „system“, was ultimately to grant actors creative freedom (Toporkov in Cole & Chinoy 1970: 528). Grotowski might already have realised this shortcoming in his training approach as early as 1965 when his technically proficient actors struggled to devise *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, as he acknowledged during the interview with Ahrne (*in* Allain 2009a: 222):

The training does not prepare us for the creative act. That it does is a big myth. The training works against time as we get older. It allows us to keep a sort of physical freshness, a freshness of reactions, of perception regarding life. In this sense, it does help. It breaks that feeling of resistance we have if our bodies are weak. It gives a sort of confidence. In this sense, it helps. But we can torture ourselves with exercises for months and years and never be creative. We should not forget that.

In Grotowski’s view (*in* Allain 2009a: 222) creativity equated with “life, spontaneity, something completely personal, and – at the same time – rigour, structure and precision,” the formula encapsulated with his term “*conjunctio oppositorum* – the contradiction between spontaneity and discipline” (Kumiega 1987: 134). Yet this interplay between form and content is a paradigm theatre practitioners have struggled with for millennia. What has been determined is that form can be acquired, or rather control, discipline and

⁷⁶ Barba (2003: 115, his italics) employs the term „pre-expressive” to describe a level of work when “there is no realism/non-realism polarity, there are no natural or unnatural actions, but only useless gesticulation or *necessary* actions.” In this regard he defines a necessary action as “one which engages the whole body, perceptibly changes its tonus, and implies a leap of energy even in immobility” (*ibid*).

precision learnt, but what about content? This question prompted Stanislavski to find a conscious means to access the unconscious, which he believed was the domain of the spirit. For Grotowski however, “secretly inspired by yoga,” the body “was the Holy Grail, the sacred vessel where energies sublimate and from where Mystery emanates,” but to access this resource one had to be reborn, “supervised by a master,” a process that “may last for many years” (Flaszen 2010: 270, 271, 275). In this respect Brook (*in* Schechner and Wolford 2001: 383) stated the following about Grotowski’s work in an article he wrote in 1995:

The spiritual traditions of the whole history of mankind have always needed to develop their own specific forms, for nothing is worse than a spirituality that is vague or generalised. [...] Grotowski is showing us something which existed in the past but has been forgotten over the centuries. That is that one of the vehicles which allows man to have access to another level of perception is to be found in the art of performance. For this, there is one condition: the individual must be talented. [...] Often those who possess talent haven’t got the faintest idea of what this means; they can’t explain it by themselves; they simply know that they feel an “attraction”. With this attraction, the persons who dream of becoming actors can, in a perfectly natural way, go straight towards the world of the theatre. But in certain cases they may feel something else. They may feel that this gift, all this love, is an opening towards another understanding; and they may feel that they can’t find this understanding except through personal work with a master.

That “Grotowski – a man of the theatre, and Grotowski – creator of his own version of yoga, or a spiritual master” was highly adept at the latter process Brook described is without doubt, and, as Flaszen (2010: 279) agreed, there is a “mutual creative symbiosis ... between performing arts and spiritual practices.” Yet, although he used the theatre for his journey of self-discovery, it is questionable whether Grotowski’s investigation was artistic. Instead he tried to change its nature to suit his ends, but as Flaszen (2010: 186) pointed out: “The price for breaking the rule of Mimesis in art is high, if one wants to go all the way. Expelled, Mimesis returns as Nemesis.” There is no denying that in his efforts to transform the theatre into “a secular **sacrum**,” as he termed it in *Towards A Poor Theatre* (1991: 49, his emphasis), he rediscovered something forgotten, namely

“that the theatre, perhaps to a greater extent than we can imagine today, had always been troubled by its appearance as spectacle” (Birringer 1991: 217). In this respect, at a Brazilian symposium in 1996 focussed on „Art as Vehicle“, the Russian theatre director Anatoly Vasilyev (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 19) described this final stage of Grotowski’s work as “the realisation of a non-narrative theatre,” which was arguably his intent all along, namely to show that when a Performer becomes “a channel for the divine,” and “starts to gather forces that are linked to that spirit, at that moment theatre changes its essence.” Unlike Artaud however, who merely captured his visions in print, Grotowski left behind substantial traces of his efforts to rejuvenate the theatre by turning it into a secular church, thus redefining its function in contemporary society. While a laudable effort, he perhaps underestimated its own powers of survival, protected by its ancestral spirits.

3.10 A postscript to the chapter

Considering that improvisation was the foundation of the training approaches of all five former Group Theatre members, as well as Moore, and Chekhov (2004a: 35, his italics), who stated the highest aim of the actor's art "can be achieved only by means of free *improvisation*," Grotowski's statement below taken from his text *Tu es le fils de quelqu'un* (in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 298), reveal an antithetical outlook:

[M]ost often the people who practice so-called "improvisation" are plunged in dilettantism, the irresponsibility. For working on improvisation, one needs bloody competence. It is not goodwill which will save the work, but it is mastery. Obviously when mastery is here, appears the question of the heart. Heart without mastery is shit. When mastery is here, we should cope with the heart and with the spirit.

Grotowski's is more than an opposing viewpoint however, rather a challenge to the „system's“ ideological basis. If the ability to freely improvise during performance is indeed "the high point of the actor's creation on stage," as Toporkov (in Cole and Chinoy 1970: 528) claimed it was, then what of technical discipline? Or, framed somewhat differently, what of emotional control and a mastery of physical expression as an imperative part of effective signification on stage? The practitioners considered in this chapter all had distinct interpretations of the actor's art and developed training approaches which suited these notions. In each case Stanislavski's findings served as a foundation for their personal explorations, and they adapted the „system“ to suit their own artistic needs, rather than the other way around. In some cases they found innovative ways to address the dialectics of discipline versus spontaneity, form versus content, and how versus what – the essential question in acting – yet it is apparent that none found an ideal method or technique to resolve the conundrum, and in this respect the principles that Stanislavski identified during his lifetime remain intact.

In the following chapter I will consider the key elements of an integrated theory of actor training and thereafter trace my own journey as a teacher-trainer in the past three years, during which time I engaged in both literary and practical research in an attempt to give a personal response to this challenge at the heart of the actor's art.

Chapter Four Towards a theoretical integration

4.1 Chapter introduction

In a twenty-first century context the actor's art has become increasingly difficult to define. From stand-up comedy to performance art, „reality TV“ programmes to stage musicals, broad comedy to traditional drama, activities associated with some degree of acting are extremely diverse. Although I have focussed on stage performance, the same considerations apply in film and television acting, even if adjustments have to be made to comply with the requirements of the media, as with different theatrical genres. In this respect my research has been based on identifying what type of training is required at the start of a student actor's journey of self-exploration that might help them identify where their individual talent lies, and the specialist direction(s) they intend to pursue. This initial training is therefore not aimed at readying them for work in a particular media or performance style, rather to liberate their creative individuality, which Stanislavski (*in* Malaev-Babel 2011: 9) stated should be “the principal aim of a theatrical school.” In a lecture he gave to the Bolshoi Opera students in the early 1920's (cited in Magarshack 1950: 162, italics in original), he described the function of this personal work as follows:

[D]o you think it is possible to lay down generally accepted rules, according to which every actor can learn „to act“, that is to say, to express *his* feelings in the same way as any other actor? Every man discovers for himself *his own* germ and his own love of art and sets them free for his creative work by a special and unique method, which constitutes his individual uniqueness and his own secret. For this reason the secret of creative work of one man is of no earthly good to another and cannot be handed to anyone as a model for imitation. For imitation is the most deadly sin of all. It is something that is completely devoid of any creative principle.

The „system“ was therefore conceived “to develop in the student those abilities and qualities which give him the opportunity to free his creative individuality,” which were “[imprisoned] by prejudices and stereotyped patterns” (Vakhtangov in Cole 1995: 141). There is an obvious correlation between this notion of „work on oneself“ and Grotowski's notion of *via negativa*, which he defined (1991: 17, 35, his emphasis and insert) as “an **inductive technique** (i.e. a technique of elimination),” namely “not a collection of skills

but an eradication of blocks.” The difference however, is that acquiring the „system“’s elements, from learning to direct one’s attention on a stage to developing actor’s faith and a sense of truth, may well have an impact on the person as s/he starts to distinguish between authentic and false behaviour, but these learnings also apply to „work on a role“, so that the process orientated work is directly related to performance. It is not merely a matter of collecting skills however, rather acquiring strategies to address different acting problems, effectively evolving a personal „toolkit“ that is suited to each individual’s psychophysical „instrument“.

The methods used in foundational training aimed at liberating the artistic self should therefore also facilitate self transformation and character creation. Although Grotowski’s notion of a role serving as a „scalpel“ to reveal a performer’s essential self as a form of sacrifice to the audience is an extreme interpretation of this process, „work on oneself“ serves a similar function, as Vakhtangov (*in* Cole 1995: 146) explains: “To create and not be oneself is impossible. It is essential not to distort oneself on the stage, inasmuch as the actor retains his own personality on the stage. You must remove whatever is superfluous as far as the character goes and not add what you do not possess.”

The „system“’s elements therefore also serve as *yantras*, to use Grotowski’s terminology, not to expose the actor’s personality on stage but rather to assist them when engaging in psychological „deep play“, namely discarding personal traits inappropriate for a role, and adopting new ways of feeling and thinking in their character’s circumstances. These adjustments have to affect the actor’s inner being however, not only their public mask, or else the outcome will not be a living, organic creation in which impulses originating from the essential self can find expression, albeit transformed, through the character-as-other.

The emphasis during initial training is thus on a student actor’s psychological makeup, which is why Stanislavski referred to the „system“ as a „psychotechnique“. Unsettling as the term may be for some, there is unfortunately no getting away from it. In her book *Beyond Stanislavsky*, Bella Merlin (2002: 29) states that this is because „psychology“ is a fairly amorphous, ungraspable concept, whereas the body “is utterly graspable.” Yet it is debatable whether a body-based approach is effective for a „work on oneself“ process; given that the art of impersonation is more than a mere physical embodiment of an other.

Although the question of whether actor training should be approached through the body or the psyche is a contentious issue, I have incorporated neurological and psychoanalytic references to cast some light on what Toporkov (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 528) termed the “psychotechnical techniques” actors have to master before they engage in “subconscious creation,” or spontaneous improvisation, the key aim of initial training. In this respect I subscribe to Damasio’s view that “the body (the body-proper) and the brain form an integrated organism and interact fully and mutually via chemical and neural pathways,” and “in complex organisms such as ours, the brain’s regulatory operations depend on the creation and manipulation of mental images (ideas of thoughts) in the process we call the mind” (2004: 194, his inserts).

In terms of distinguishing between the actor’s self and the character-as-other, I have derived my conceptual ideas from Bollas, author of *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis & Self Experience*, a leading figure in contemporary psychoanalytic theory, as well as a self-proclaimed “pluralist”, a term which he defines as follows (2007: 5):

Theories are views. Each theory sees something that the other theories do not see. They are forms of sensation. What we gain from the eyes is different from what we take in from the ears. What we perceive of reality through the olfactory sense is different from what we take in from touch. Theory is a meta-sensual phenomenon. Some theories are better than others, just as it is possible to say that sight is probably more frequently used than smell in the perception of reality. So you can see that for me pluralism is, in its core, a theory of perception, and to say that one must become a Kleinian or a Lacanian,¹ to the exclusion of the other theories, is as absurd as saying that one must become an advocate of the ear, or an eye-guy, or a touch person, or a sniffer.

Although my focus during „work on oneself“ training is predominantly on a student actor’s mental processes rather than conditioning the body-brain organism, it should not suggest that I view them as separate. In this regard I concur with Grotowski (cited in Richards 2003: 94-95) that “impulses are the morphemes of acting,” namely “the basic

¹ Bollas is referring to Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan. He is influenced by both Sigmund Freud, the Austrian neurologist widely known as the founding father of psychoanalysis, and D. W. Winnicott, the renowned British psychoanalyst, theorist, and founder of the object relations perspective in the field.

beats of acting” that “[always] precede physical actions;”² yet he pointed out that “[the] impulse is so complex that one cannot say that it is only of the corporeal realm,” which is “the secret of something very difficult to grasp.”³

Meisner also believed “inner impulses” were “the source of organic creativity,” and acting equated with “a give-and-take of those impulses affecting each person;” yet for him, they were “emotional impulses,” which meant “all good acting comes from the heart, as it were, and that there’s no mentality in it” (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 37, 62).

These views represent the two axes of performance, the horizontal and the vertical, both equally important to develop during initial training, as they respectively equate with the plane of the „soul“ and the „spirit“, both non-corporeal aspects of the human organism. In this chapter I will attempt to demystify these processes in relation to the actor’s creative expression.

² Grotowski (quoted in Richards 2003: 94) stated the following during a conference at Liège in 1986: “[W]hat is the impulse? „In/pulse“ – push from the inside. Impulses precede physical actions, always. The impulses: it is as if the physical action, still almost invisible, was already born in the body.”

³ Grotowski made this statement during an interview printed in *Les dossiers H*, entitled „C’était une sorte de volcan“ (Editions l’Age d’Homme et Bruno de Panafieu, 1992, p. 102).

4.2 The two axes of acting

In his 1993 text entitled „From The Theatre Company To Art As Vehicle“ Grotowski (*in* Richards 2003: 125, his insert, italics and capital) defined the horizontal plane as “linked to the forces of life, to instincts, to sensuality,” namely the “heavy but organic energies,” whereas verticality entailed moving from this coarse, every-day plane “to a level of energy more subtle or even toward the *higher connection*,” namely “the consciousness which is not linked to language (the machine for thinking), but to Presence.” To indicate how he envisioned verticality Grotowski used the biblical image of Jacob’s ladder as a metaphoric reference, so one may assume that it relates to man’s spiritual nature. Meisner however, who considered himself “a very nonintellectual teacher of acting,” said that his approach was “based on bringing the actor back to his emotional impulses and to acting that is firmly rooted in the instinctive” (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 37).

Despite Grotowski’s “iron intellect,” as Schechner (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 211) described it, he too believed that “there is no room for intellectualisation” in an actor’s work, according to Flaszen (*in* Kumiega 1987: 46), instead one must “act, think, do.” The initial stage of actor training is therefore aimed at de-conditioning the student’s reliance on the intellect, which they inevitably developed as the dominant faculty for negotiating interactions with the external world, and rather to learn to trust their emotions, instincts, intuitions and feelings as the impulses that will initiate authentic, organic behaviours; the foundation of „truthful“ acting.

In this respect instincts are synonymous with the basic reflexes that “organisms deploy in reaction to a noise or touch or as the tropisms or taxes that guide organisms away from extreme heat or extreme cold, away from dark into light,” but also entail more complex pain and pleasure behaviours (Damasio 2004: 31, 32). In Meisner’s interpretation this generic term also refers to an individual’s drives and motivations, an even higher level of reactions to one’s environment and other organisms occupying it. The most sophisticated level of homeostatic regulation however relates to emotions and feelings, which Damasio (2004: 27, 28) considers to be separate processes, with the latter at the summit of man’s evolutionary development. It is at this point that horizontally motivated behaviours start to diverge from those that are vertically orientated.

Damasio (2004: 28) defines emotions as “actions or movements, many of them public, visible to others as they occur in the face, in the voice, in specific behaviours,” which “play out in the theatre of the body,” whereas feelings “play out in the theatre of the mind,” because they “are always hidden, like all mental images necessarily are.” This is because “evolution came up with emotions first and feelings later,” as “[e]motions are built from simple reactions that easily promote the survival of an organism and could thus easily prevail in evolution” (Damasio 2004: 30). Emotions are therefore intrinsically and reflexively linked to the human body’s instinctive responses, and can thus be seen as more „primitive“ behaviours; while “as far as the mind is concerned, feeling is what really counts” (Damasio 2004: 29).

Damasio (2004: 284) furthermore asserts that “spiritual experiences, religious or otherwise, are mental processes,” namely “biological processes of the highest level of complexity,” which are usually associated with “an intense experience of harmony, to the sense that the organism is functioning with the greatest possible perfection.” A „spiritual“ experience is therefore “to hold sustained feelings of a particular kind dominated by some variant of joy,” and we can evoke them by creating “systematic frameworks within which their action can be effective,” using “emotionally competent stimuli” such as listening to uplifting music (Damasio 2004: 284, 285). It is therefore quite apparent why Grotowski used repeatable, physical structures akin to martial art’s *katas* and coupled to vibratory songs, for this vertically orientated „work on oneself“ process.

Margarita Espada (*in* Lutterbie 2011: 2), a body-based theatre practitioner who follows a similar process,⁴ explains that it “begins with the generation of images, which are then structured into a performance and rehearsed until ready for an audience.” In the early stages of work “[she] attends to the feelings and images that arise from the physical experience of moving, letting each movement suggest the next, and acknowledging the sensory effects that arise,” creating “[a] feedback loop – from movement to image to

⁴ The Puerto Rico born Espada’s initial performance training “came from work in the martial arts, especially karate,” falling in love with the *kata*, namely “set sequences of moves that emphasize the specificity of each gesture and the fluidity of the sequence” (Lutterbie 2011: 2). When she began her formal training at Puerto Rico University in 1984 however, “she found the strictures of repetition-based techniques frustrating,” and afterwards she joined an alternate theatre company founded on the improvisatory nature of Augusto Boal’s theatre principles (*ibid*). Some years later, at an international theatre festival in Cuba, she encountered Eugenio Barba, “a turning point for her because she began to see the possibilities of combining specific, physical work with a more improvisational approach to the making of theatre,” and led to her forming her own company, *Teatro yerbabruja* on Long Island (*ibid*).

emotion to movement” (Espada in Lutterbie 2011: 2, 3). In this regard Damasio (2004: 195) points out that “the critical interface between body-proper activities and the mental patterns we call images consists of specific brain regions employing circuits of neurons to construct continual, dynamic neural patterns corresponding to different activities in the body – in effect, mapping those activities as they occur.”

Although these neural patterns can be described “[using] the tools of neuroanatomy, neurophysiology, and neurochemistry,” and images can be described “with the tools of introspection,” it is still scientifically unclear how we get from the former to the latter, but “the current ignorance neither contradicts the assumption that images are biological processes nor denies their physicality” (Damasio 2004: 198). Mental images therefore play a pivotal role in human behaviour as they stimulate the impulses that compel the organism to act in a particular manner. The mind’s role is thus important in all forms of acting, whether the impulses generated as a result of mental imagery find their expression in physical or verbal acts. In this respect Toporkov (2001: 129, his quotes) explains that during the *Tartuffe* rehearsals the final stage of work consisted of the following:

The „impulses“ to action we had worked on had to be developed and rounded out through active words. We had to make the characters come to grips with each other in a dynamic verbal conflict. We had been prepared for this by all our previous work, but Stanislavski’s demands were so enormous that in this phase of our work we also felt misery. Stanislavski didn’t let one empty phrase, one word that was not justified by an „inner image“ pass.

The work on physical actions that preceded this stage was therefore only a precursor to making the deeper meanings in Molière’s text accessible to an audience, and during this period Stanislavski (*in* Toporkov 2001: 131-133) emphasised “mental images,” a term synonymous with the thought processes that the actors had to generate and maintain throughout, not only when delivering lines of dialogue, for reasons he states below:

[D]on’t forget the intricate pattern of thoughts that [lead] up to your speaking [the] line. Remember, people only speak ten per cent of what is in their heads, ninety per cent remains unspoken. In the theatre, people forget this, they only care about what is spoken out loud, and destroy living truth.

Even before he formulated the Method of Physical Actions Stanislavski emphasised the need for actors to create a “film of visualisations,” as he described it during *The Government Inspector* rehearsals, perhaps because Michael Chekhov “was by nature gifted with an unusually vivid visual thinking” (Knebel 1967: 107). This stream of mental imagery not only provided a constant flow of impulses to enliven his verbal delivery, but also Khlestakov’s spontaneous actions, so that each night’s performance was unique. During a rehearsal of *The Barber of Seville* at his Opera-Dramatic Studio in 1933, Stanislavski (quoted in Zon 1955: 457, his insert) stressed the imperative of visualisation rather than simply delivering lines, explaining how this method worked during performance as follows:

One learns to play a role according to the images and not the words. At first I see a picture on my internal display, this picture in turn creates a word for me. The word, (when we talk about opera), evokes music. The role must in such a way gradually become a film, so that one can see it all with one’s eyes. During a mechanical act of speech there are no images, “worries” or the truth.

Stanislavski’s rationale in this respect is clarified in the following explanation (*in* Zon 1955: 458, his italics and quotes): “*For every second of your stage life you must have a living object and communication with it. [...] We create an image in our mind, it is what we call living through it, and at other theatres they do not imagine anything, they just play a role.*” Stanislavski furthermore stated (*in* Zon 1955: 457) that “facts from the actor’s own life experience and emotional memory are placed in the film, created by the actor’s imagination,” and in this regard “[he] is free to combine what was experienced and imagined.” He therefore integrated the use of affective memories with the actor’s imagination to create an internal film of visual associations, or “a string of images” as he referred to it (*in* Zon 1955: 458, 460, his italics), his only condition being: “You must communicate with all of them *in spirit.*”

After Damasio (2004: 98) conducted an experiment with forty people who had to recall an emotional episode in their lives and “bring forth all the imagery they could so that the emotions of that past event could be re-enacted as intensely as possible,” he found that most could “conjure up fine details and literally relive those emotions and images with

surprising intensity.” Despite this confirmation that affective memory actually works, he also points out that our creative imagination “can invent additional images to symbolise objects and events and to represent abstractions;” in fact, you can construct anything you fancy as “[the brain] has component pieces for every sensory modality,” and because the conscious mind “permit[s] the integration of actual images of every sensory stripe with pertinent images recalled from memory,” to create a “movie-in-the-brain” (Damasio 2004: 198, 199, 204, 207). Thus, regardless of which mental faculties and sensory materials actors use to construct the objects that make up this inner film, it is an essential part of the acting process, as Chekhov (*in* Knebel 1967: 107), who “was especially fond of this part of the system,” confirmed in asserting the following: “To see, to see, to see what you are talking about, this is the key to everything. You cannot compensate the absence of an image which must be placed behind words.”

Images are not only necessary to substantiate an actor’s words and actions with personal meanings, they also form the basis of „communion“, which Stanislavski-Tortsov (1984: 201) described as creating a “constant flow of ... interchanging thoughts and feelings” between actors. This, in fact, constitutes “the active principle underlying the process of communication,” namely that these “inner, invisible acts of spiritual communion” are “one of the most important sources to action” (Stanislavski 1984: 205). This was a vital aspect of Stanislavski’s work on *Tartuffe*, as his explanation below (*in* Toporkov 2001: 140, 141) confirms:

Verbal action is an actor’s ability to touch another actor with his mental images. And to do that you have to see everything you are talking about in crystal-clear detail, so that he sees it that way too. [...] Conveying thoughts – that is an action too. Your thoughts, words, inner images exist for the other actor. [...] You have to convey your inner images, you have to make him see things through your eyes. Don’t speak for his ears, but his eyes. [...] Your actions are only convincing and organic when you have concrete, detailed inner images.

In *An Actor Prepares* Tortsov tells his students that “[if] you want to exchange your thoughts and feelings with someone you must offer something you have experienced yourself,” furthermore that “you must be experiencing what you are trying to transmit to

[them],” and finally that “[c]ommunion must be mutual” (1984: 205, 215, 222). Knebel (1967: 105, 108, 109), who “watched *The Government Inspector* many times” to study Chekhov’s acting, said that he “absorbed every phrase of his partners, like a sponge,” missing nothing, answering immediately and creating “an impression of amazing freshness and unexpectedness,” as he allowed the objects gained from them to instantly affect him. This is the key to spontaneity in performance, allowing oneself to be “*played by the object*” and becoming “*lost in self-experiencing*,” which leads to “[*observing*] *the self as an object*,” as Bollas (1992: 31, his italics and insert) describes it, a process which requires a great deal of courage, as he elaborates below:

Self-experiencing cannot be assumed. Some individuals are reluctant to live in the third area (the intermediate area of experience), insisting that the invitational feature of the object be declined. They impose their view on the object world and blunt the evocative – transformational – facet of the objects in the field. They may narrow the choice of objects, eliminating those with a high evocative potential.

When actors engage in this process it is more than merely listening and looking, the active form of hearing and seeing, instead it is an attempt “*to reach the living spirit of their object*” (Stanislavski 1984: 200, 202, his italics), which “requires a great deal of concentrated attention, technique, and artistic discipline.” This unnamed method, which Stanislavski particularly emphasised during his final years, enabled actors to literally transmit their thoughts to one another, “and each one of them poured oil on the fire,” namely enhanced their feelings, according to Toporkov (2001: 156), making him realise “for the first time the meaning of, the profound significance in acting, what Stanislavski defined as „inner images“.” Bollas (1992: 63) describes the value of this deep level of interaction between people as follows:

Being a character means that one is a spirit, that one conveys something in one’s being which is barely identifiable as it moves through objects to create personal effects, but which is more graspable when one’s spirit moves through the mental life of the other, to leave its trace. Perhaps there is a special form within each of us for the perception of this type of communication. Maybe we have a special ear for it, as we have for music. If so, then we are capable of a kind of spiritual communication, when we are

receptive to the intelligent breeze of the other who moves through us, to affect us, shaping within us the ghost of that spirit when it is long gone. It also suggests that some people may be spiritually impoverished, with a diminished capacity for the reception of spiritual communication, meaning that they lack an intelligent inner space available to receive the other's spirit. Some individuals may be spiritual imperialists, greedily moving through others, militantly affecting people in destructive ways.

The actor's art of creating "[the] inner life of a human spirit, and its expression in an artistic form," as Stanislavski (1984: 14) framed it, might start with finding physical actions appropriate to a character's given circumstances and evolving a performance score based on these, but it is only a precursor to their real creative work, which is to create a mental score in order to "*understand all and to see all, in order to speak definitely,*" namely "[to] visualize what you are talking about and have a flowing line of visual images" (Stanislavski in Zon 1955: 459, 477 his italics). This technique, call it the Method of Affective Visualisation, integrates both the horizontal and vertical planes of performance in that it enables actors to respond to impulses emanating from all the body-brain organism's mental processes. This holistic engagement with the imaginary scenic environment and others effectively means that the actor does not *give* a performance, but is rather *given by it*, as Meisner encapsulated this spontaneous, in-the-moment expression (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 128). It is also the point at which the body and mind start to function in unison as a „feedback-loop“ is created, an interactive process that Damasio (2004: 195) describes as follows:

[The] critical interface between body-proper activities and the mental patterns we call images consists of specific brain regions employing circuits of neurons to construct continual, dynamic neural patterns corresponding to different activities in the body – in effect, mapping those activities as they occur.

4.3 The role of logic and tempo-rhythm

Stanislavski's approach to acting differed from both Grotowski and Meisner's in that he emphasised the use of logic to determine a character's most appropriate behaviour in the given circumstances, which included the production context, the text's thematic content, the director's vision, and the implications of staging it at a particular place and time, namely the "super-supertask", which is "apart from the supertask of a play" (Stanislavski in Toporkov 2001: 150). In this respect the supertask, or super-objective, determines a production's style, as he explained to Zon (1955: 479) in 1934, while the super-supertask relates to socio-political circumstances that influence audience perceptions at the time, and how the production as a whole, and the role interpretations, reflect this wider reality.

Like Adler, Stanislavski (1980: 537) also believed actors should be "men and women of broad and uplifted views, of wide horizons and ideas, who knew the soul of man and aimed at noble artistic ideals," echoing Brecht's vision (*in* Willett 1978: 279) of an actor-dialectician, "who needs to muster his knowledge of men and the world" in order to "ask his questions dialectically." This meant actors had to employ all their mental faculties to develop a holistic approach in which logic played a pivotal part, as Stanislavski's following statements to Zon (1955: 482, his inserts) in 1935 confirm: "Everything must be placed in a logical manner! Remember: I imagine something at first (imagining), I then reason (reasoning), and only after this I act." Considering Grotowski's formula of „act, think, do“, Stanislavski (*in* Zon 1955: 446) wanted actors to create "continuous lines of logically rational behaviour," based on his belief that "[l]ogic and common sense are the foundations of stage art." He also emphasised rhythm, stating (*in* Zon 1955: 461,467, his italics) "there is a direct connection between the rhythm and the feeling, and often one can awaken the feeling with one rhythmic maneuver," which meant that his acting formula read as follows: "*Logic first, then rhythm, then exceptional logic again.*"

How this worked in actual practice is conveyed by Toporkov (2001: 117), who states that the initial *Tartuffe* rehearsals were devoted to "getting to know individual scenes and the play as a whole," yet "always directed towards defining active tasks," while the next stage, which "demanded a great deal of thought and imagination," was "the first attempt towards a rough outline of the character, the logic of its behaviour, the logic of the struggle." This logical approach continued until action sequences based on the play's

events were arrived at through improvisations, with the actors forbidden to speak Molière's lines, instead using their own. It also entailed finding the appropriate rhythm, a process Stanislavski (*in* Toporkov 2001: 122) defined as follows:

Rhythm must be felt in the eyes, in tiny movements. These are elementary things. I am asking you to sit in a specific rhythm. To modify the rhythm of your behaviour. Any third-year student⁵ can do that. [...] You can't master the method of physical actions if you don't master rhythm. Each physical action is indissolubly linked to a characteristic rhythm. If you always do everything in your own personal rhythm, how will you be able to characterise different people.

Rhythm, or tempo-rhythm as it is referred to in *Building A Character*,⁶ consisted "of inner tempo-rhythm at the same time as the outer tempo-rhythm – when it becomes manifest in physical actions," and was considered to be an integral part of the actor's creative process because it "*has the power to suggest not only images but also whole scenes!*" (Stanislavski 1986: 183, 203, his italics). It was not only "a measure and speed," but brought "visual memory and its images to life," and in this regard Stanislavski (1986: 197, 218, his italics) asserted the following: "*The tempo-rhythm of the whole play is the tempo-rhythm of the through line of action and the subtextual content of the play.*"

By establishing a deep identification with each „beat“ of a production, the actor, as an observer-conductor, could therefore become detached from a character's life in the scenic circumstances as they followed a logical sequence of actions, responding to the „movie-in-the-brain“ and behaving in a predetermined metre during each moment. This was a key principle of the „system“, namely "that the through line of action calls for two angles of perspective: that of the actor and that of the part" (Stanislavski 1986: 218); or rather, "the *perspective of the role* and the *perspective of the actor*," as Stanislavski explained it to Zon (1955: 465, his italics). This effectively meant actors had to induce the state of „I am being“ to evoke the condition of dual-consciousness when they could function as both the character/puppet and performer/puppeteer simultaneously. It was their super-objective, as

⁵ Stanislavski's statement that a third-year student should know how to use rhythm confirms that „work on oneself“ lasted two years before they commenced „work on a role“.

⁶ The eleventh and longest chapter in *Building A Character* is entitled „Tempo-Rhythm in Movement“, and the twelfth „Speech Tempo-Rhythm“.

it were, which Stanislavski (*in Zon 1955: 475*, his italics and quotes) framed as follows: “Finally I take my place *inside* the play, I don’t see anything from the outside, but all from the *inside*, I see the partners, my partners, I am the master! I call this moment “I am”.” Once they experienced this state in each moment of scenic action they were ready to act, as Stanislavski’s next statement (*in Zon 1955: 476*) confirms: “When the moment “I am” occurs throughout the whole role, the role is now ready.”

Considering that the aim of both „work on oneself“ and „work on a role“ was to induce this state, it is perhaps worth reiterating that it was not only to enable actors to monitor their actions in training and performance, and to shield them from a character’s emotions, but also to engage their unconscious feelings akin to spiritual experiences. In this respect, according to Winnicott (2008: 76, his capitals): “[In] highly specialised conditions the individual can come together and exist as a unit, not as a defence against anxiety but as an expression of I AM, I am alive, I am myself. From this position everything is creative.” Damasio (2004: 284-285, 286, his italics) equates this „coming together“ with a condition of psychophysical unity, as he elaborates below:

I assimilate the notion of spiritual to an intense experience of harmony, to the sense that the organism is functioning with the greatest possible perfection. [...] One might venture that perhaps the spiritual is a partial revelation of the ongoing impulse behind life in some state of perfection. [...] The spiritual is a particular state of the *organism*, a delicate combination of certain body configurations and certain mental configurations. Sustaining such states depends on a wealth of thoughts about the condition of the self and the condition of other selves, about past and future, about both concrete and abstract conceptions of our nature.

During the *Tartuffe* rehearsals Stanislavski (*in Toporkov 2001: 123, 146*) stated that „I am being“ required “belief plus truth,” which he defined as follows: “What is belief on stage? You have to move in boldly, decisively, that is, with crystal-clear logic.” Logic was therefore the key for actors to believe in their scenic actions, and once this occurred they gained the courage to allow their mental images to wholly affect them, the point at which they entered into a state of dual-consciousness, and were able to freely exchange objects with others on stage, and thereby wholly release their idioms into play.

4.4 The actor as marionette

During his work on *The Constant Prince* Cieślak's first task was to dominate the text, learning it by heart so "he could start in the middle of a phrase of any fragment," and still "[respect] the syntax" (Grotowski in Richards 2003: 16). Yet, although the text "[spoke] of tortures, of pains, of an agony" experienced by "a martyr who refuses to submit to the laws which he does not accept," Grotowski (in Richards 2003: 15) had him recall "his first big, extraordinary amorous experience;" an personal affective memory that became the emotional substrate of his entire performance. Collaborating for "months and years" Grotowski prompted Cieślak to "return to the most subtle impulses of the lived experience, not simply to recreate it, but to take flight toward that impossible prayer," a process that he described as follows (in Richards 2003: 123, his insert):

[B]efore we even started to work [we read] the *Spiritual Canticle* by John of the Cross (which rejoins the biblical tradition of the *Song of Songs*). In this hidden reference, the relation between the soul and the True – or, if you want, between Man and God – is the relationship of the Bride with her Beloved. It is this that led Cieślak toward his memory of an experience of love so unique that it became a carnal prayer.

Although Cieślak's first carnal experience had nothing in common with the Spanish nobleman who sacrificed his life for his beliefs during the protracted Christian and Islamic conflict in the fifteenth century, Grotowski nonetheless forged a metaphysical link between the scenarios so that Cieślak could subsume these images until they became part of his internal landscape. By distancing the actor from the character's circumstances, Grotowski thus avoided any sentimentality that may have arisen due to identification on a horizontal plane, which would have vulgarised the play's theme, yet it also meant he could program Cieślak's thought processes sans the playwright's interference; effectively rewriting the play via the actor's wetware. During an interview with Kumiega (1987: 52) in 1981, Zbigniew Cynkutis explained how this programming worked in actual practice:

Everything that we did that was any good was not even made by Grotowski, but was *born between* me and Grotowski, Grotowski and me; Cieślak and Grotowski, Grotowski and Cieślak. It was this strong, direct relationship

between Grotowski and each actor that enabled them to express something – something that originally may often not have been the actor’s own but that in time came to belong to him. [...] Because so many things, thoughts, experiences, which to begin with were even strange to me and didn’t belong, after long practice and investigation found their place, in my bloodstream, in my respiratory system, in my muscles.

The justification for this form of re-programming an actor’s psyche to wholly become a character stems from the notion that the true self is suppressed by the false self, a public mask created to comply with social interactions that has to be prised off for the authentic being to emerge and express himself without any guise or falsity. This is the „holy actor’s credo, bearing all as a gift of self to an audience. The manner in which Grotowski went about conditioning his actors to accept this „deep direction“ was by first weakening their mental resistances through rigorous physical exercises to overcome fatigue and thereby to “break the control of the mind, a control that blocks us,” as he described it during the 1967 interview with Schechner (*in* Grotowski 1991: 204). Once the actor “[conditioned] the intellect to be in a passive relationship with the body” (Ruffini *in* Allain 2009a: 106), they were ready to spontaneously react to impulses, based on Grotowski’s next assertion, *in Towards A Poor Theatre* (1991: 205): “To act – that is to react – not to conduct the process but to refer it to personal experiences and to be conducted. The process must take us. [...] If one begins too early to conduct the work, then the process is blocked.”

Zdeněk Hořínek (*in* Allain 2009a: 86), a former editor of the Czechoslovakian theatre journal *Divadlo*,⁷ observed the Firm’s training in March 1967 and wrote “Grotowski’s main aim is to free actors from social inhibitions and renew their forgotten, or at least dormant, spontaneity and naivety of expression”. Hořínek (*in* Allain 2009a: 87) also asserted the following, no doubt derived from his conversations with Grotowski: “Only naïve expression is true. [...] A spontaneous expression of powerful emotions is often total, and the entire body takes part in it.” Thus, Boss not only wanted his actors to work without any interference from their intellects, but also urged them to wholly submit to their instinctive natures, which Winnicott (1999: 39), in his book *Human Nature*, defined as follows:

⁷ The journal appeared between 1949 and March 1970. The article from which the quotes are taken appeared in the June 1967 issue, entitled „My Second Meeting with Grotowski“.

Instinct is the term given to the powerful biological drives which come and go in the life of the infant or child, and which demand action. The stirrings of instinct cause the child, like any other animal, to make preparations for satisfaction of the full-blown instinct when it eventually reaches a climax of demand.

In a letter Grotowski wrote to Barba at the height of *The Constant Prince* rehearsals in September 1964, he stated that the term „organic“ had taken on a new meaning for him, in that it now also encompassed “that which [he] considered to be dependent on the intellect” (Barba 1999: 131). Richards (2003: 93, his italics) explains what this new definition came to mean: “[F]or Grotowski, *organicity* indicates something like the potentiality of a current of impulses, a quasi-biological current that comes from the „inside“ and goes toward the accomplishment of a precise action.”

The key to accessing this “living stream, a river of reactions, a torrent of impulses, which embraces our senses and the entire body,” as Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 222) described it, was an actor’s courage to both discover and uncover himself, yet to do so “in full light, not furtively, but overtly.” His role in the process of self-exploration undertaken by Cieślak delving deep into his adolescent psyche was therefore not unlike that of an analyst, encouraging him to first access his primal instincts, and allowing them to play him without any mental resistance. This understandably required a great deal of courage from the actor, and a remarkable trust in the one who witnessed and guided his psychic journey. In his homage to Cieślak in 1990, following his premature death at fifty-three, Grotowski (*in* Richards 2003: 15-16) described what transpired as follows:

It was necessary not to push him and not to frighten him. Like a wild animal, when he lost his fear, his closure we can say, his shame of being seen, he could progress months and months with an opening and a complete liberation, a liberation from all that in life, and even more in the work of the actor, blocks us. This opening was like an extraordinary trust. [...] We can say that I demanded from him everything, a courage in a certain way inhuman, but I never asked him to produce an effect. He needed five months more? Okay. Ten months more? Okay. Fifteen months more? Okay. We just worked slowly. And after this symbiosis, he had a kind of total security in the

work, he had no fear, and we saw that everything was possible because there was no fear.

Grotowski's introduction of a spiritual dimension to Cieślak's unveiling at the start of the process meant that his „carnal prayer“ could aspire to be more than a mere exhibitionistic reaction to remembered erotic imagery, and instead mutate into a form of quasi-devotion aligned to the central theme of *The Constant Prince*, namely that the main character could be considered a Christ-like figure. In this respect the loincloth Cieślak wore during performance no doubt viscerally aided this embodiment of the ultimate martyr, as did the “iconographic compositions” included in his score, which also “[alluded] to Christ” (Grotowski in Richards 2003: 16). Most importantly, during the protracted rehearsal process Cieślak discovered his “secure partner” (Grotowski 1991: 203), which meant his expression was no longer orientated to the audience, or the other actors, but became “[a] gift to something much higher, which overpasses us,” as Grotowski (*in* Richards 2003: 15) framed it. This schism between Cieślak's private, inner life during performance and that of the character portrayed in public, effectively meant his highly trained body could be manipulated as a living signifier in any manner that his director desired, the ideal both Craig and Meyerhold aspired to. Hořínek (*in* Allain 2009a: 88-89, his insert) describes the outcome of this approach below:

A group of psychiatrists who saw a performance of *The Constant Prince* allegedly said that Cieślak performed the lead role without any rational control. Grotowski adds to this (and I can confirm this from my own experience because I saw the performance several times) that, nevertheless, he manages to perform all the actions precisely, fully, and each time in the same way, thus playing out the full score of the play. That is the secret of Grotowski's method. Explaining it – that is a task for psychologists.

Grotowski's total control also extended to his actors off-stage lives, and during *The Constant Prince* Cieślak “was forbidden to use obscene words referring to the human body and physiology,” instructed not to “[familiarise] with his colleagues and acting partners” (Flaszen 2010: 265), which meant that: “Grotowski established a taboo mood around him – also around the stage. His body was taboo. He became untouchable – not like a Hindu pariah, but rather like some kind of holy man, or holy vessel.” It is therefore understandable that Cieślak underwent a complete character transformation, becoming

“incredibly improved on both a human and artistic level, certainly famous, but not fulfilled or happy,” as Marco De Marinis⁸ (*in* Allain 2009a: 155) asserts.

Although Cieślak was free to pursue his own interests after serving as Grotowski’s instrument of expression, he had nonetheless touched “something too strong, too deep,” which “[was] probably the reason why he used to smoke and drink non-stop,” gradually consuming himself “without enough strength for a full recovery” (De Marinis *in* Allain 2009a: 155). It is therefore both ironic and tragic that the willpower he developed during the many years of rigorous training was ultimately ineffectual to halt his self-destruction. In this respect Grotowski may have shielded his actors’ most sincere confessions “[with] mythical, archetypal associations and the compositional precision of the body and voice’s score of actions” (Flaschen 2010: 285); but in the end it was the unleashed, uncontrollable forces from within themselves that many of the Firm’s members ultimately fell victim to.

Grotowski’s approach to working with actors was in many respects the antithesis of Stanislavski’s, even though he claimed to have been most influenced by him throughout his life. In this respect it is significant that Kumiega (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 236) points out that: “There is no room in Grotowski’s theatre for the Stanislavskian dual actor/observer.” In depriving his actors of this ability he exposed them to psychological upheavals that stemmed from their character’s torments which directly impacted on their essential natures, which led to some committing suicide, whilst others opted for more prolonged forms of self-destruction. If there is anything to be learnt from this approach to actor training and performance, then it is that violating the autonomy of actors as creators in their own right inevitably leads to dysfunction in the theatre’s most essential artist. Yet, in order for them to gain access to their full potential a degree of psychological re-conditioning is nonetheless required; a quite delicate transaction that inevitably entails an involvement of both the Ego and the Id.

⁸ De Marinis is Professor of Theatrical Disciplines at the University of Bologna, and is the author of several books, including *La danza rovescia di Artaud. Il Secondo Teatro della Crudeltà 1945-1948* [Artaud’s Upside-Down Dance. The Second Theatre of Cruelty 1945-1948] (Bulzoni, 2006).

4.5 The role of the Ego and the Id in acting

Although Grotowski's work with Cieślak was ostensibly vertically aligned, there are nonetheless parallels with actors using affective memories as psychological substance to enliven their performances, albeit more insidious than Strasberg's application of this technique. Grotowski's assertion (*in* Kumiega 1987: 120, his italics and quotes) that "we do not *possess* memory, our entire body *is* memory, and it is by means of the „body-memory“ that impulses are released," is yet another example of his exploitation of the ideological grey areas which exist between the psyche and the soma, by reformulating this technique to suit his own body-orientated inclination. There are also correspondences between his approach and Meisner's, in particular regarding the primacy of impulses in acting, and just as the latter opposed „intellectual talking“, instead wanting his students to be emotional not logical (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 117), Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 219) described his own opposition to this mental faculty as follows:

What did Stanislavsky understand by physical actions? He saw them as ordinary, everyday behaviour ... [...] [Stanislavsky demanded of the actor to look for a logic in them, the logic of actions, continuity of behaviour, and why at a given moment he should do this and not the other. But are the everyday actions important in what is close to me, in that towards which we are aiming? Sometimes, perhaps, yes; at other times, no, not at all. On the whole, however, the ordinary, everyday actions, which for Stanislavsky were something essential, and in his case rightly so, from our perspective are rather the means by which we hide or arm ourselves in life.

Bearing in mind this was Grotowski after witnessing Cieślak's unmasking during *The Constant Prince*, a process he believed everyone should undergo to become sincere with themselves and each other, essentially his own „horizontal“ period, this dismissal of Stanislavski's approach stemmed from a rejection of everything theatrical, rather than an in-depth analysis of it.⁹ The fact is Stanislavski was not merely attempting to recreate

⁹ Flaszen (2010: 233), who edited the *Holiday* text and served as Grotowski's "advisor and humble scribe before its publication," states that the hurriedly written notes on which it was based were those "of a wanderer, not of a director and methodologist." In this respect they were scribbled in Grotowski's notebook during his travels in India and Kurdistan during July and August 1970, no doubt his version of forty days in the desert. According to Flaszen (2010: 233): "He tested his poetic metaphors – that were supposed to be understood literally – on my ears as a man of letters. What does it sound like? Is it suggestive enough? Is it stimulating enough? And, besides, is it concrete?"

everyday behaviours on stage, rather to find a means of engaging the ego, namely “[the] agency of repression ... which operates the mechanisms of the mind” (Bollas 2009a: 27), in the actor’s creative process. Although none of Stanislavski’s writings can confirm that he was *au fait* with Freud’s theories regarding the ego’s function in human behaviour, he nonetheless intuitively grasped that the actor’s conscious mind had to be engaged during performance, or it would suppress impulses originating from the unconscious; the *raison d’être* of his „system“. In his book *Human Nature*, Winnicott (1999: 51, 56, his insert), citing Freud, states that the unconscious “refers to near-physical fantasy, that which is least available to consciousness,” and described the ego’s role in the individual’s mental negotiations as follows:

[Freud] called the instinct drives the Id, and for the part of the self that is in contact with the external world he used the word Ego. For many years his work was a study of the Ego’s struggle with Id-impulses. This involved psychology in going to meet the Id in a way that had not been done before. By means of a technique for getting at the unconscious with the patient (psycho-analysis) Freud was able to show the world the nature and the strength of Id-impulses, that is to say, of instinct. He showed that what was associated with conflict and intolerable emotion became repressed, and a drain on the Ego’s resources.

Despite Freud employing various definitions to describe the complex functioning of the unconscious during his research, according to Bollas (2007: 17) his core theory is as follows: “Our unconscious is a dynamic factory of thought that knits together “infinite” lines of thought that combine and grow. Some of the lines come together for a while and create nodal points, and because of their increased psychic weight may come into consciousness.” Bearing in mind that “this network is operated by the ego,” and it is “the ego that dreams the dream, that thinks the free associations, that also writes the novels, creates symphonies, and so forth” (Bollas 2007: 29), it is apparent why Stanislavski tried to engage it in both character creation and performance. What he realised, from extensive personal experience, is that the conscious mind’s logical and reasoning processes cannot simply be switched off so that its unconscious content becomes available; instead they had to be actively engaged in an actor’s creative act. The „system“ therefore evolved from identifying a play’s super-objective, and each character’s objectives in relation to it,

through textual analysis, then identifying their actions defined by verbs, which were then divided into units that followed a through line; an extremely logical approach to creating a performance score. What the Method of Physical Actions offered was that actors no longer had to imaginatively identify with the character's given circumstances in order to find a sense of personal truth on which to base their scenic behaviours; instead they simply asked themselves what they themselves would logically do in similar conditions. This was not so much applying the so-called „magic if“ to stimulate them into thinking like the character, rather engaging their rational faculties. In this manner they identified logical activities that could be practically executed and elaborated by using their creative imaginations, yet continually aspiring to ever greater clarity and precision in each action during rehearsals, so that their conscious minds became wholly engaged in creating this performance score. The more these sequences were repeated with full concentration and attention to detail, the more the “observing ego”, as Bollas (2007: 13, 73) refers to it, namely “the *process* of our mind,” became involved. This was because “[t]he ego has a vested interest in perceiving reality, in giving it organisation, and in communicating it to others,” and most importantly “[t]he ability to follow the logic of sequence is a formal quality of the ego – a type of intelligence” (Bollas 2009a: 14, 27). Merely viewing the ego as an agency of repression should therefore be balanced with Freud's assertion that “there are unconscious processes that do not operate to repress contents but to form contents for other purposes,” as Bollas (2007: 72-74, his italics) clarifies below:

For classical psychoanalysts, the dynamic unconscious refers to the repression of sexual and aggressive drives that seek return to acceptable consciousness in some form or another. *This* unconsciousness is, by definition, drive-like; it is a pulsion seeking discharge any way it can and when it ropes in thinking it does so rather expeditiously. Contrast this with Freud's dream model. Here the unconscious is an intelligence of form. [...] Had Freud unequivocally stated that the ego was not only mostly unconscious but it also created the dream, the symptom, and all works of creativity, then he would have allowed subsequent generations of analysts to see matters differently. [...] How can one reconcile the primitive unconscious with the sophisticated unconscious? In fact, there is no contradiction if one simply understands that *in the beginning* both the form and the contents – that is the process and its productions – of the infant's unconscious were

primitive. During the course of time however, the self's ego becomes more sophisticated. This does not mean that primitive elements of the unconscious – the drives, infantile fantasies, envy, greed etc. – cease to exist; it simply means that the unconscious processing of these contents becomes more and more sophisticated. Indeed, right from the beginning of life the self is dream working the primitive, transforming urges into images.

Stanislavski's attempt to engage the unconscious in the actor's expression is focussed on the more sophisticated category of higher level thinking, and the contents gathered at „nodal points“, namely “a convergence of unconscious lines of thought where they join together for a while and then disperse,” as in a dream, which “is a convergence of many lines of thought into a single object, after which they go separate ways” (Bollas 2007: 60). These objects are highly evocative in a creative act as they are comprised of a range of sensory data, yet their affect on the body-brain organism is temporary. The more primitive unconscious however, which the ego tries to suppress, is more aligned to Grotowski's notion (*in* Richards 2003: 94-95) of a “pulsion,” namely “the impulse, which pushes from inside the body.” While there is no doubt that directly accessing this dynamic unconscious, the source of a human being's most powerful drives, will induce strong emotional responses, the resultant behaviours will invariably lack sophistication, which may explain Grotowski's use of archetypal imagery to signify complex meanings to an audience; even though the psychological content enlivening these physical forms was somewhat crude. The involvement of a director figure to assist the actor in creating an objective score for their subjective experiencing is thus essential, but the relationship between the physical score and their inner imagery is that of a glass shielding a candle, an analogy Cieślak used during a conversation with Schechner in 1970.¹⁰ In this respect the holy actor's total act of self-revelation being their gift to an audience is questionable, as Kumiega (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 236) elaborates below:

[I]t is the director alone who is able, if he is in tune with his actors, to select the visually effective moments of truth, the moments of untruth ... And, most importantly, to select, use and manipulate these moments to build up a

¹⁰ Schechner included a transcript of the conversation in his book *Performance Theory* (2003: pp. 46-47). Although Cieślak described his performance in *Akropolis*, a similar procedure was undoubtedly followed in *The Constant Prince*. In this respect he equated his objective performance score with a glass and his subjective associations to candle burning within, stating its flame was his inner processes every night, namely “what illuminates the score, what the spectators see through the score” (*ibid*: 47).

creatively cohesive score. [...] And if one is judging his “total acts” and using them to construct an artistic framework and incapable of response – what then becomes of the giving, the gift?

In his *Performer* text Grotowski acknowledged the imperative of the Performer “to be double,” developing what he termed the “I-I”, quoting an ancient text which states the following (*in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 378, his italics*): “*We are two. The bird that picks up and the bird who looks on. The one will die, the one will live.*” Although not an outright admission that he may initially have been wrong to discount dual-consciousness, it nonetheless suggests an ideological shift in his view of the actor-director relationship. Furthermore, in his 1993 text which deals with verticality, he asserts (*in Richards 2003: 125, his quotes*): “The point is not to renounce part of our nature – all should retain its natural place: the body, the heart, the head, something that is “under our feet” and something that is “over the head”.” In the same text he also states (*in Richards 2003: 128, his italics and quote*) that “[f]rom the point of view of verticality toward the subtle and the descent of the subtle to a level of reality more ordinary, there exists the necessity of a “logical” structure,” and work on “the text as living word” is essential, as well as “the *logic* of the smallest actions,” going so far as to say: “[T]he fundamental thing, it seems to me, is always to precede the form by what should precede it, by a process which leads to the form.”

Effectively, in his final years, Grotowski acknowledged that Stanislavski’s core convictions regarding the actor’s art, which he spent his lifetime challenging and trying to overturn like many others before him, were, in fact, its most fundamental principles.

In the next chapter I will consider whether a foundational level of actor training based on a „work on oneself“ process might safely be practiced in a formal education environment, drawing on empirical materials gathered during three years of practical work with student actors in South Africa (2010-2012), and building on my former research findings gained from working with first year students in both Australia (2003) and England (2005).

Chapter Five From theory to pragmatic application

5.1 Framing „work on oneself“ training

In any actor training approach, whether horizontally or vertically aligned, physically or psychologically-orientated, the overall objective should be to equip students with a holistic means to practise their art in a diverse profession. In this respect the methods acquired should ideally be self-contained toolsets that can be applied when working in any genre or media. This, at least, is the ideal, which is usually far removed from realistically achievable results given the time constraints that govern the HE sector, in which the academic demands placed on students often take precedence over practical work. As frustrating as this may be at times, it is arguably the correct emphasis under the circumstances, as a majority of students entering tertiary education are usually still unsure of what specialist directions they want to pursue. In this respect a broad-based introduction to the ideologies and methods of key practitioners in the modern era can often help them to identify ways of doing and thinking they personally relate to and can further explore during the course of their degree or diploma.

I consider their first year of training a basal experience, in that the objective should be to assist students to liberate their individual creative potentialities through a „work on oneself“ process, and to raise their awareness of their chosen profession in general, in the hope that some may discover they have strengths in areas previously overlooked. In this regard Brook’s claim (*in Schechner & Wolford 2001: 383*) that mankind is divided into two groups, namely “those who want to act and have no talent, and those who possess a real talent,” reflects a human phenomenon that is difficult to define but may explain the strong interest in „acting“ as a career, especially in the highly mediatised and globalised culture of the twenty-first century. The fact is we „act“ throughout our lives, whether consciously or unconsciously, and at the time of death will have experienced “[millions] of sequential self states arising from the dialectical meetings between [our] self and the object world, which release in [us] some conscious knowing of [our] life,” as Bolas (1992: 29) frames it in *Being a Character*.

The category of human behaviour referred to as „acting“ is therefore intrinsic to us all, and questions related to defining what it is are redundant, as most humans feel the need

to express themselves to others, and the medium of communication is inevitably via the agency of a „character“. Although most of us can articulate our thoughts, move our bodies and express our emotions, the stuff of acting on life’s big stage, once these natural activities have to be consciously recreated and codified to signify meanings to an audience of strangers, all manner of tensions arise that make those expressions which were once uninhibited in the company of family and friends feel awkward before others less sympathetic. For many aspiring young actors the transition from supportive familial environments to the highly competitive conditions at University and College Drama Departments and Schools, is understandably an intimidating experience, for some even traumatic as they realise their abilities are not on a par with those of their more innately gifted or technically proficient peers. It is inevitable that many become defensive, which complicates the process of instruction. Overcoming these reactions to unfamiliar circumstances is an important part of the basal training process, not only to help individuals settle in, but also to foster a sense of ensemble in a particular year group, and to facilitate their interaction with the rest of the drama department/school.

An additional challenge for teacher-trainers at this basal level is that ingrained ideas of what „acting“ constitutes are often based on „acting“, namely displays of stereotypical theatrical behaviours divorced from personal truth, and lacking any understanding of the meaning of words delivered with false pathos and exaggerated gesticulation. Often these behaviours are the result of working with unqualified school teachers or private drama coaches, who unfortunately impart what they consider to be skills that condition, rather than liberate, a student’s natural expression. In certain cases these performance habits are near impossible to unlearn and limit a trainee actor’s ability to adapt to the requirements of different genres and media.

A further aspect of „work on oneself“ many students struggle with is learning to differentiate between their public, everyday masks and their private, inner natures, the source of sincere expression. In this regard Winnicott (1999: 109-110, his insert) distinguishes between the “false self [that] becomes organised to keep the world at bay,” and the “true self [that] is in a constant state of what might be called internal relatedness,” which influence artistic expression in the follow manner:

[O]ne can say there are two types of artist. One kind of artist operates at first from the false self, that which can too easily make an exact representation of a sample of external reality. The artist makes use of this ability and what we next see is the attempt of the true self in the artist to relate the first exact impression to the crude phenomena that constitutes aliveness in the secret true self. If there is success the artist has not only produced something recognisable to others but also something which is individual to the artist's true self; the finished product has value because we can appreciate the struggle that has gone on in the artist in the work of drawing together the elements originally separated. If the skill in technique runs away with the artist we use the word facile and speak of a virtuoso. In contrast to this is the other kind of artist who starts off with crude representations of the secret phenomena or personal aliveness which are pregnant with meaning for the artist but at first have no meaning for others. The artist's task in this case is to make his very personal representations intelligible, and in order to do this he must betray himself to some extent. [...] The first type of artist is appreciated by persons who have a need to get in touch with their crude impulses, whereas the second type is appreciated by those who are withdrawn, and who are relieved to find there can be some (though not too much) sharing of what is basically personal, and essentially secret.

Winnicott's explanation reveals the imperative of art having both content and form to be effective, yet it is significant that he asserts an overdependence on technique can lead to facile work, which in acting jargon is termed cold and hollow, namely lacking emotional content, as well as being mechanical, meaning unmotivated from within. In this respect there is a very real danger that young actors become reliant on technical abilities too soon, a common tendency as this grants them an extra layer of protection for shielding their true self from being revealed during performance, as Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 220-223, his italics) elaborates below in an excerpt taken from his *Holiday* text:

We want to learn means: how to play? How best to pretend to be something or someone? How to play classical plays and modern plays? How to play tragic plays and comic plays? But if one learns *how to do*, one does not reveal

oneself; one only reveals the skill for doing. And if someone looks for means resulting from our alleged method, or some other method, he does it not to disarm himself, but to find asylum, a safe haven, where he could avoid the act which would be the answer. [...] We arm ourselves in order to conceal ourselves; sincerity begins when we are defenceless. Sincerity is not possible if we are hiding ourselves behind clothes, ideas, signs, production effects, intellectual concepts, gymnastics, noise, chaos. If any method has any sense at all it is a way to disarmament, not as a system.

Although Grotowski's statements must be viewed in perspective, bearing in mind that in the early 1970s his ideas stemmed from an anti-theatrical bias, his core argument is important, namely that technically mastering the ability „to do“ something too soon can become a trap that prevents inner growth, and the false self becomes increasingly dominant in artistic expression. Ilinsky (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 505, his italics), in his 1961 autobiography,¹ identified the same problem with Meyerhold's system of training, as he explains below:

Meyerhold based his biomechanics on the *rational* and *natural* use of movement. He felt that an excessive use of ballet steps exaggerated the “ballet style”; the same is true about acrobats, even some sportsmen. He wanted biomechanics to be free of any obtrusive style and manner, wanted it to be only *natural* and *efficient*. Unfortunately many ardent “biomechanicians” became extremely mannered since biomechanics became for them an end in itself.

The problem is not only a technical one however, but has far-reaching consequences in terms of a student actor's artistic and personal development, the two being interrelated. In his *Holiday* text Grotowski (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 220) asserts that the aim of training is “not to learn but to unlearn, not to know how to do, but how not to do,” all the while risking “the defeat of a missed gift, that is to say an unsuccessful meeting with oneself.” The need for this self-discovery to occur early in an actor's development is imperative as it provides a solid foundation for all their subsequent growth. It is not only a matter of unmasking the true self however, rather discovering their personal integrity

¹ Ilinsky's autobiography was entitled *Sam o Sebe (I About Myself)*, and published by VTO, Moscow.

and sincerity, the start of loving the art in oneself and no longer seduced by the notion of oneself in art. Brook (1990: 33) describes the inevitable consequence of neglecting this formative development below:

Time after time I have worked with actors who after the usual preamble that they „put themselves in my hands“ are tragically incapable however hard they try of laying down for one brief instant even in rehearsal the image of themselves that has hardened round an inner emptiness. On occasions that it is possible to penetrate this shell, it is like smashing the picture on a television set. [...] The tragedy is that the professional status of actors over the age of thirty is seldom a true reflection of their talents. There are countless actors who never have the chance to develop their inborn potential to its proper fruition.

Brook is referring to actors who have undergone training, emerging after three or four years at institutions that offer a specialist education in the performing arts, often with admirable technical capabilities such as being able to employ their „neutral“, accent-free voices to clearly convey the written word to audiences, able to move well on the stage and gesticulate in a meaningful, albeit often stylised manner, and occasionally even experiencing a faint stirring of actual emotion. Inevitably this is accompanied by what Grotowski (1991: 50, his emphasis) termed “**arriviste** tendencies, characteristic of a great number of theatre school pupils.” This attitude, stemming from an inflated sense of self-worth invariably based on the achievements of the public self, inevitably mean that additional learnings are filtered through this agency, and while knowledge may still be gained there is usually a lack of intrinsic understanding as the true self, with its organism’s best interests at heart, is subjugated by its alter ego for whom the approval of others becomes increasingly important. In his book *Playing and Reality* Winnicott (2008: 73, his insert) casts a light on this phenomenon:

The self is not really to be found in what is made out of products of body or mind, however valuable these constructs may be in terms of beauty, skill, and impact. If the artist (in whatever medium) is searching for the self, then it can be said that in all probability there is already some failure for that artist in the field of general creative living. The finished creation never heals the underlying lack of sense of self.

The fact is that artistic activities in general, and the performing arts in particular, are often seen as outlets for self-expression by individuals whose social circumstances may have encumbered, or even prohibited such freedoms. Although these inner drives may occasionally stem from a genuine „attraction“, as Brook termed it, namely a very definite inclination towards the actor’s art being the most appropriate vehicle for self-realisation, there is also a common misconception that the theatre is an accessible platform for gaining public approval, and acting equates with simply being oneself, or rather revealing one’s „personality“ on the stage. This is one of the ironies of acting, namely “the more accomplished an actor’s work is the simpler and easier it appears,” although the technical expertise required to attain this seemingly effortless result “can only be achieved by a great deal of hard work and daily exercises throughout one’s life” (Toporkov 2001: 162).

The realisation that acting is not simply a matter of exhibiting one’s social mask, rather an attempt to reveal one’s true self to others, is often a rude awakening for students whose fear of self-revelation has become acute. Yet as Winnicott (1999: 110) pointed out, authentic self-expression inevitably involves self betrayal, namely a willingness to expose one’s inner being in an attempt to be sincere. Meisner, quoting G. B. Shaw, also believed that self-betrayal “magnified to suit the optics of the theater, is the whole art of acting,” as acting “is the art of self-revelation” (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 145). For him this was a precondition when trying to exchange authentic impulses with others, which some of his students were unable to do because their “intense self-consciousness” cut them off from others and prevented “the possibility of transcending [their] own scared self,” resulting in him asking them to leave his classes (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 114). Although this heavy-handed approach would be unacceptable in formal education, and it should be said he was especially intolerant of actors who lacked the courage to overcome their personal insecurities, there was nonetheless a sound reason behind his thinking, as Larry Moss, a former student, explains in his own book on acting, *The Intent To Live* (2005: 188):

At nineteen, I was so frightened of myself that in scene work I could very rarely put my attention on anyone else. As much as I wanted to be heard, it was very difficult for me to truly listen. I was so busy listening to the thoughts roaring inside my own head and waiting for my cue that my acting

was the opposite of moment to moment – I was moment minus moment; I wasn't present enough to be actually affected by another person's behaviour. Also it was difficult for other people to understand me even if they were listening, because I spoke so quickly it was as if I were mainlining Benzedrine. Meisner picked up on this when I studied with him.

Moss (2005: 189), who became a respected teacher in his own right, considered this training an essential part of an actor's formative development because it “[provides] a solid beginning to a lifetime of truthful acting,” by enabling them to be “in the moment and solid in [their] freedom of impulse.” These are the most important abilities for student actors to acquire during their initial training, namely learning to set aside their public masks and to start trusting their instinctive natures, which is a manifestation of their true self, by turning off their intellectual minds. This does not mean the mind must be excluded from characterisation and evolving a performance score, but these processes should not start too early in a student actor's development, which is why Stanislavski began with the psychological elements of „work on oneself“ first, before moving onto the technical aspects in the second year of training, and finally onto „work on the role“ during the third year. In this respect, according to Toporkov (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 529), training at the MAT began “with the study of the main elements of organic behaviour: attention, communication, physical action, logic, and truthfulness,” which meant the first year was devoted to “[developing] in the student a heightened sense of the *truth* of his actions, just as one develops a musician's sense of hearing or a painter's sense of sight.”² Truth in this regard is not an abstract notion of universal truth, rather a sense of personal truth, namely gaining an understanding of the being behind the mask, a process that inevitably depends on the presence of others to serve as a mirror. Yet for this work to be successful there must be a concerted attempt by everyone involved to be open and sincere, which equates with emotional availability, a vulnerable state that many students understandably struggle with. Barba (*in* Huxley & Witts 2002: 46-47), in an article he published in 1972³ which echoed Grotowski's ideas in *Holiday*, had the following to say about self-revelation during training:

² Toporkov made these statements in an article that he wrote entitled „Je Rôle de l'improvisation dans l'incarnation du personnage scénique“, which appeared in *Le Role de limprovisation dans l'enseignement de l'art dramatique*. Bucharest: Centre Roumain de L'IIT (International Theatre Institute) 1965, pp. 53-65.

³ The article, entitled „Words or Presence“, was first published in *The Drama Review*, 1972, Vol. 53. It was also included in Barba's book *The Floating Islands: Reflections with Odin Teatret* (1979).

For a long time the „myth of technique“ nourished our work. Then gradually it brought me to a situation of doubt. [...] It was no longer a matter of teaching or learning something, of tracing a personal method, of discovering a new technique, of finding an original language, of demystifying oneself or others. Only of not being afraid of one another. Having the courage to approach one another until one becomes transparent and allowing glimpses of the well of one’s own experience. [...] Virtuosity does not lead to situations of new human relationships which are the decisive ferment for a reorientation, a new way of defining oneself vis-à-vis others and of overcoming the facile self-complacency.

Although this form of horizontal training may be considered „soft“ by those who favour a more rigorous physical approach, I would argue that without these fundamental learnings in place any ways of doing, whether how to use the body and voice effectively on stage, or how to conduct text analysis, will merely be mechanical devices that prohibit, rather than facilitate, authentic self-expression. Even if the inner impulses are initially crude and lacking in any aesthetic form, they are nonetheless the very substance of the actor’s art, without which no role can be brought to life.

This is a central paradox in acting, namely “that in order to succeed as an actor you have to lose consciousness of your own self in order to transform yourself into the character in the play” (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 114). In this respect self-consciousness can be defined as “locking [oneself] within [one’s] own subjective circle and becoming a coldly abstract phantom,” as the Russian film maker V. I. Pudovkin (*in* Cole 1995: 220) framed it. It therefore equates with refusing to engage with potentially transformational objects that stem from both the interior and external realms, as they might induce change. The British Dramatherapist and Psychologist Roger Grainger, in a book he co-authored with Mary Duggan entitled *Imagination, Identification and Catharsis in Theatre and Therapy*, explains the origins of this anxiety as follows (Duggan & Grainger 1997: 138, ellipses in original):

Through drama, we are able to give form to our experience of change; to have a good look at it and thereby confront our very human fear of it. Change necessarily involves challenging our deepest existential fear; loss of personal

identity and integrity – the annihilation of the self. Change is therefore at the very roots of the dramatic act; theatre shows how people are changed by events ... or not.

The actor, inevitably serving as an *agent provocateur* to incite dialectical questioning and changes in entrenched perceptions, cannot become detached from the responsibility of self transformation. In this respect, as Meisner pointed out (Meisner & Longwell (1987: 178): “The first thing you have to do when you first read a text is to find yourself – *really* find yourself. First you find yourself, then you find a way of doing the part which strikes you as being in character.” Despite representing a different acting tradition, Ariane Mnouchkine (*in* Williams 1999: 124, my inserts), the founder of the Théâtre de Soleil, echoes Meisner’s view, as her assertions below reveal:

If he [the actor] doesn’t allow himself to be possessed to some degree by the soul of this man [the character], he won’t be able to play him. Of course it’s a process of imagination, but in the end that’s what possession is! He’ll only be able to let himself be possessed by this soul, by this character, if he resembles him, if he finds what is within himself that resembles him.

Regardless of what genre, media or tradition a student with a genuine attraction to the actor’s art will eventually be drawn to, a personal choice akin to a musician choosing a particular instrument as most appropriate for their self-expression, their initial „work on oneself“ training is an essential precursor to this stage. It could be seen as training on a “pre-expressive level,” as Barba (2003: 105) terms it, in that the efficacy of this process “is the measure of her/his autonomy as an individual and an artist.” It is however an area of training that is unfortunately often neglected in HE institutions due to time constraints, yet is arguably the most vital, providing student actors with a firm basis for their artistic and personal development. In this respect, as Barba (2003: 107, his italics) points out, when Stanislavski and Sulerzhitsky first began to develop this form of training at the First Studio: “They discovered that work on oneself as an actor often became work on oneself as an individual. It is impossible to define the border beyond which scenic *ethos* becomes ethics.”

The potential for a student actor’s development during this basal stage of training is therefore extensive if approached as a process with “a value in and of itself – an end, not

a means – which finds one of its social justifications through theatre” (Barba 2003: 106). During his 1967 interview with Schechner Grotowski (1991: 200) stated the following about this complex issue:

We cannot hide our personal, essential things – even if they are sins. On the contrary, if these sins are very deeply rooted – perhaps not even sins, but temptations – we must open the door to the cycle of associations. The creative process consists, however, in not only revealing ourselves, but in structuring what is revealed. If we reveal ourselves with all these temptations, we transcend them, we master them through our consciousness. That is really the kernel of the ethical problem: do not hide that which is basic, it makes no difference whether the material is moral or immoral; our first obligation in art is to express ourselves through our own most personal motives. [...] Self-research is simply the right of our profession, our first duty.

In his typically incisive manner Grotowski identified the crux of a „work on oneself“ process, which is to liberate actors from any ideological constraints that may impinge upon their freedom of expression, even if it is in defiance of existing social norms. Art’s function is not merely to reflect established thinking but to test the boundaries between the acceptable and impermissible. In this respect actors, whom audiences can relate to in blood and flesh, ideas and thoughts, emotions and feelings, soul and spirit, are the most tangible representatives of collective humanity to explore the unknown areas of our mutual existence, and to do so effectively they cannot be constrained by personal prejudices or frightened off by prevailing social taboos. It is not a calling for the faint-hearted, and the sooner those attracted to it without realising what it will demand of them are confronted with these realities, the better for them and the art as well.

The French playwright and philosopher Hélène Cixous, a former collaborator of Mnouchkine, provides an evocative description of what is required from individuals to explore their inner world in her book *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*; namely, “one must have the utmost courage to let go of the ballast of self, to leave oneself unweighted on the celestial platform,” because only then can true transfiguration be experienced, “without which there would be neither joy nor learning” (1998: 137). If there is a single lesson to

be gained from a „work on oneself“ process which outranks all others, then it is this one, which Cixous (1998: 135, her insert) encapsulates below:

... no one can set foot on the sacred planks of the stage, in the hopes of approaching the living heart of the mystery, without having first stripped from head to foot down to one's self: for the aim and the mission of these agents (actors as well as director and author) is to increase the odds of the birth of the You.

In the following section I will examine my experimentations with a basal form of actor training based on the „work on oneself“ process over a three year period to assess whether I managed to address the challenges of conducting this type of work in an HE environment, and achieved any of the aims outlined above.

5.2 Devising a „work on oneself“ process

During my study with the drama students in Australia in 2003, in which the Meisner approach was the basis of all our work, I found that the older participants struggled to open up during repetition exercises, and after six weeks two in their thirties and two in their twenties had withdrawn. Two seventeen year olds also withdrew (one for financial reasons), but only one of the six eighteen year olds, and the single nineteen year old remained throughout the five month course.⁴ In the Kent University study in 2005, working with drama students aged between eighteen and twenty-one, I applied the technique during a „work on a role“ process in workshops which culminated in a production. This was a compromise however, as I tried to convey the principles of the Meisner approach in a less confrontational manner, somewhat defeating the purpose of this form of training, and despite the precaution older students still struggled with the self-revelatory nature of the work, so that after two months three withdrew.⁵ In preparing for this third stage of research I decided to focus on „work on oneself“ even if it meant those uncomfortable with the work might withdraw. I also realised that I needed a different vehicle for instruction as the Meisner technique no longer satisfied all my pedagogic objectives. I therefore had to formulate a new training approach, a process that began in earnest after my return to South Africa in 2009.

My initial idea had been to work with prospective actors in secondary education aged from sixteen to eighteen, partly based on Grotowski’s assertion (1991: 50) that age “is as important in the education of an actor as it is to a pianist or dancer – that is, one should not be older than fourteen when beginning.” I had also concluded that younger students were less guarded and more willing to open themselves to new experiences in order to explore their innate potential.⁶ This outlook was imperative during „work on oneself“ because, as Meisner pointed out, the first lesson is “that you can’t learn to act unless you’re criticised,” and in this respect “you must learn to take criticism objectively,

⁴ The group who started training on 26 April consisted of 17 female students and 2 males. By the end of the first semester in June 1 male and 6 female students had withdrawn. In the second semester 1 female and 1 male exchange student joined the workshops, but only 9 remained actively involved until the final class on 27 September; namely 7 female and 2 male students ranging in age from 17 to 22.

⁵ The group who began training on 9 February consisted of 10 female students and 3 males. By Easter two 20 year old and one 21 year old female students had withdrawn, as well as a male student aged 18.

⁶ I had noticed the same trend with an ensemble I formed in England in 1998 called Horsham Young Players (HYP), ranging in age from 16 to 30. During training I also applied the Meisner technique, and noticed the teenagers were far more open and emotionally available than their older peers.

pertaining only to the work being done” (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 176-177). My ideal target group for the study was therefore grade eleven and twelve students, namely sixteen to eighteen year olds, as I thought they would be emotionally mature enough to undergo training aimed at liberating their authentic natures without being overly self-defensive.

After submitting an application for ethical clearance to conduct the research I sent out letters to ten secondary schools in the Stellenbosch vicinity outlining the study and inviting volunteers to take part. Despite the workshops being gratis the response was disappointing however, even after a follow-up round of letters addressed to the schools’ headmasters. In June the Ethics Committee sent me a report that expressed concerns regarding the videoing of workshops and use of these materials in my thesis. Furthermore, I had begun to doubt whether senior secondary school pupils would be able to commit to an extracurricular training process lasting several months given their academic workloads.⁷ I therefore started to develop misgivings whether my intended course of action was the right one to pursue, re-evaluating my research proposal in terms of who would benefit from the outcomes, which in turn impacted on why I was undertaking it, what I intended to teach, and how best to convey this knowledge. After a period of reflection I decided it might be less problematic to conduct experimental groundwork with older volunteers in an informal setting, and in 2010 I relocated to Ekurhuleni in Gauteng, a populous area where a number of my acquaintances offered to assist me in setting up the study.

During 2009 I had outlined a three-stage training programme comprised of „work on oneself”, „work with others” and „work on a role”. This still entailed basal training as it focussed on developing an individual’s expressive potential rather than the body or voice, although these would inevitably be exercised in the process. I intended to show that the learnings gained from one stage could be carried over to the next, ultimately providing a step-by-step approach to characterisation and performance. The first stage would entail one-on-one work with students to create a personal score of actions, or etude, based on Grotowski’s private work with Cieślak during *The Constant Prince*, although obviously not aimed at inducing a trance state, rather to help them overcome

⁷ Following my return to South African, after seventeen years abroad, I renewed contacts with family and friends, many of whom had children in secondary school. After numerous discussions with parents and the scholars, I realised that their academic demands were more extensive than I had envisioned and even if I accommodated these the continuity of the training programme would be disrupted by exams.

their self-consciousness by first working alone with me before they began working in a group. I also wanted to begin in this manner because I believed it might accelerate the process of them learning the rudimentary elements of acting, like concentration and attention, if there were no distractions from the presence of others. I also hoped to convey the principles that informed the Method of Physical Actions, namely the need for conscious control, physical discipline, precision, and logic when constructing a score, based on Grotowski's assertion (*in* Richards 2003: 130, his insert) that: "One cannot work on oneself (to use the term of Stanislavski), if one is not inside something which is structured and can be repeated, which has a beginning a middle and an end, something in which every element has its logical place, technically necessary."

This then formed the ideological basis of the first stage of training, the „what“ as it were, and although I was still unsure of the „how“ I hoped to determine this while working with different students. The second stage, in which the emphasis was on spontaneous interaction, would again employ the Meisner approach, which I still considered an effective means to convey principles related to communion. The third stage would entail script work so students could learn how to determine a play's super-objective, and thus a character's through line of action, as well as the various methods for transforming oneself into the role. I had therefore devised a conceptual framework, but needed volunteers to help me determine if it was feasible in practice.

In March 2010 I approached the editors of several Ekurhuleni community newspapers and requested that they publish an article outlining my research intentions and the fact that I was looking for volunteers to participate in the study. At the end of the month the *Brakpan Herald* and *Springs Advertiser*, among others, ran the article and I received e-mail enquiries from eleven interested parties to whom I sent more detailed information about the research and training process. I then arranged to meet with the e-mail respondents at a guest lodge in Brakpan on Saturday 10 April, but only four attended. During the meeting I explained that the first phase of training would focus on body-based work, and asked them to find a theme or incident as a basis for their individual etudes. I also determined what times would suit them to attend workshops so I could draw up a schedule.

Given the poor response I approached a private drama teacher who had practiced in the area for three decades to enquire if any of her former students might be interested in participating. After a week of e-mail correspondences with the rest of the initial group and eight students of the drama teacher, I invited them all to another meeting on 17 April. Six of the drama students attended but none of the initial group. I again outlined the first phase of work and requested that they think of a real or imagined evocative incident to serve as a basis for their etudes. The following week I procured a church hall in Brakpan for the workshops⁸ and on 3 May conducted individual sessions with F18a and F24, followed by F18b, F26 and F23a on 4 May, and F23b on 8 May.⁹ After e-mail exchanges with the rest of the interested parties it became clear they were reluctant to commit to the weekly workshops, and I decided to press ahead with the much smaller group than I had initially envisioned.¹⁰

The procedure followed in each workshop session was that I first guided participants through a series of physical and vocal relaxation and stretch exercises to prepare them for the concentrated work to follow. They then performed their etudes, having worked at home to incorporate any elements discovered during the previous week's session. The onus was thus on them to refine their etudes, both to foster a sense of ownership, and so that they served as a training structure which could be elaborated in details as I introduced them to new elements. In this respect the physical structure served as an external form within which the student's inner life could gradually be released as they gained the confidence to work with personal objects. The sessions were therefore accumulative, each building on the one before in an attempt to discover the essence of what each student wanted to convey with their materials. I guided the process through interrogating their score to ensure each moment of action had been clearly conceived and logically thought through. I decided not to video the initial sessions as I wanted them to

⁸ One of the volunteers' father was a minister in the church and helped me gain permission to use this venue. Besides its central location I had wanted the training environment to serve as a „yantra“, to use Grotowski's term (*in* Schechner & Wolford 2001: 301), to induce a changed state in the participants so they could work in a more concentrated manner. In previous studies I had used venues on campus, but found that students struggled to adjust their mindsets from attending classes to working on themselves.

⁹ The formula denotes the participant's gender and age, „F26“ indicating a twenty-six year old female. F18a and F18b were form twelve pupils, while F23a and F26 were teachers, at different schools. F23b was a journalism graduate, and F24, the drama teacher's daughter, a qualified occupational therapist.

¹⁰ I had hoped to work with a group of between 12 and 16 volunteers of mixed genders and ethnicity. This was one of the reasons I decided to conduct the workshops in Ekurhuleni, as there were several mixed-race townships in its municipal area, and I hoped to attract a more diverse range of volunteers.

first settle into the training, but after receiving their signed consent forms (*see appendix item 1*) in the fourth week, I began to record the etudes for later analysis.

In the fifth week starting on 6 June I conducted personal interviews with the participants using a prepared questionnaire (*see appendix item 2*). My decision to adopt a formal approach for the interviews was based on findings during former studies, in which I had experimented with more flexible formats, raising issues relevant to the research in more informal discussions with the volunteers. Although this had allowed them to speak freely, subsequent conversation analysis proved awkward given the breadth of their discourses, and although this stream of consciousness occasionally provided insights that deepened my understanding of how they viewed the work, these nuggets were rare and usually occurred later, once they grasped the aims of the research. I therefore simply gathered personal data about each participant, interspersed with questions to elicit feedback that might help to improve the training process. This was also to remind them that they were participants in a formal research activity, and had responsibilities in this regard.¹¹

From this initial feedback it was apparent that they were still unclear about the exact nature of my research, but were enthused by the training and considered me a good teacher with nothing to improve in either my approach or the work itself. I also provided them with a handout I had prepared based on using the creative imagination, to supplement one that I gave them in the third week which focussed on the need for precision when creating a score of actions. This became a useful means of conveying theoretical information which complimented our practical work, a method that I maintained throughout the course of training.¹²

After the winter vacation I arranged a showing of the etudes on Saturday 10 July, inviting the drama teacher to attend and provide feedback. This was the first occasion that the

¹¹ Although the consent forms outlined the responsibilities of everyone involved in the project I wanted them to realise the importance of their role as co-researchers, to foster a sense of joint ownership in the outcomes of the study and thereby hopefully ensuring their full commitment.

¹² I began making use of handouts during the Australian study to convey information relevant to the work to save class time devoted to lengthy explanations. The handouts clarified any questions students had after a workshop session, so those raised in the following class were filtered. This established a cyclic feedback process necessary in Action Research, and student questions prompted the ideological content of subsequent handouts. Not only did the students benefit from this method of teaching, but as my knowledge increased due to ongoing literary research the handouts became increasingly discursive.

participants saw each other's work, signalling the culmination of the first phase of training. The drama teacher was impressed with the high standard of work and what had been achieved with her former students in such a short period of time.¹³

I had also begun working with pairs on 26 June, giving the participants no forewarning that another would be present so they engaged without anticipation. This was to gauge the feasibility of certain pairings as I wanted them to work in their first language, preferably with similarly aged partners as I believed the more they had in common the less likely tensions would arise during their mutual unmasking. In this respect language barriers often result in misunderstandings during the initial period of interaction when literal meanings of words form the principal basis of communication and subtleties are overlooked. As the students' ability to read each other's behaviour increases however, words become increasingly irrelevant as they react impulsively. At this stage they can interact with anyone. I therefore paired F18a and F18b, and the teachers F23a and F26. As participant F23b spoke no Afrikaans, I paired her with F24 who spoke good English.

Although satisfied with the pairings for the second phase of work, the lack of male participants concerned me as interactions between members of the opposite sex often reveal unadjusted behaviours that same gender partnerships do not. This was an important aspect of the „work with others“ process, as dysfunctional tendencies are often based on fear. Fortunately, a former student of the drama teacher who had graduated from the University of Pretoria in 2009 with a BA Drama degree contacted me to ask if he could join the workshops. I began to work with him in June, and by mid-July M21 was ready to join the group.¹⁴

¹³ F18b and F23a had eight hours of class time spread over seven and nine sessions respectively. In the latter's case she was too emotional during her first session on 4 May to work on her etude, and came to a class on 7 May, when we began to conceptualise her ideas. Despite a shaky start she became the most open participant in the group. F18a and F26 had seven hours of contact time spread over six classes, while F24 had six hours spread over five classes. F23b, the strongest actress in group, had five hours of contact time spread over four sessions, but worked extensively on her own.

¹⁴ I wanted to avoid working with drama graduates as I felt their training would compromise my ability to gauge the effect of mine on their development. Although F18a, F23a, F24 and F26 had undergone training with the drama teacher in their primary school years, these early teachings did not encumber our work. F23b had performed in school productions, but had no formal acting training, and F18b had no former experience, or training, which meant she was an ideal candidate for the study. I conducted two meetings with M21 before I started to work with him, unconvinced he would be a good addition to the group despite the fact that he spoke fluent English and would be a good partner for F23b. In the end his amicable nature won me over, but his HE training had conditioned him to such an extent that unlearning his ingrained performance habits became near impossible.

By the time the group came together to show their etudes I had worked at least once with each pair and began to supplement the general handouts with ones that explained specific exercises of the Meisner technique in detail. During previous studies several weeks of training had been lost while participants struggled with the mechanics of the Activity Exercise in particular, which entailed combining difficult physical tasks with compelling reasons for doing them, and a strong sense of urgency (*see appendix item 3*). Despite demonstrating several examples in class, the initial period was usually hit and miss as most exercises lacked all the necessary elements, which compromised the improvised scenarios. Although there is a great value in trainee actors learning how to conceive imaginary circumstances to self-stimulate their organisms, it takes time to develop this skill, and is ultimately an ancillary aspect of learning to react impulsively to others. I therefore decided to focus on eliciting spontaneous behaviours from the participants, bringing a selection of activities to the initial second phase workshops and helping them conceive plausible fantasies as to why mending a broken plate or piecing together a torn up letter might have a life-altering reason attached to it. In this respect I had hoped that giving them examples and helping them to use affective personal materials in imaginary situations might accelerate their ability to do it by themselves, but we were unable to achieve the level of work I had hoped for in the two months I devoted to this stage, and it was the least constructive in terms of the overall process.

Although all seven participants struggled to reveal their authentic natures, in the end only F18a and F24 withdrew from the training, both citing work obligations as the reason.¹⁵ During the final week of August I conducted a second round of interviews with the remaining participants, again using a prepared questionnaire (*see appendix item 4*), which marked the culmination of the second stage of training, and in October we began the third phase, namely „work on a role“.

¹⁵ F18a was reluctant to commit to the training from the start, although she showed potential to become a strong actress. During a private discussion in August she told me she wanted to become a teacher and had to ensure her grades were high enough to allow her to study further. Although a valid reason for withdrawing, I suspect that she realised she lacked the will to engage with the demands of the actor's profession. F24 struggled to reveal her true nature and the second stage work unsettled her. She had also moved to Johannesburg for work reasons, and commuting to Brakpan for classes became difficult.

In the months leading up to the final stage of training I had read numerous plays, looking for a vehicle to accommodate the group's age and gender composition, and offering the flexibility of bilingual performance. Ideally, I wanted participants to work in their first language as there was already a sense of otherness when speaking in a different language I wanted to avoid as it might prohibit a true identification with the character. I also looked for material requiring a high degree of analytical and imaginative work, so that the process of creating an authentic character presented a challenge for each participant.

I eventually realised that the only feasible option was to split the group, settling on Richard Findlay's¹⁶ *Roep van die naguiltjie (Call of the nightjar)* for the Afrikaans students (F18b, F23a and F26), and Tennessee Williams' *Talk to me like the rain and let me listen* for the English students (F23b and M21). Findlay's one-act featured three sisters with leprosy living alone in a house, with the action occurring in a living room, and Williams's semi-biographical one-act featured a young man and woman trapped in an emotionally dysfunctional relationship in a Manhattan bedsit.¹⁷ As both took place in a single room I could stage them as companion pieces in an intimate setting, as I intended to seat the audience as close as possible to the action to gauge whether the actors could perform in a fully concentrated manner despite their proximity.

This was an acid test of a student actor's abilities in my view, namely when they had to work within touching distance of those watching them and did not feel intimidated. When I had worked with young actors in the past some resorted to old performance habits when confronted with an audience, despite months of training. Although not always apparent to an audience, I could see when students resorted to theatrics and their internal connection with the character was broken. Although they could still give a competent technical performance, the sense of „I am“ was lost and their feelings could not be organically stimulated by the scenic circumstances. I therefore deliberately chose emotionally demanding materials so that this important final lesson could be conveyed to the remaining participants.

¹⁶ Findlay was a South African philatelic artist in the latter half of the twentieth century. He wrote the play in 1983 based on a myth about Jochemus Erasmus who supposedly locked his daughters up in the tower of a castle that he built in Pretoria in 1903, namely the so-called „Spookhuis“ („Ghost house“).

¹⁷ The play was written around 1953 and the characters may have been based on Williams, an alcoholic and homosexual, and his schizophrenic sister Rose, with whom he had a very close relationship.

In the ensuing months I rehearsed the two casts separately, working for ever greater simplicity in staging, so they were eventually able to portray their characters without costumes, makeup or properties. This stripping away of everything unnecessary so that their acting skills were laid bare may have been a *via negativa* approach in the tradition of Grotowskian poor theatre, but I did not employ it for aesthetic reasons, rather to ensure the students realised we were still engaged in process-orientated work, and not merely rehearsing a production.

I converted a corner of a large room in a building a friend owned into a makeshift theatre with a slightly raised, semi-circular stage area approximately three metres deep and five across, where we performed the two plays, back-to-back, on 3, 4 and 5 December. I had also conducted final interviews with the five participants on 2 December, again using a prepared questionnaire (*see appendix item 5*), which meant that after the last performance, to which I invited the drama teacher, a prominent film director,¹⁸ and a casting agent, to provide feedback (*see video clip 1*), I was able to wrap up the ten month project.

The following day I left Gauteng and returned to Stellenbosch to prepare for my new position as a lecturer in the Drama Department, commencing January 2011.¹⁹

¹⁸ I had worked with Cedric Sundström on several films during the 1990s, and wanted his opinion on the truthfulness of the participant's performances in the intimate setting as a much experienced director of actors working in front of a camera.

¹⁹ I was invited to interview for the position in September 2010.

5.3 Applying „work on oneself“ in HE

Despite the small number of participants in the Gauteng study it turned out to be an ideal opportunity to experiment with different approaches, working with a committed group whose feedback during interviews and discussions in workshops and rehearsals provided me with a wealth of empirical data for further analysis. I had also prepared twenty general class handouts, and nine relating to specific exercises or elements of the „system“, which had allowed me to interrogate the ideological basis of the work. I furthermore generated sixty pages of reflexive writings by ensuring that I documented my thoughts on a daily basis, and drafted a lengthy introduction to my thesis.²⁰ It had therefore been a productive period, and I felt certain I had sufficient data to complete my thesis, considering that my five co-researchers also promised to forward their reflective journals to me. Little did I realise that my engagement with drama students in an official capacity in a formal HE environment would raise several new questions.

Being allowed an opportunity to conduct practical acting classes with a second year and three first year groups was an unexpected boon in terms of my research. Although the Gauteng study showed I did not have to solely rely on the Meisner approach to convey the „system“’s elements, I was still looking for a suitable alternative. Although I believed the first phase of physically-orientated work had been the correct approach to commence the training, the final products had become performance pieces rather than personal *katas* (see video clip 2 of *F23b’s etude*). This was partly due to the high degree of emotional investment the participants had put into their creations, which I initially encouraged but started having doubts about as the emphasis on detail and precision began to suffer as a result. I had also begun to question whether a one-on-one approach was the right option, as students learnt from observing each other’s work, a fundamental part of basal training. I certainly did not have the time to engage twenty-nine first year students²¹ in private training, especially as each group only had a two-hour²² acting class per week, and given

²⁰ My supervisor at that stage was Prof. Temple Hauptfleisch, who retired at the end of 2010. I ended up not using any of these materials in my final thesis as it was arguably far too soon to write it up.

²¹ This was the number I worked with during the first semester, while two groups, comprising 17 students, worked with a different lecturer. At the start of the second semester we exchanged a group, which meant that I only worked with two groups, or 18 students in total, throughout the whole year.

²² Classes ended 10 minutes before the hour to give students time to get from one location to the next, which meant I had 110 minutes a week for training, about 11 minutes per student for one-on-one work.

their academic workloads, and mine, finding extra time was difficult. Furthermore, the three-stage approach I used in Gauteng had to be adapted to accommodate the four term structure and two-month winter vacation, which meant that work undertaken in each semester had to ideally be self-contained. I was thus forced to reconsider my entire approach.²³

During the interviews at the end of the first phase of training in Gauteng I asked the participants what aspect they had found most challenging. Their replies inevitably centred on the fact that they had to work sans scripts to create their etudes, but F23b identified an element I had not consciously considered, but which had evolved organically as a result of the physically-orientated work, namely working with imaginary objects, or „mime“ as she called it (*see video clip 3*). Although I did not take full cognisance of it at the time, despite all six etudes incorporating it to some extent, it became a pivotal part of our work in the third phase (*see video clips 4 & 5, extracts of the two Gauteng productions*).

Using mime in training was not derived from a personal interest in the form, which, as Jacques Lecoq (2006: 67, 68) pointed out, “is an art in itself,” namely “the language of an actor who has been forbidden to speak,” rather because I began to realise its benefit in developing concentration and attention to detail. In this respect Stanislavski (*in Toporkov 2001: 116*) believed that “[e]xercises with imaginary objects develop concentration, an essential quality in acting,” and helped actors to acquire a “„diction“ of physical actions.” It also exercised the imagination, “the actor’s most important muscle” as Mnouchkine (1999: 171) described it. Furthermore, handling invisible objects strengthened sensory perception, according to Strasberg (1988: 132). These were all key learnings during the initial stage of a student actor’s training.

I was also intrigued by Sudakov’s claim (*in Cole 1995: 92*) that: “The ability to master one’s attention in full, regardless of any circumstances, and always to cleave to the necessary object is a fundamental rule for the actor. Once such mastery has been obtained the action is then executed as a reflex, a motor-discharge without any halts.” Bearing in

²³ There was also the matter of assessment to take into account, which meant that during the practical exams at the end of each semester a „product“ of sorts had to be presented to two internal examiners. I found this irksome as it meant that some form of rehearsed work had to be undertaken each semester, which compromised the process orientated „work on oneself“.

mind he made this statement in the early 1930s after serving as Stanislavski's directing assistant in the 1920s, I believed there was a link between learning how to wholly engage with objects, whether real or imaginary, and understanding how the Method of Physical Actions worked. In this respect Stanislavski (*in* Toporkov 2001: 116, his quotes) asserted "[t]he workings of our five senses can be broken down into the tiniest physical actions," and "for the actor who is a true artist" exercises with imaginary objects were an essential part of a daily "clean-up". I therefore decided to incorporate mime in the training at Stellenbosch University as it might allow me to convey foundational elements of the „system“ to the students like attention to objects, concentration, imagination, sensory awareness and willpower, as well as introducing them to the Method of Physical Actions.

Having more latitude with the first year students in terms of assessment requirements, I spent the first term working on „private moment“ exercises, as Strasberg referred to them, which I delineated in their first two class handouts (*see appendix items 6 & 7*). In the second term I introduced them to the Meisner technique, and during the end of semester exams they presented improvised Activity Exercises to the examiners. Even though each student pair conceived the imaginary circumstances within which their scenarios would take place and shared pertinent information, they never rehearsed together and their actual encounters occurred for the first time in the exam. In this respect their interactions were totally spontaneous even though each had prepared for the event by choosing appropriate clothing to wear, and properties their „characters“ might use.

My decision to present this form of work rather than rehearsed scenes was a risky experiment, but I wanted to determine whether the training they had received in twenty-four hours of class time had equipped them to work impulsively in a relatively structured framework, despite not having learnt any dialogue or having a predetermined outcome in mind. It was therefore an attempt to integrate the process-orientated „work on oneself“ and „work with others“ in an actual performance context to gauge if the students had begun to develop the ability to engage in an emotionally available, instinctive and sincere manner with their acting partners, despite being observed by others. Although I provided the two examiners with an overview of the training and a template to help them allocate marks (*see appendix items 8 & 9*), it was clear that they struggled to evaluate the work.

At the culmination of the Australian study I encountered a similar problem when a panel of theatre practitioners failed to distinguish between rehearsed work and spontaneous

expression occurring moment-to-moment as the actors focussed their attention on each other and paid scant attention to the onlookers, which meant that technical considerations relating to clear diction and projection were ignored as they tried to react impulsively and authentically. Despite hoping that my colleagues might make this distinction, they had no experience of the technique and were thus unfamiliar with its aims. During interviews I conducted with the first year students afterwards however, who all observed each other's exam work, again using a prepared questionnaire (*see appendix item 10*), it was apparent that they were able to „read“ what they had witnessed, and personally identified with their peers' struggle to be emotionally available and react instinctively. Most were impressed by the standard of work (*see video clips 6 – 9, and appendix item 11 for the consent form to use video materials generated at SUN*).

With the second year students I had started with the Meisner training, knowing they had to do scene work in the second term for assessment purposes. In many respects it was too late for them to undertake basal training as they had already developed fixed self-images, which meant a „work on oneself“ process was largely ineffectual. While rehearsing the second term plays I followed a similar process as I did in Gauteng by stripping away everything superfluous so that they interacted without costumes, make-up or properties (*see video clip 10*), a reductive approach relying on mime which did not overly impress the examiners. Despite confirming that psychological work aimed at liberating the true self should ideally occur before students acquired technical skills, there was little benefit in terms of my core research working with this group. I nonetheless conducted interviews with them at the end of the year using a prepared questionnaire (*see appendix item 12*) to gain their feedback on how I might improve the course. The youngest student in the group, only nineteen at the time of the interview, nevertheless made insightful comments about the training's effect on her (*see video clip 11*).

During the winter vacation I returned to Ekurhuleni to conduct follow-up interviews with the participants in the Gauteng study, eight months after they had completed the training. The fact that I left for Stellenbosch immediately after the performances on 5 December was due to both personal and professional reasons,²⁴ and although I tried to ensure there

²⁴ My father, who lived in the Western Cape, passed away in late November and I had to attend his memorial service. I also had to attend meetings at the Drama Department in early December.

was a sense of closure for everyone involved, I nonetheless wanted to ensure that this had indeed been the case.

On 28 June I conducted a joint interview with participants F23a and F26, during which I used an informal, conversational approach rather than a prepared questionnaire. I learnt that the latter had become engaged, a positive development as she had been emotionally deadened at the start of the training due to a failed long-term relationship. F23a was also a lot more confident than at the start of the process, and the two had become close friends (*see video clip 12 and appendix item 13 for an English transcription of the conversation*). On 6 July I met with F18b, F23b and M21, again conducting a joint, informal interview with them. There had also been personal growth with all three, in particular F18b who underwent a personality change from a somewhat brazen teenager to a composed young woman (*see video clip 13*). What I found of particular interest in terms of the research was F23b's recollection of her final night's performance, as it was clear she had entered into a state of „I am being“ and experienced dual-consciousness (*see video clip 14 of her climactic scene, and video clips 15 & 16 of her description*). Student M21 was also in demand for his dramatic acting ability after the training, which had formerly been his Achilles heel (*see video clip 17*).

During the winter vacation I continued my literary research and worked on my thesis, which had been put on hold due to my responsibilities as a lecturer. I was still unsure of what approach to adopt with the first year students during the third term, although I intended to devote the fourth term to script work to convey the elements underscoring „work on a role“. The first semester's „work on oneself“ and „work with others“ processes were therefore over and I had no intention of returning to either. Instead I needed a new vehicle to serve as a preparation for the final phase. In my reflexive writings I had speculated that this might be to first explore the physical aspects of role creation, namely a „work on character“ process which focussed on embodiment during transformation. Although the students had classes in movement and speech, I wanted them to acquire a holistic approach to character creation that still formed part of their basal training, rather than acquiring technical skills for their own sake.

My thinking in this regard stemmed from a statement Stanislavski (*in Zon 1955: 486*) made in 1938 about his intention to write a book entitled *About Embodiment* after *About*

Living Through followed by *Work on a Role*. The first two correlate with the two parts of his „great book“, which the Hapgoods published as *An Actor Prepares* and *Building A Character*. In this respect the first chapter of the latter is entitled „Towards A Physical Characterisation“, which delineates its focus, but according to Benedetti (2008: xi) only one or two chapters were completed at the time of his death, and “*An Actor’s Work on Himself on a Role* was never even started.” During a masterclass with the students at his Opera-Dramatic Studio in June 1938, a mere two months before his death, Stanislavski (in Benedetti 2008: 147, 148) had the following to say to them:

When do you start being false? When the voice isn’t working, when it isn’t placed. [...] You have to do exercises every day. Not only on the words but on the whole of your physical apparatus. You need a great deal of fire and energy to overcome the bad impression you make on audiences with badly spoken lines, wooden hands and all the rest.

Bearing in mind the students began their „work on oneself“ training in November 1935 and „work on a role“ in the Spring of 1937, his focus on technical proficiency stemmed from their work on embodiment after their expressive potential had been liberated. The second year of training was therefore a pivotal part of the student actor’s foundational development, an area I had neglected in the past as I considered it part of their movement and voice work. Yet, according to Toporkov (2001: 150), it was an area that Stanislavski emphasised during the *Tartuffe* rehearsals, stating “one of the most important elements in an actor’s technique [is] giving full physical expression to a role, characterising it externally.” This did not refer to movement in general, a type of training he opposed,²⁵ rather to what he termed “[p]urposeful and productive action” in *Building A Character* (1986: 45). It meant being aware of the mechanics of an action, namely how it related to the different parts of a limb and to the whole body, as well as how the vocal apparatus worked, a conscious mastery that he framed in the following manner (1986: 69, 83): “When an actor controls his movements and adds to them words and voice it seems to me it becomes an harmonious accompaniment to beautiful singing.”

²⁵ During a conversation with Toporkov regarding his role as Sam Weller, the manservant in Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers*, Stanislavski (in Toporkov 2001: 152) stated: “You’re young, very agile, you move well but do you know what your purpose is? Agility for its own sake? That’s for the circus.”

Following this line of reasoning I realised that I had to incorporate a „work on character“ process in the overall training programme. After checking with the movement and voice teachers that my intended work would not clash with what they had planned for the first year students in the second semester, I began to look for a suitable training vehicle and settled on what later came to be known as „the singing animal exercise“ (*see appendix item 14*). This stemmed from a personal experience while a member of an ensemble in England in 1997, when I played Napoleon in a stage adaptation of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, a challenging experience in terms of characterisation and incorporating the traits of a boar in my performance, which was well received.²⁶ At the time I was in my thirties and it had taken all my technical skills to embody a pig in an authentic, non-clichéd manner. During the ensuing years, while focussing on the psychological aspects of „work on oneself“, I had forgotten about this experience, but during my literary research I discovered that both Adler and Strasberg considered animal exercises an essential part of actor training, and in this regard Adler asserted the following in her book *The Art of Acting* (2000: 92, 93):

The purpose of the animal exercises is to rid the actor of his social mask and to free him from his inhibitions. To become an animal, to make non-human movements and noises reduces the actor’s fear of making a fool of himself. I want you to experience the freedom of the stage, to dare to do anything. [...] As an animal, you have a firm sense of your identity, which gives you the grounding from which you can behave spontaneously. [...] Imitating an animal will teach you an enormous amount about your body.

Strasberg (1988: 147, 148), in *A Dream of Passion*, states the animal exercise “helps the actor to create a particular type of human being – a character – that is separate from himself,” and “[forces] him to deal with the character’s behaviour rather than relying on his own feelings.” Despite their different views on acting, the fact that both endorsed this form of training was significant, and I decided to use the *Animal Farm* theme, primarily because domestic animals were readily available for the students to study, but gave them *carte blanche* to interpret it however they chose to. My only condition was that they worked as an ensemble, which meant that each first year group devised their own short production in which I had minimal involvement. Actual class work for the term entailed

²⁶ “Rufus Swart as the top pig Napoleon proved the most effective of the characters giving a powerful performance in the key role.” David Briffett, Art’s Editor, *West Sussex County Times*, June 1997.

each student having to sing an a cappella song each week so they became more conscious of their vocal abilities to complement their physical explorations.

During this phase many confronted personal insecurities regarding their voices, as well as discovering previously overlooked aspects of their psychophysical instrument. I also had the groups show their work in an open class in September, and used a peer-to-peer assessment approach to evaluate the term's work.²⁷ In this regard the drama department held open classes on Friday afternoons to afford students an opportunity to present their work to an audience of all four year groups. For first year students it was understandably a daunting prospect to make their debuts as singing animals, which required a great deal of courage, or actor's faith, the most important learning I had hoped to convey to them during this phase (*see appendix item 15*). Although a challenging experience, most became quite fearless as a result, which was revealed during the interviews I conducted with them in November at the end of the semester, again using a prepared questionnaire (*see appendix item 16, and video clips 18 – 20*).

After the third term's ensemble work, which was a lesson in itself for most students as they had to learn how to contribute their ideas in a group context, negotiating their value with others equally creative, and in the absence of an authority figure, I asked them to work in pairs with scripts. In this regard I had already informed them that we would be working with texts during the first semester, so they had sufficient time to find material. I also let them choose their own partners for this final phase of work, allowing them maximum creative freedom, although it did not always result in the most compatible partner combinations. This too was a lesson of sorts, as I hoped they might realise that artistic growth occurred when engaging with those whose work you respected, even if you did not socialise together. Most importantly, I did not want them to feel as though I was merely directing them, rather that we were still engaged in process-orientated work, even though the outcome would be examined.

I employed a similar process as I had in the Gauteng study, asking the students to create character biographies, learn their lines by rote and only then to work together exchanging

²⁷ I provided my twenty-six first year students with a template for allocating marks listing the names of each individual with four assessment criteria, namely „Animalisation“, „Vocalisation“, „Humanisation“ and „Singing“, that had to be scored out of ten. The template also required the markers to indicate who they were, and proved an effective means of determining how they rated each other's work.

lines as though engaging in a Word Repetition exercise. Considering that I had twenty-six actors simultaneously working on thirteen short plays, it was also a practical measure to let them undertake preliminary work before I became involved teaching them how to apply active analysis. From the final interviews it was apparent that most benefited from this systematic approach and understood how the preceding training stages contributed to this final one (*see video clip 21*).

Although it was necessary to round off their training with text work, and it was evident that some students underwent a total transformation into their characters, I felt as though the forty-eight hours of contact time throughout the year may have been better utilised if had I concentrated on selected elements, instead of trying to convey the entire „system“ to them. Despite supplementing the practical work with twenty-one handouts, including two essay assignments on concentration/attention and the use of gestures, which made the course more substantial, I nonetheless questioned whether what the students learnt had penetrated deep enough to provide them with the foundation that I hoped it would. On a positive note it was evident that there had been significant personal growth for many, in particular with respect to their self-confidence (*see video clip 22*). Due to my misgivings I spent the summer vacation reviewing the video materials generated during the year, engaging in reflexive writings and considering how I might simplify the course without diluting its content.

During the final interviews a common complaint amongst the first year students had been that they only had two hours per week acting practical classes. Students in my groups also felt their peers in the other two would have benefited from undergoing the same training, so that there was more uniformity of knowledge across their entire year group.²⁸ I conveyed these concerns to my colleagues during a meeting in December, and as a result two streams of training were agreed upon for the 2012 first year student intake; one devoted to teaching stage skills, and the other focussed on conveying the techniques and theories of key twentieth century theatre practitioners, which I would be responsible for. The benefit of this arrangement was that the students could still be assessed in a traditional manner, namely their ability to act using text-based materials, whereas I could

²⁸ The group I started working with in the second semester (*see note 22*) were disadvantaged from the start not having undergone the same training process, nor having a theoretical foundation based on the twelve handouts I prepared during the first semester, and the two essay assignments.

focus on process-orientated work that emphasised self development, which would inevitably influence their artistic expression. It also meant I could work with the entire first year group throughout the year, so the forty-eight hours of contact time could be used to systematically develop their personal abilities without having to rehearse plays for examination purposes.

In terms of my ongoing investigation it was an ideal opportunity, as the previous year's work had provided me with some idea of how to devise a training approach to comply with the four term structure, and how to maximise the limited time available for practical training by making extensive use of class handouts. In this respect I had also taught first year acting theory during the first semester in 2011, and despite it only being an hour per week class time, I introduced them to Stanislavski and Meyerhold's views on acting and theatre using handouts supplementing those my practical groups received. I therefore tried to integrate theory with praxis, although this process was curtailed during the second semester due to a colleague taking the theory class, and compromised because I only worked with some of the students in practical classes. In 2012 however, I was afforded the opportunity of working with the entire first year group in both the acting practical and theory classes for the entire academic year – a near perfect opportunity to test my findings after a decade of research.

5.4 Defining a basal training process

Given its facilities and personnel complement, the target first year intake per annum at Stellenbosch University's Drama Department was fifty acting and ten technical students. The stringent selection process, which included auditions, resulted in only a third of applicants being invited to register for a course considered one of the best of its kind in the country due to the professional standing of several staff members and the success of former students in the local industry. To meet the annual quota a larger number of prospective students were invited to register each year as some inevitably changed their minds about study direction or preferred institution, however in 2012, sixty-one enrolled for the first year acting course. Considering that in 2011 the forty-six acting students comprised five groups, in 2012 they were divided into four, which meant my two hours of contact time per group per week had to be carefully managed to ensure that each phase of training was completed in its allocated term. To meet this challenge handouts played a more pivotal role in my teaching approach than before, familiarising students with the language of acting, as I believed that precision should start with how we communicated during practical work. The handouts thus became carefully prepared *yantras* addressing issues that arose during the weekly classes with all four groups, as well as introducing new elements in the training process. They also became a means to interrogate my grasp of the work, a heightened form of reflection that compelled me to crystallise my own thinking so I could share it with the students. Bearing in mind that they also attended weekly theory classes, these sessions often became forums for rich discourse as the entire year group exchanged their perceptions of the practical work, and the various (integrated) theories that informed it.

During the first term I again employed the private moment exercise as the basis of our work, but students were no longer permitted to talk on imaginary mobile telephones, a freedom I had allowed the previous year that compromised the precision of their physical actions, often turning their etudes into mini-melodramas. As a result of this adjustment a more concentrated level of engagement with their invisible objects was achieved, evident during a combined class on 20 March in the final week of the term, during which representatives from all four groups demonstrated their etudes. I invited a student from the 2011 intake who had been strong in this particular phase of work to provide feedback,

and the advice he offered his younger peers reflected his understanding of the training a year on (*see video clips 23 & 24 of his 2011 etude and 2012 commentary*).

The second term's work was again based on the Meisner technique, and at the end of the semester, improvised Activity Exercises were again presented to examiners. Although a midyear assessment was a prescribed part of the course, I again wanted to gauge how individuals would react when they had to work in front of their entire peer group. The exams were thus the first opportunity all four groups had to see each other's second phase work. Although I again provided the examiners with a marking template outlining the aims of the training and the criteria that ought to be considered (*see appendix item 17*), my attempt to familiarise them with the mechanics of a technique they had no personal experience of again proved ineffectual. In order to gain student feedback, I e-mailed them a prepared questionnaire (*see appendix item 18*), rather than conducting on-camera interviews. Although this was partly due to the fact that most had gone home for the winter vacation immediately after their practical exams, it was also to determine whether this approach would allow them to be more reflective, which proved to be the case with some (*see appendix items 19 – 22*).²⁹

At the conclusion of the first semester I felt that the „work on oneself“ and „work with others“ modules had been refined and required little additional adjustment. Although not all the students benefited equally from both processes, most did, as was evident from the feedback; a positive result considering they only had ten hours of class time per term.³⁰ I had also provided them with twenty-one pages of specifically prepared handouts, using a format which distinguished between the elements and principles of the „system“ by separating them into tiers, and providing definitions of the terms (*see appendix item 23*). I therefore felt confident that I had employed this pedagogic tool more effectively than in the previous studies, even though I had not yet created a template for each week's training process, which was my overarching objective.³¹

²⁹ The twenty students whose responses to the four questions used were selected at random. Their answers are verbatim, as written in their responses, and appear in the same order under each question.

³⁰ Although terms consisted of either six or seven weeks, each group lost at least one workshop due to public holidays. As students spent five to ten minutes on warm-ups at the start of a session and had to leave ten minutes before the end, ten hours per term was all I realistically had available for training.

³¹ Besides the modular, term-to-term programme, I also hoped to create class-to-class breakdowns that identified the elements and principles to be conveyed in each session. This was not to develop a recipe type approach to actor training, rather to ensure that the process was transparent for everyone involved.

In July 2012 I delivered a paper entitled „Reclaiming Logic: Applying the intellect in characterisation and performance“ at the 7th International Conference on the Arts in Society at Liverpool’s John Moore University. The title reflected my belief that logic was a vital mental faculty that had to be incorporated in the actor’s creative process, instead of viewing it as an obstruction to spontaneous behaviour. It was partly for this reason that I wanted my students to understand the theory informing their practical training so they developed a logical appreciation of the work as reflexive practitioners who could articulate their creative activities, and so they could construct performance vehicles based on the ideology of the Method of Physical Actions that would engage their higher level mental processes. In this regard I agreed with Stanislavski (*in Zon 1955: 475, his italics*) that “*feelings* are the target value in art,” the most powerful motivators of human behaviour in life and on the stage, but they had to be lured into play, and using logic was one such manner of baiting the trap. So too with developing a student actor’s courage, which directly influenced their willpower, the essence of Grotowski’s approach. It was with these thoughts in mind I returned to Stellenbosch at the end of July to commence the third term’s work with the first year students.

During the vacation I had also prepared handouts on Grotowski, on whom I wanted to focus during theory classes as a logical continuation of the students’ introduction to Meyerhold and Stanislavski. With regard to their second semester’s practical work, I chose not to engage in script work after consulting with my colleague who taught the second stream of training, as his emphasis was on textual materials, and we agreed it might confuse students due to our approaches being so dissimilar. It was a difficult decision however, as it meant I would not be able to convey the elements relating to „work on a role“, but the upside was that his work with them would form the basis of their end of year exams. With regard to the third term’s practical work, I again wanted the students to sing, as the 2011 intake all agreed that overcoming their fear of singing in public had been one of the most beneficial aspects of their training. In this respect I again wanted the students to create their own offerings for an open class presentation, but realised that unsupervised work in groups of fifteen might prove too difficult for them to manage. I thus divided them into pairs, trios and quartets, but with the freedom to create a five-minute performance piece based on any song or a medley. The resultant „First Year Musical Jamboree“ presented on 7 September was a special occasion as all twenty-one acts, singing a cappella, but made-up and in costume, had their own style and

interpretation of materials ranging from gospel to rap (*see appendix item 24 for the programme*). Unlike the singing animal exercise, in which the physical characterisations often overshadowed the students' vocal abilities, the 2012 intake had an opportunity to showcase both their singing and personalities in a charming, infectious manner. This was a valuable personal lesson for me, namely that one should not discount the benefit of making training fun, as well as instructive.

During an open class on 20 April a number of the first year students were supposed to show their etudes, but due to other items on the agenda taking longer than expected there were only a few minutes available at the end. Rather than defer the showing until the next week, I asked three students from different groups to do their etudes simultaneously, working in the same performance space and in each other's line of sight. The aim of this impromptu experiment was to determine whether they could maintain their discipline and focus despite doing their etudes together, and with an audience watching. All three did, even after I requested they repeat their etudes, again doing them together.³² I realised that this was a significant finding as it meant the physical structures created in the first term might serve as a foundation for more interactive work. We were already deeply engaged with the Meisner training at that stage however, which meant I had no opportunity to explore my hunch further. So too during the third term, which also had set objectives. In the fourth term however, I was freed from having to engage in text-based work, which meant I could further investigate the possibilities of this accidental occurrence.

Bearing in mind that at the start of the fourth term in mid-September 2012 I had reached a point where my findings derived from a decade of experimentation on three continents had coalesced into a relatively clear idea of how to conduct a „work on oneself“ process, there was still the question of why I considered this training beneficial to be answered. Besides the obvious benefits, such as helping them to become emotionally available and confident when engaging with others, and more courageous when working in front of an audience, I needed to ascertain whether it actually benefited their creative abilities. In this regard it is worth noting Brook's definition of actors in the extract below taken from his book *The Shifting Point* (1989: 232-133, his quote):

³² The reason I asked the students to repeat their etudes was to demonstrate the precision of the work to colleagues who did not realise they were carefully structured pieces, instead thinking them improvised. After the students again went through their routines, exactly as before, it dawned on them that it was in fact highly disciplined work that engaged the students' full attention, without any self-consciousness.

A real actor is an imitation of a real person. What do I mean by a “real” person? A real person is someone who is open in all parts of himself, a person who has developed himself to the point where he can open himself completely – with his body, with his intelligence, with his feelings, so that none of these channels are blocked. [...] First, the actor must work on his body, so that his body becomes open, responsive and unified in all its responses. Then the actor must develop his emotions, so that the emotions are not just emotions on the crudest level – crude emotions are the manifestations of a bad actor. A good actor means that he has developed in himself the capacity to feel, appreciate and express a range of emotions from the crudest to the most refined. And an actor has to develop his knowledge, and then his understanding, to the point where his mind has to come into play at its most alert, so as to appreciate the significance of what he’s doing.

Brook’s definition was written in 1987 after he had spent four decades in the theatre, and is particularly wise as it embraces all three major twentieth century trends insofar as Western actor training is concerned. The first, focussing on the body, can be traced to Meyerhold’s Biomechanics,³³ the second to Stanislavski’s psychotechnique, and the third to Brecht’s notion of actor-dialecticians. Although these aspects should all ideally be integrated in a holistic acting approach, there are no teacher-trainers I am aware of that are equally adept in all these areas, considering the physical spectrum includes voice work, a discipline supported by many theories and methods of how to condition a student’s vocal potential, as with techniques for body-work, a specialism equally influenced by various ideologies. Although, as F. M. Alexander (1985: 21, his italics and quotes) stated in 1932, “it is *impossible* to separate „mental“ and „physical“ processes in any form of human activity,”³⁴ this idea of an integrated, psychophysical approach, now embraced by many, inevitably means that „body-based practitioners“ throw in a bit of

³³ I am aware that Meyerhold borrowed from several sources to provide the basis of the classes he gave in stage movement from 1914 onwards, including techniques associated with the commedia dell’arte, “Jaques-Dalcroze, Miss Isadora Duncan, Miss Loïe Fuller, the circus, the variety theatre, [and] the Chinese and Japanese theatres” (Braun 1998: 146, 149); but after he synthesised these influences, by the early 1920s Biomechanics had become a system of actor training that was relevant in its own right.

³⁴ Frederick Matthias Alexander was an Australian actor and originator of the „Alexander Technique“, a method of improving the use of the body based on the idea that an incorrect use of the self is the root cause of human suffering, reflected in the title of his classic book *The Use of the Self: Its Conscious Direction in Relation to Diagnosis, Functioning and the Control of Reaction*.

psychology for good measure, and vice versa, rather than anyone having conceived a reliable means of working on the actor's intellect, psyche, soma, voice and „spirit“ all at the same time. In my own case, I accepted the fact that there were others more proficient than me in most areas of a student's education once they had identified what specialist directions they wanted to pursue; but I still believed there was a value in the work that I did with them at a basal level, namely the stage at which they discovered themselves and their artistic potential – even if justifying the benefits of this type of training to those unfamiliar with it was difficult. In this respect I harboured doubts whether a „work on oneself“ process would improve their acting abilities, a question I intended to address during the fourth and final term in 2012.

The acclaimed Russian filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky, in his book *Sculpting In Time*, defined the ideal film actor as follows (1989: 144): “[S]omeone capable of accepting whatever rules of the game are put to him, easily and naturally, with no sign of strain; to remain spontaneous in his reactions to any improvised situation.” This became a template for the fourth term's work, in that I wanted to gauge if the students could be presented with any scenario without forewarning or even knowing who their partners would be, and could portray someone in those circumstances. The only performance structure they were allowed was their first term private moment exercises, but taken out of the context in which they were initially conceived to suit the instant scenarios their classmates and I made up for them to enact. These impromptu exercises showed that they could interact in a wholly spontaneous, unselfconscious manner despite the proximity of an audience, totally committing to the given circumstances and each other's imaginary situation with actor's faith after only forty hours training. It made me realise the imperative of having a physical framework to support improvisational work, as the scenarios resembled Activity Exercises, but without the preparation needed beforehand. In this regard the exercises were completely spontaneous, yet required each participant to instantly access their emotions, creative imagination, instincts and power of logic (*see video clip 25*).

During the course of the fourth term that we engaged in this work I witnessed students who had struggled with their emotional availability the whole year have breakthroughs that surprised even them, engaging with partners they had never before worked with. In this regard the stable nature of the training vehicle, namely employing the first term's etudes as a score of action for the scenarios, allowed me to experiment with all manner of

pairings by letting students of different cultural backgrounds work together. This enabled me to introduce sensitive social issues as part of the given circumstances whenever the logical parameters permitted it, to ascertain whether the students had sufficient courage to broach these during their interactions, which many did. This added dimension to the work provided insights about how they felt about issues which still affect our society in the aftermath of apartheid, and led to self-revelations exposing deeply rooted prejudices. For some this served as a purging of sorts, as they rid themselves of influences which no longer suited their need for personal redefinition. Although the physical discipline of the etudes were compromised due to these charged encounters it was a worthwhile sacrifice given the powerful feelings that surfaced. As a result the entire year group became close, having revealed themselves in a manner that only those sincere about wanting to become open-minded in practicing their art are willing to do.

On a lighter note, after the students became comfortable with the impromptu exercises towards the end of the term and these „heavier“ issues had mostly been dealt with, many began to also play their audiences while still remaining in connection with their acting partners (*see video clip 26*). This sense of dual-consciousness was gratifying to observe, especially in an improvisational context, and made me realise that the state of „I am“ could be induced without using text based materials, as long as actors were willing to wholly immerse themselves in the given circumstances. This confirmed Stanislavski’s assertion that one “can act out a play not yet in existence” (1975: 213), and provided me with a new avenue of exploration for the future.

At the end of the year I again e-mailed all the students a prepared questionnaire (*see appendix item 25*), wanting to grant them enough time to reflect on what they had gained during our brief spell of work together. Their responses were insightful (*see appendix items 27 – 29 for twenty-one student responses to four questions*), and confirmed that this final phase of my practical research had been beneficial for us all.

5.5 An argument for a basal technique

Since leaving university in 1982 dissatisfied with the training I received and feeling as though my potential as an actor had never been fully developed, I often wondered what I might have done differently. It was from this perspective that I approached my research, asking what I would have wanted to explore as a first year drama student still unsure of my abilities. The closest I came to this type of work was in my second year when a visiting Israeli actor, Shalom, conducted a workshop with my class and asked us each to choose an image in a book of art and to bring it to life. I chose a picture of a statue of a Moor, and as I imagined myself as this being, working alone in front of my year group, I lost all self-consciousness and something vital within me found expression through this other. When Shalom stopped my improvisation, offering me a cigarette and telling my thirty classmates that it was the degree of commitment he expected, I felt a personal breakthrough had occurred and from my peers' expressions I saw they knew it too. It was the last workshop he gave, but my passion, the source of my talent, had been touched. The problem was I had no idea of how to access it again, and no one who directed or taught me thereafter did either. I now know the key I sought was how to access my unconscious creative resources in a conscious manner.

During my first year as a drama student I performed in eight productions ranging from *The Merchant of Venice* to *Thesmophoriazusae*, Agatha Christie's *Spider's Web* and Guy Bolton's musical *I, Anastasia*, the last two professional. Having never acted at school everything I discovered was by chance, namely what elicited a positive response from directors, fellow cast members, and audiences. I had no technique but quickly acquired an array of „how to do's“, and gained self-confidence from this, not a good thing in this case. My arriviste attitude propelled me during my early years as a professional, but by 1984 I knew I was in trouble, despite glowing reviews.

The turning point was seeing myself perform on television for the first time. I could see my character's behaviour was false from the start, and although I tried to seem natural it was a contrived naturalism. I now know I was merely acting with my public mask, behaving as though myself in the given circumstances with no idea how to create an authentic character, especially in the subtle manner necessary for the camera. Despite this personal realisation no one else appeared to notice, and I was offered work in all media.

What concerned me most was that I could feel my passion start to grow cold, the onset of the emptiness Brook (1990: 33) stated most professional actors develop by the age of thirty. I knew that if I did not do something about it I would become a courtesan actor plying my services for hire, a role I did not want.

In 1985 I gave up my budding career and went looking for training in New York, intending to work with Strasberg,³⁵ but ending up at the HB Studio. Here I learnt how to analyse scenes using the Method, but it was not substantial enough. What I wanted was something more fundamental, a form of training I did not know how to define then, but I now know was „work on oneself“. In 1989 I studied the Meisner technique in Los Angeles and learnt how to react spontaneously and liberate my true self. Despite the revelatory nature of the experience it occurred too late however, as I had already learnt how to give the impression of being sincere. In this respect it was far easier to offer the world a carefully constructed mask than to reveal my inner being.

By my early thirties I had largely lost my youthful passion for acting, realising I had missed the opportunity to fully develop my talent, and perhaps also myself in the process. It was only in my late thirties, when I began working with young actors, that this feeling was rekindled, but not as an actor, rather as someone who might assist those starting out on their journey.

My decision to embark on this research therefore stemmed from a deep-seated need, not so much a frustration, rather to determine whether it might make a difference in a young actor's career if they learnt how to access their authentic natures at the start of their training, even if they lacked the technical know-how to fully utilise their body-voice, or to effectively analyse texts, skills I believed they could learn as they gained experience, and which I felt would impede their personal development if acquired too soon. With this in mind I set out to develop a „basal“ technique, a ballet term which in an etymological sense refers to a base, namely the lowest part of something that supports whatever is built upon it. It is an appropriate encapsulation of how I see this form of training, which is to provide young actors with a stable foundation for their more focussed, other learnings,

³⁵ He died in 1982 but I was unaware of this. Although his wife Anna was running the Institute, word on the street was that the training standard had dropped off, which is why I decided on the HB Studio, working with both William Hickey and Salem Ludwig during my first year there.

with them as knowing artisans able to evaluate each in terms of constructing their own method.

The notion of a base also infers a means of stabilising the personal ground on which one's art is created, identifying the faults of one's nature, yet able to use it all without fear or shame. Finding the balance between these two processes, namely the personal and artistic, is arguably a teacher-trainer's biggest challenge, and one I struggled with at the start. In this respect it is inevitable that this form of work will be therapeutic for some students, which I believe should not be denied them, yet it should also not become a type of therapy either.

The „work on oneself“ process has a definite purpose, which is to prepare actors for „work on a role“, and unless students grasp the „system's“ foundational elements and principles, it is questionable what long-term benefits they will derive from it. The overarching aim, as Stanislavski indicated in *An Actor Prepares* (1984: 291, 293), and reiterated in *Creating A Role* (1975: 249), is learning how to enter into the state of „I am being“, which is dependent on having developed a strong sense of truth and actor's faith. Without knowing how to consciously induce this creative condition for themselves, they will not be able to experience dual-consciousness during performance, the key to having an objective technique, which should be the central aim of every actor. While personal objects may be necessary to provide characters with authentic substance, any method limited to a subjective, horizontal plane will eventually degenerate into public displays of self-indulgence, just as any technique for its own sake will inevitably result in mechanical acting. Finding the correct balance between these extremes is the key to addressing the challenge posed by *conjunctio oppositorum*, the most important lesson for actors to learn, which all those who work with them should never forget.

Chapter Six Conclusion

There are new things like fashion magazines. And there are new things, but as old as the sources of life. Why do you ask if Stanislavski is important for the new theatre? Give your own REPLY TO STANISLAVSKY: a reply based on practical knowledge of the matter and not on inexperience. Open yourself as an existence. Either you are creative, or you aren't. If you are, you somehow go beyond him; if you aren't, you are faithful, but barren. (Grotowski in Salata 2008: 31)

Although Grotowski (*in Salata 2008: 31, 32*) considered Stanislavski's method one of the greatest stimuli for European theatre insofar as an actor's education is concerned, he nonetheless pointed out that "the method in terms of a system does not exist," as "[it] cannot exist in any way but as a challenge or a call," to which everyone should give their own reply. Undertaking this investigation was my response to that call, believing that by interrogating the „system“ and integrating its principles with the methods and techniques of other theatre practitioners, I might derive a holistic approach for training young actors.

During the course of this research I too concluded what Grotowski (*in Salata 2008: 32*) realised after twelve years of experimentation, over four decades ago; namely "that there is no ideal system that [can] serve as the key to creativity." During the Ahrne interview (*in Allain 2009a: 222*) twenty-five years later he reiterated this conviction by stating that "training does not prepare us for the creative act," because creativity is "life, spontaneity, something completely personal, and – at the same time – rigour, structure and precision."

He was, of course, referring to *conjunctio oppositorum*, the conjunction of spontaneity and discipline, which he equated with an actor's "total act" (Grotowski 1991: 93). This echoed Vakhtangov's notion of "the laws of unity of content and expressiveness, and the laws of expressiveness dictated by the content" (cited by Sushkevich in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 200), which stemmed from Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko's attempts to find "a *balance between the inner essence and the image on stage*" (cited by Popov in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 170, his italics). Meyerhold also followed this rule, wanting his biomechanical actors to express emotion, despite emphasising "the actor's outward visualization of himself" (Schmidt 1980: xiii). Finding an appropriate

balance between content/essence/spontaneity and form/image/discipline thus constitutes the formula for effective performance expression; and helping trainee actors to become proficient in both realms should therefore be a teacher-trainer's overarching objective.

Recognising this *what* does not necessarily mean one knows *how* to achieve it however, which is when the question of finding a suitable training method or technique comes into play. Initially this will inevitably stem from what others have taught one. In Grotowski's case, for example, Vakhtangov's student Zavadsky (*in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 236, 240*) instilled in him "a demand for iron discipline," and the director as someone "whose job is to suggest a precise, clear-cut form to the actor." These principles, coupled to his fascination with the Orient, mysticism and the human body, guided his exploration. In this respect a lack of financial resources led to him exploiting the only means at his disposal, the actor's bodies, transcending Craig and Meyerhold's ideal of actors as living signifiers on stage. Instead the corporeality of his über-marionettes *became* the *mise en scène* of his productions, and the basis of his poor theatre aesthetic. In trying to integrate Meyerhold and Vakhtangov's formalism with Stanislavski's spiritualism, he hoped that it would result in the ultimate „total act“; instead he found that "in striving for the Essence – it seems there is no escape from the theatre," as Flaszen (2010: 308) so succinctly put it.

Strasberg, who also tried to turn the theatre into a laboratory to experiment with Freudian psychology, suffered a similar defeat as a director, and also withdrew to focus on training his Method actors, just as Grotowski did with training his Performers. In this regard both had tried to alter the theatre's essential nature, and thereby the actor's role, which can be many things but should never be made to conform to a particular ideology. Nick Worrall (*in Russell & Barratt 1990: 2*), in evaluating why Stanislavski's production of *Three Sisters* was universally effective, concluded that "[it] can be described as an ideological fusion of opposites – form and content, positive and negative, optimism and pessimism, meaning and non-meaning, and, even, „East“ and „West“." Vakhtangov (cited by Markov *in Vendrovskaya & Kaptereva 1982: 176*) considered this "law of contrasts" the key to an actor's passion, "which, once freed, cried out from the stage, uncontrollably disrupting the „correctness“ of the performance." It is for this reason that faith and a sense of truth is needed to "step freely back and forth" into "the sphere of „un-truth“," which Stanislavski (*in Smeliansky 1999: 114*) considered "the actor's supreme art". This ability to exist on the liminal divide between the „real“ and unreal, without fear, is imperative; because the

irresolvable questions of human meaning can only be “dramatised in the space where these tensions are capable of assuming their most poignant and intensely involving forms – on a stage peopled by live actors” (Worrall in Russell & Barratt 1990: 2).

The question of *how* to train actors, which Grotowski and Strasberg no doubt thought they had resolved, should therefore remain aligned with the theatre’s essential purpose, regardless of its function in a particular place and time. Despite disagreements regarding its role in society, which constitutes a large part of the problem in defining the actor’s art, it is nonetheless the responsibility of all practitioners to confront this question. It should therefore serve as a conceptual framework for teacher-trainers attempting to create their own methods, an artistic and pedagogic obligation, or else they will merely be copyists, as both Grotowski and Meisner asserted. By focussing on this bigger issue, rather than the merits of a specific acting approach, the shortcomings of the past might be addressed so they do not remain pitfalls in the future, as Lutterbie (2011: 230) elaborates below:

There are a lot of myths about acting and the training of actors, many of them extremely productive. They are nonetheless reductive and therefore biased toward certain values that define boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, promoting what constitutes good acting according to the principles of that domain. The limits of a method become the limits of the actors, becoming a force of preservation by insisting that the results of the training are aligned with the aesthetics of what acting should be. By cementing the foundations in past accomplishments, training regimes seek to determine the future of the theatre.

Rejecting former training approaches is not a solution however, as chances are you will simply rediscover the same principles in the process of conceiving your own. In this regard performance styles might differ, but the actor-as-human-being’s organic functions remain the same, and if one intends to substantiate scenic form with living content, then understanding these processes is vital. In her article entitled „Reconsidering Stanislavski: Feeling, Feminism, and the Actor“¹, Rhonda Blair (*in* Malague 2012: 25) urged feminists who rejected the „system“ due to the patriarchal overtures in its creator’s writings to reconsider their stance, as “developments in neurophysiology, cognitive neuroscience,

¹ The article appeared in *Theatre Topics* 12, no. 2 (2002).

and evolutionary biology indicate that Stanislavski was onto something fundamental about acting.” Malangue (2012: 1) echoes this view, stating that: “Stanislavsky-based training is an invaluable asset to any actor; its techniques can be applied to many different theatrical forms and purposes.”

A case in point is Ilinsky, “an actor of the eccentric school,” who “[discovered] himself as an actor of tragic proportions” during his celebrated portrayal of the peasant Akim in Tolstoy’s *Power of Darkness* in 1956, and who, “[through] his dumb gestures, somehow conveyed the music of a pure soul” (Smeliansky 1999: 11-12). This dormant ability may have stemmed from his formative training at the Maly theatre, “where [he] encountered Stanislavski’s method of physical action”² (Ilinsky in Cole & Chinoy 1970: 506), before enrolling in Meyerhold’s biomechanical classes in 1921, where he developed a grotesque performance approach. It is perhaps worth noting how he set about integrating these disparate influences, as he explains below (*in* Schmidt 1980: 26-28, his quotes):

Meyerhold’s demonstrations were already psychologically “justified,” to use Stanislavsky’s terminology, and for that reason I kept trying to find the psychological sense of his demonstrations or directorial ideas, no matter what form they took. I tried to get at the root of each individual scene or individual moment. [...] Sometimes they had to do with rhythm, sometimes with mood, sometimes with attack, with the direction of energy. I had to find those roots and work them over within myself³ as an artist. Meyerhold came to value my ability to accomplish his ideas physically, and so always appreciated my work more than he would some dead, formalistic, but absolutely accurate copy of his sketch.

Ilinsky’s explanation reveals that the „system“ “is not a style,” as Clurman (1974:145) asserted, instead “[it] is the only thorough formulation of the actor’s craft.” Stanislavski (1986: 294) called it “a reference book”, and considering the diverse acting approaches it inspired, from Chekhov/Vakhtangov’s imaginative/fantastic realism, Strasberg’s psycho-

² He could not have been exposed to the Method of Physical Actions as it did not yet exist at that time. It is nonetheless apparent from the terms he uses in the quote above that he was familiar with elements of the psychotechnique, which he employed to enliven his grotesque characterisations.

³ Ilinsky is no doubt referring to *perezhivane*, “the natural living over of his part,” as Stanislavski (1980: 530) described the process of psychologically identifying with one’s role.

realism, to the spiritual realism he himself favoured, it is clearly not prescriptive. Instead it encapsulates the elements of acting out of which different methods can be constructed. In this respect Pang (*in* Malague 2012: 21) argues that even “some so-called alternative approaches to actor training actually borrow heavily from Stanislavskian principles,” a view Strasberg (1988: 197) concurred with, pointing out that “Brecht’s „non-Aristotelian“ theory of theatre is represented mainly in his playwriting; the best part of his work with actors derives from Stanislavsky and perhaps even uses the techniques of the Method”.⁴ It is for this reason that Smeliansky (*in* Stanislavski 2008: 693) equates the „system“ with Mendeleiev’s periodic table, the basis of chemistry; a comparison he acknowledges “may not be entirely appropriate,” but that nonetheless “seems to [him] essentially true.”

Although it is perhaps a natural human need to be thought of as unique, or „original“ in the case of artists, it is a trap to simply refer to age-old principles by fashionable, new names, as Grotowski stated at the head of this chapter. True progress invariably depends on what has come before, and requires a familiarity with the prevalent theories in one’s field. In this respect the challenge is not to reinvent the wheel, but rather to remain true to one’s own creative instincts despite acquiring this ken. The fact that Stanislavski’s most successful Russian students, Chekhov, Meyerhold and Vakhtangov,⁵ and their Western counterparts like Adler, Meisner and Strasberg, created distinctive personal methods, although they were all based on the „system’s“ elements, shows creative independence is possible. In doing so they contributed to the actor’s art evolving into a holistic approach that “is possibly best defined today as the psycho-physical-spiritual fusion understood to be the necessary condition for performance,” as Maria Shevtsova (2004: 40) describes it in her book about Lev Dodin’s praxis (*see note 5*).

As our collective understanding of what is required from actors performing in different media and genres increases, it is inevitable that the specialist training techniques used to achieve these outcomes will multiply. Yet, as Arthur Bartow (2008: xxi) points out in the

⁴ Strasberg (1988: 197) saw all Brecht’s plays that toured the USA and considered *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* to be “among the half-dozen outstanding theatrical experiences of [his] life.” He flew to London to see *Coriolanus* in 1956, after Brecht’s death, and spoke to several Berliner Ensemble actors to find out how they created their roles. Their descriptions led him to draw this conclusion.

⁵ There are, of course, a number of influential Russian directors currently active who have a lineage to Stanislavski, although the term „disciple“ may not sit well with them. Lev Dodin, who trained under Zon is one. Anatoly Vasiliev, who trained under Knebel, is another. Vasiliev was a friend of Grotowski and is the only director to have applied his „vertical“ approach in actual production.

introduction of his *Handbook of Acting Techniques*, most of the ten approaches to actor training featured in the book, and their variations that “are widely taught throughout the United States [...] in one way or another, sprang from Stanislavsky’s investigation of the actor’s process, surely the most complete exploration ever undertaken.”

Although teachers should always strive to be “preeminently futural,” as Heidegger (cited in Dahlstrom 2001: 328) termed it, so “we know what matters in advance of any theory or practice,” it is also important that we do not ignore fundamental principles. This does not suggest they should not be challenged, rather that the long-term adaptability of the actor’s art will be the virtue of it having a stable theoretical foundation. A diversity of training approaches is healthy, perhaps even essential in “the postmodernised, mediatised and globalised world of the twenty-first century” (Kershaw & Nicholson 2011: 3), but there are nonetheless tenets that have sustained the art of Thespis for over two and a half millennia. It is these timeless precepts that Stanislavski (1980: 571) tried to enshrine with his „system“, so “the actor may create the conditions that are favourable to true scenic inspiration, and in the same manner call it forth at the moments necessary for his art.”

The importance of this ability is conveyed in the famous story of the ancient Greek actor Polus,⁶ who “excelled all others in his clear delivery and graceful action,” but had to use an urn containing his own son’s ashes to evoke Electra’s “genuine grief and unfeigned lamentation” due to Orestes’s death; as he did not want to simply give “the appearance and imitation of sorrow” (Cole & Chinoy 1970: 14-15). Despite his technical proficiency Polus knew that this deeper identification with his character was necessary to effectively convey her authentic feelings to an audience. This is an early example of the technique of experiencing, and the „system“ was created so that modern actors no longer have to resort to such extreme measure to stimulate their organisms. External expression may take any form, but the ability to manipulate one’s psychophysical instrument remains the key to a holistic performance. Without this know-how, which is the result of a „work on oneself“ process, actors become dependent on their technical abilities to imitate human behaviour; yet, as Diderot (*in* Cole & Chinoy 1970: 167) insightfully pointed out: “[A]cquired or factitious sensibility [...] leads the actor into mannerism and monotony.”

⁶ We know of Polus due to the writings of the Roman grammarian and legal practitioner Aulus Gellus (c. 123 - c. 165 A.D.). The play in question was *Electra* by Sophocles.

During training actors should therefore learn how their body-brain organisms function, and acquire the courage to reveal their inner beings to avoid the emptiness Brook referred to from occurring; the inevitable result of hiding behind one's public mask. Oida (*in* Oida & Marshall 1997: 118) summarises the key aspects pertaining to an actor's art as follows:

Zeami offers three concepts to define the actor's craft. He describes these elements as „skin“, „flesh“ and „bone“. The skin is the exterior beauty of the actor, the flesh is the beauty that comes through training, and the bone is the essential nature of the person, a kind of spiritual beauty. [...] The audience looks at the actor; the beauty you see is „skin“. Then the musicality of the performance, the timing, and harmony of expression that you hear is the „flesh“. Finally, the actor's performance moves you on a deep, almost metaphysical level: you feel something very profound. This is the „bone“ of the actor's craft.

If, as Mnouchkine (*in* Williams 1999: 171) states, “the actor's most important muscle” is the creative imagination, which can only be conditioned and worked on “with sincerity, with emotion,” then the „bone“ it is attached to equates with feelings emanating from our spiritual natures. These are the most powerful “morphemes of acting”, as Grotowski (*in* Richards 2003: 94) termed the impulses that prompt our actions, and work on this inner realm is as essential as honing one's technical abilities; because, as Oida rightly points out (*in* Oida & Marshall 1997: 118): “Even if your body is withered and old, something very beautiful and clear can emerge, if you have maintained a strong and open heart. This goes beyond technique.”

Dodin (*in* Shevtsova 2004: 39, her inserts and italics) echoes this view, stating that “the sensory receptivity and responsiveness („nervous system“) of each actor and *between* actors allows them to find an appropriate physical expression for whatever internal action transpires („heart“)", so the actor's body “is in a position to articulate the impulses that drive it *at any given instant* of a performance”. In this respect “the most important figure in Dodin's approach to acting is Stanislavsky,” according to Shevtsova (2004: 39-40), as his “search for the principles of cohesion in, by and through the actor” constitutes a form of “„aliveness“ [that] cannot be taught according to rules, [but] can be fostered by awakening the actors' emotions and imagination.” This awakening can only occur if one

is open however, and, as Brook (1993: 23) asserted: “To open oneself, one must knock down the walls.”

The reluctance of some teacher-trainers to engage in work which directly impacts on a student actor’s psyche, instead seeking to access the inner being via the body, is entirely understandable, as venturing into this volatile realm requires a cautious approach. Over a century has passed since Stanislavski developed his „inner technique“ however, and much has been learnt since then. The mistakes Strasberg may have made emphasising the use of affective memories in the 1930s are somewhat irrelevant now, as he later evolved a more stable Method; just as Grotowski’s experiments with „technique 2“ in the 1960s led to a more reliable „vertical“ approach by the 1980s. Teachers interested in this manner of work therefore no longer have to grope in the dark, as the findings of practitioners who followed this route provide guidelines for designing more healthy and safer approaches.

In my own experience, both as an actor and a teacher-trainer, the insights gained from a „work on oneself“ process can be life-altering, because, as Esper (2008: 178) rightly states, the “line that separates reality from the imaginary world is very thin” and it “takes just one tiny step to cross over it.” This correlation between human behaviour in real life and in the imaginary circumstances on a stage means that once young actors grasp this there is a potential for growth in both realms; but only once they have gained the courage to discard their public masks and engage others in a sincere manner. In this respect I have watched the first year students I worked with in 2012 gradually mature as both artists and young adults during the past two years without adopting any arriviste tendencies, which has been gratifying. The openness the training fostered is still evident in them, although I sense they’re ready to move on now, and learn the lessons only real life can teach them.

In 2013, during my Media course,⁷ I worked with seven students who underwent a full year’s training with me in 2011, their first year, four I worked with for one semester, and seven who worked with my colleague. The course, which entails working in front of a camera, requires the actor “[to] express in particular circumstances a psychological state peculiar to him alone, true to his own emotional and intellectual make-up, and in the

⁷ Third year students choose two specialist modules in the first semester from acting, applied theatre, cabaret, directing, media, physical theatre, puppetry and creative writing. In the second semester they select one to specialise in. The media course is focussed on film, radio and TV acting and presenting.

form that is right only for him,” as Tarkovsky (1989: 141) described this type of acting. It is therefore suited to the subtle psychological realism, or “sophisticated naturalism” as Declan Donnellan (*in* Stanislavski 2008: x) referred to it, which is the inevitable outcome of a „work on oneself“ process. The third group, who I had not previously worked with, struggled to adjust their theatrical style to this medium, which may have contributed to five withdrawing from the course at the end of the first semester. Although this is a subject for another study, it is worth noting Tarkovsky’s views in this regard (1989: 155):

For an actor to be effective on the screen it is not enough for him to be understandable. He has to be truthful. What is truthful is seldom easy to understand, and always gives a particular sense of fullness, of completeness – it’s always a unique experience that can neither be taken apart nor finally explained.

The window for a „work on oneself“ process to be effective is therefore quite narrow, as I also found with the second year students in 2011, and on previous occasions when I tried to work in this self-revealingly manner with older actors. The exceptions to this rule were participants F23a and F23b in the Gauteng study, which was perhaps due to the fact that I worked alone with them for several weeks before the group work began. This poses a dilemma, not only because there is little time available for one-on-one work in HE, but also because there are obvious benefits to student actors training together, so they can learn from each other. Taking all this into account I am now fairly certain that an ideal age for basal training is between sixteen and eighteen, which I recently confirmed while working with a group of secondary school pupils.⁸ Despite the challenges this may pose, once young actors grasp the benefit of this inner work early on it will become an integral part of their technique, and thereby assist both their personal and artistic development.

The overall aims of a „work on oneself“ process should therefore be that student actors develop a sense of personal honesty/truth/sincerity and belief/courage/faith, because, as Mnouchkine (*in* Williams 1999: 171) rightly asserts: “In reality, *the* essential theory is

⁸ I was approached by the school’s drama teacher in March 2014 to assist her with a stage production involving three learners from grade 12, one from grade 11, and one from grade 10. Although I only spent eight hours working with them over two days they clearly benefited from the experience, as is apparent from a letter she wrote afterwards (*see appendix item 30*). This confirmed that my initial idea of conducting „work on oneself“ training with this age group was not misplaced, even though this conclusion cannot be substantiated given the brevity of my work with them. It may well be an area of future research however.

that you have to believe: believe in what you act, what you are, what you incarnate; and believe in what another incarnates; believe in the emotional turmoil, in one's strength, one's anger, one's joy, one's sensuality; one's love, one's hatred, whatever." In this respect belief, or actor's faith, which Grotowski associated with courage, is not simply being confident, an attitude of the public self, rather a willingness to surrender to the character's imaginary circumstances and allow the unconscious mind's contents to come into play. For many actors this is understandably a daunting prospect, which is why they would far rather construct performances based on predetermined movements and line readings, artificial structures that restrict spontaneous expression. Daniel Day Lewis, one of the most respected actors of his generation, sums up his own approach as follows: "All you're trying to do is lay the groundwork, which might allow the imagination to free itself. When the imagination frees itself, you have no goddamn idea what's going to happen. So it's not a constrictive or restrictive way of working – quite the opposite."⁹

Stage actors might argue one can only work this way on camera, with the advantage of multiple „takes“ and editing, yet it echoes Stanislavski's description of how to access the subconscious realm, the seat of an actor's inspiration (1975: 236): "The only thing we have in our power is to prepare the ground, lay our rails, which is to say create our physical actions reinforced by truth and faith." This is an important learning for student actors, namely that it is possible to consciously prepare for unconscious creativity to occur, and this does not mean a loss of self or self-control, rather the creation of what Chekhov (2004a: 86) referred to as "the higher-level *I*," which "enriches and expands the consciousness." Hornby (1992: 74) shares this perspective, pointing out that it "is an expansion of the self rather than a transplantation; [namely] the actor retains his everyday self and adds another," which in his view is "a *sine qua non* for the best acting."

The overarching aim of actor training, and culmination of a „work on oneself“ process, is that student actors know how to induce the state of „I am“ at will, because, as Winnicott (2008: 76) stated, from this position "everything is creative". This „creative mood“, as Stanislavski (1980: 462) called it at first, is not only necessary in realism or naturalism,

⁹ These comments were from a BBC Radio interview following the release of the film *Lincoln* in 2012, for which he won his third Academy Award, the only leading actor to have done so. During a similar interview on BBC Television in 2007, following the release of the film *There Will be Blood*, for which he won his second Academy Award, he stated the following: "If you want to work close to chaos, which is essential, you have to close the conscious mind and let the animal take over, to my mind."

but “to affect our inner feelings in our roles, and to avoid frightening away or forcing our emotions, in order to preserve their pristine quality, their immediacy and purity, to convey on the stage the living, human, spiritual essence of the character we are portraying” (Stanislavski 1975: 237). It was not only needed in performance, instead he believed “[one] should have this experience and use it when you are working on your inner „elements“ and „inner creative state“, in all your drills and exercises” (Stanislavski 1984: 293). The reason it is imperative however, is revealed in his following explanation (Stanislavski 1986: 295): “When you have mastered the creative state necessary to your artistic work you must learn to observe, evaluate your own feelings in a role and criticize the image you naturally portray and live in.”

The state of „I am“ is therefore the basis of having an objective, holistic technique. Not only does it allow an actor to give full vent to a character’s feelings without any personal repercussions, it also enables them to direct their own performance; able to distinguish between actions and emotions that are false and those that are true to the circumstances. It is this ability that guides them in the realm of „untruth“, a type of „sixth sense“ which is the result of dual-consciousness, as Strasberg (*in* Hethmon 2003: 165) elaborates below:

The essential part of an actor’s training tries to make him aware of what he is doing at the time a thing is happening. Otherwise, he doesn’t know whether to do it more or to do it less. That is the difference between acting and life. In life it is perfectly possible for the human being to be unaware of what is happening, even at moments of top intensity. But for the actor it is absolutely essential that he know all the time “what I’m doing while I’m doing it.” This split awareness, which Stanislavski calls “the feeling of truth,” must develop as a kind of sixth sense, and yet it cannot do so at the expense of the actor’s belief, his concentration, his involvement in what he is doing.

An experiential actor’s creative process therefore consists of knowing how to enter into a state of „I am“, namely performing with both the actor and the character’s perspectives simultaneously, a dual-consciousness that allows the integration of form and substance, or discipline with spontaneity, in order to achieve a „total act“. While form is the product of a particular production and can be acquired during a rehearsal process, the actor-performer must provide the substance which will enliven it. This is the essence of the art.

If I have learnt anything from investigating the different methods and techniques used by the principal Western theatre practitioners in the past century, then it is simply that no single approach fulfils all the requirements of actor training as delineated in the „system“, which in itself is not practicable. Its ongoing value in the twenty-first century is that it remains the most comprehensive repository, or theoretical reference, of the elements that comprise the actor’s art; which are perhaps also relevant to other performing artists. How these might best be imparted to student actors remains an open-ended question, in that it depends on several factors, not least being the personal and artist outlook of a particular teacher-trainer.

For my own part I doubt there will ever be a single method or training technique that gains universal approval, because they are vehicles for instruction and not the learnings themselves. This is not a setback for the actor’s art, as long as there is a consensus of its fundamental principles, namely an agreement of *what* should be taught, even if the onus of determining *how* is an individual’s responsibility. In this respect the closest anyone has come to conceiving a technique that has met with universal approval is Stanislavski with the Method of Physical Actions, which many agree is an effective psychophysical approach to creating a role and performance score; even though Grotowski employed it for „work on oneself“. Yet in Russia there are many disagreements regarding the manner in which different practitioners have interpreted it, and whether Active/Action Analysis is not a more holistic approach. I suspect that the imminent publication of a long overdue English translation of Knebel’s book on this subject will no doubt fuel a wave of debates, although the chances are there will be no definitive conclusion regarding which is most effective. If there is a lesson to be learnt from this wrangling, then it is that the „system“ is infinitely flexible, but relies on the creativity of the person using it to achieve a desired outcome, especially as far as training is concerned. Trying to create the ultimate Method is a conceit, especially for a teacher. Finding an effective, personal means to convey the elements of this complex art to student actors so they can start to apply them in their own work should be a challenge enough. It certainly has been for me.

I conclude this dissertation with a statement made by Meisner that I have come to realise is a truism that transcends all methods, techniques and system’s of training (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 25): “Acting is an art. And teaching is an art too, or it can be. Ultimately it’s a question of talent – of theirs meshing with mine.”

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Appendix Item 1

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Towards an integrated theory of actor training: Grotowski's *conjunctio oppositorum* and the question of dual consciousness.

You are asked to participate in a Participatory Action Research study conducted by Rufus Swart, MA PaR (Drama), from the Drama Department at Stellenbosch University, currently conducting research towards a DPhil (Drama and Theatre Studies). You were selected as a participant in this study because you are of a suitable age, 18 or over, and indicated you can commit to the eight month duration of the research.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The intention of the study is to investigate whether various contemporary and historic theories of actor training can be integrated into a cohesive method for young actors so they may be adept at performing on stage and in front of a camera. Traditional theatrical training often results in performance styles that clash with the subtle realism required for film acting. The aim of the study will be to explore whether young actors can be grounded in a holistic, basal technique enabling them to work effectively in all media.

2. PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- 2.1) Agree to attend a practical workshop once a week at the AGS Church West in Brakpan, Gauteng, South Africa, as a member of a mixed ethnic/gender group of fellow volunteers, and commit to the eight month duration of the study.
- 2.2) Allow periodic video recordings to be made of the workshop processes which may **potentially be used as empirical materials for the researcher's DPhil thesis, and/or** edited to accompany the written paper as supplementary audio-visual (AV) references.
- 2.3) Agree to take part in group discussions during workshops, and to participate in periodic, videoed personal interviews so that your views of the training process may be obtained. Furthermore that these materials may be incorporated in the AV component, or referred to, and quoted if necessary in a transcribed form, in the thesis.
- 2.4) Agree to keep a reflective journal of your experiences during the research programme, and to submit this to the researcher for potential inclusion in the thesis as an additional empirical resource. It will also be required that any personal views which may enhance the group experience on a weekly basis be submitted to the researcher in the form of e-mails or SMS messages, and that these may be referred to, if necessary, in the thesis.
- 2.5) Agree to participate in a theatrical production devised by the group at the conclusion of the training, as well as a short (15 min) film, both of which will be shown to the public. It is also expected that your views be voiced during a Q&A session with the audience/s, and that recordings of these events be used for the thesis and AV accompaniment purposes.

3. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The training will encompass a spectrum of physical and psychological techniques for creating imaginary characters. Work will be conducted in both an individual and a group format, or as

partner pairs observed by their peers, as indicated in the attached training outline. The researcher has previously conducted similar studies with students at Australian and English universities, and is familiar with the need to ensure a safe working environment from a health and safety standpoint, and to engender mutual respect within the group. As the nature of actor training involves heightened emotional expression, there may be incidents when individuals are startled by their **feelings arising during an imaginary, dramatic context. To accommodate this a 'cooling off' procedure will be conducted at the conclusion of each workshop, to allow emotions stimulated during improvised interactions to neutralise.**

4. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The decision to conduct the research with 18 year old volunteers, is partly based on the reasoning that they will be better equipped afterwards to undergo more focussed training at university/college level. Class handouts compiled by the researcher will enhance the practical learning experience with ideological and theoretical groundings, so that participants acquire a wholesome understanding of contemporary and historic approaches to acting, performance and training.

The development of an integrated technique of actor training will benefit the wider theatrical community, both at secondary and tertiary education level. The AV accompaniment to the thesis will effectively serve as a practical guide other educators may use to develop similar programs of training at their institutions.

5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

All workshops will be free of charge to participants, including expenses incurred during the rehearsals and performance of the play and film. Video materials generated during the course of the study will be made available to participants for show-reel purposes, including access to the thesis after it has been submitted.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of using coded references to refer to participants in the thesis, as opposed to naming them, and all data collected in written or AV form will solely be used for the DPhil thesis and not released into the public domain or used for commercial purposes. **Although these materials will remain in the researcher's possession, participants will have access to** personal video footage of their workshop activities. All unused materials will be destroyed after a period of three years following the termination of the workshops.

7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any **questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw** you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so, in particular if the group is adversely affected and the research process compromised by your actions, attitude or general presence.

8. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Rufus Swart on 0761758141 or e-mail 15972011@sun.ac.za. You may also choose to contact his supervisor: Professor Temple Hauptfleisch, Director: *Centre of Theatre and Performance Studies*, University of Stellenbosch, Private Bag X1, Matieland, 7602. Telephone 021 808 4515 or e-mail satj@sun.ac.za.

9. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Maryke Hunter-Hüsselmann (mh3@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4623) at the Division for Research Development.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

The information above was described to me by Rufus Swart in [Afrikaans/English] and I am in command of this language. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily [to participate in this study/I hereby consent that the participant may participate in this study]. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Subject/Participant

Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)

Signature of Subject/Participant or Legal Representative

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to _____
[and/or] [his/her] representative _____. [He/she] was encouraged
and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in
[Afrikaans/English] and no translator was used or necessary.

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix Item 2

First Phase Interview Questionnaire

Would you mind if we conduct the interview in English?

Would you state your full name.

How old are you?

What are your academic qualifications?

What is your profession?

What is your home language?

Have you minded working mainly in English?

Do I make myself clear when we talk?

What is your previous acting experience?

What kind of drama training have you had?

Why did you decide to volunteer for this training?

How has it felt working without a script?

Have you worked in a similar way before?

What do you think of your performance piece?

Would you like to work in this manner again?

How would you describe the work we've undertaken?

What do you think you've learnt so far?

What has been your biggest challenge so far?

How do you feel about the one-on-one training?

How would you rate me as an acting teacher?

What can I do to improve the training process?

What can I do to improve my teaching approach?

What do you understand of my research?

Do you think there may be any benefit to others?

Are you keeping a reflective journal of our work?

Do the class handouts serve a purpose?

Do you ever want to talk to me between workshops?

What is your understanding of body-based theatre?

Appendix Item 3

Phase Two Training – Supplementary Handout # 2

The Activity Exercise

“The foundation of acting is the reality of doing.” – *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, p. 16.

Meisner’s Activity Exercise is an extension of the Word Repetition Game and the same rules apply, but now one partner is engaged in an activity and the other comes into their space and comments on it, or on their behaviour, so starting the repeat exercise. The aim is still to engage on meaningful level, but there is now more to take note of rather than merely commenting on the other’s dress. The partner doing the activity may be trying to piece together a torn up letter, or attempting to mend a broken plate, or looking something up in a book, or writing a card etc., which the partner entering has no prior knowledge of, and the challenge is to respond to whatever impulse first compels them to comment. This may be a question (“Why are you trying to piece together that letter”), or a statement (“You’re trying to mend a plate”), or a reaction to their emotional condition (“Why are you so upset?”). The trick is not to anticipate, to simply react to what you encounter and allow your instincts rather than your intellectual mind to guide you. The partner doing the activity must prepare it beforehand and there are three conditions that must be present; **a compelling reason for doing it, a high degree of difficulty and a strong sense of urgency**. The compelling reason should be „life-altering“, meaning that if you fail to achieve your objective (*piecing together the letter, mending the plate etc.*) you stand to lose something that will affect your life in a major way. The letter may be from a woman/man your father/mother is having an affair with, and you want to confront them with the evidence so they end it and prevent a divorce. It may be a letter you found in your boyfriend’s dirt bin, from a girl who is trying to win him over by spreading lies about you. It may be from your unmarried sister’s doctor informing her she’s pregnant, and you need to stop her having an abortion. The point is to start with a „hot“ relationship, someone close to you who you have strong feelings for, and then to create a fantasy around them. We also try to work at a level termed „height-of-the-meaning“, so that you are not merely scared, but terribly frightened, not merely upset, but severely distraught, not merely happy, but totally ecstatic. This is so you can become fully alive, with your feelings really stirred up whilst you engage in the activity, and not just doing it in a mechanical manner. The plate may be the last item of your grandmother’s original diner service that your deceased grandfather bought her with his first pay check, and she values more than anything, which you accidentally broke. You know she will be devastated by the loss, having been in hospital for a week following a stroke, whilst you stayed at her flat. And now your mom is bringing her back in fifteen minutes (*sense of urgency*), and the only glue you can find is unsuitable for the task (*degree of difficulty*). With the letter activity your mother/father may also be arriving home from work in fifteen minutes, and you want to confront them with the evidence of their affair before they leave on a „business trip“ for the weekend, which you suspect will be a liaison with their lover. You may be looking up an independent casting director’s home number in the telephone directory who set up a meeting with an American director because she thinks you’re perfect for a lead role in a movie he’s casting, but he’s flying back to the States that afternoon, and if you don’t get to the meeting in time you will lose this once in a lifetime opportunity. The card may be for a friend or family member with whom you had an argument, and they stormed out, only to have a near fatal car accident, and they are now in the hospital, possibly with only hours to live, and you are trying to write a heartfelt apology before visiting them in fifteen minutes, but you’ve sprained your right hand and now have to write with your left (*degree of difficulty*). Examples are endless but it is important to realise this is not a script-writing exercise, rather an attempt to stimulate your emotions, and if you try to be too clever by devising complicated scenarios you will actually deaden yourself because your sense of truth won’t find it plausible, and your body-brain organism won’t respond as though it’s really happening. My advice is to keep it logical, simple and truthful. Ask yourself how would you feel if something like this occurred in real life. If you are indifferent to your parents getting divorced, don’t use it, if you don’t give a damn whether your grandmother suffers a broken heart because of her precious plate being broken, then use something

else. That is why a good starting point is using a „hot“ relationship, making that person the subject of your fantasy scenario. If you're currently head over heels in love with someone, imagine if you found out they were having an affair with your best friend, or they were involved in a near fatal car accident after you had an argument. Then construct an activity based on the imaginary situation you have a strong emotional response to, such as finding a torn up letter from your girlfriend to him (*or him to her*), or writing a card of apology (*or drawing a picture*) with your awkward hand (*because the other one is hurt*), to take to the hospital. You could raise the stakes even higher by imagining that it's valentine's day, or that you've already told everyone he's your „trou-man“, or that you're pregnant. The richer your fantasy the more emotionally alive you'll be when doing the activity, but giving it extra texture does not mean making it more complex. Always check with your sense of truth whether an idea is feasible, if your internal „nonsense-detector“ says it's plausible, your imagination will be able to persuade your mind that the situation is real, and then you will have the makings of a good exercise to do in class. The point is not to practice the activity at home, merely to design it, getting the plate and asking someone to break it, or asking someone to write a letter and tear it up for you, or getting someone to write down a telephone number and address on a piece of paper and then smudge it with water so its only partially visible (*which compels you to try to find the missing info in the telephone directory*). Remember that you are trying to fool your own mind and the more believable a scenario, the more successful your imagination will be in persuading it the fantasy situation is actual. Think it through carefully, making sure you've considered all the necessary elements and provided as many factual details your imagination can use to counter your pessimistic mind. If you dug the pieces of letter out of a dirt bin, chances are they'd be soiled through contact with other stuff in there, and not in a pristine condition. If the pen you're using to write the card is almost out of ink, it would make you more frustrated, or if the pencil you were using to draw a picture with had a broken tip and you didn't have a sharpener. The more challenging (*'difficult-near-impossible'*) it is to achieve your objective, the more frustrated you'll be, and this is another way of stirring up your emotions. So too with your sense of urgency. This must also be possible, but only if you commit yourself without distraction, and that's the essence of the exercise, namely that the partner coming in serves as an obstacle in your pursuit of your objective. A sensitive partner may try to assist you in fulfilling your goal, or may try to comfort you if you are emotionally distraught, or may simply be an indifferent nuisance you want to get rid of. There are no guidelines to how you should respond to them as each situation will demand a different reaction. The key is to be fully emotionally available and to allow your instincts take over. Together these two sources of impulses will steer your actions, if you let them, and the ping-pong game with your partner will be uncontrived, as if the fantasy scenario were real. At this stage of the work the partner is merely a neutral friend, an acquaintance or neighbour with no strong connection to you. They are merely coming over to borrow some milk or sugar (*because they have guests and have run out*), or a candle or lighter (*because their electricity is down*) or to ask you if you'll feed their cat while they're away for the weekend. With other words, a real reason that their sense of truth will accept, but not life-altering in its importance and urgency. It is also very important that the partner designing the activity exercise does not share it with them, keeping it as a surprise for when they do it in class. Also, they must not incorporate their partner in the activity, such as making them the girlfriend trying to seduce the boyfriend or anything directly related to the fantasy. The incoming partner is only there to serve as an additional obstacle, and to assist the partner engaged in the activity to become more emotionally alive. Activities will be incorporated in all improvisations from now on, and both partners should bring at least two well thought out scenarios and the associated activities to the workshop sessions each week. If you are uncertain how to set them up, please call, e-mail or text me so that I can help. It is also good to talk through your activities with a classmate, not your partner, to determine if they find them believable and logical. The golden rule is that the more thorough your preparation beforehand, the richer your experience will be in class when you do the activity for the first time. Bring all the props you need to do it (*glue, broken plate, card, pen etc.*), as well as a bandage to wrap around your hand if its supposedly sprained. Remember, the more detail your imagination has to work with, the more facts it will have at its disposal to counteract the negative intrusion of your pessimistic, intellectual mind.

Appendix Item 4

Second Phase Interview Questionnaire

Firstly, I want to congratulate and thank you for still being part of the training process. The past stage is difficult and not everyone can work so self revealingly. The fact that you've hung in should tell you something about your essential nature, character and willpower. That said:

How would you compare this phase of training to the first?

Which do you prefer?

How has it felt working in a group?

What have you learnt about yourself working with others?

What do you think of the repetition exercise?

Have you learnt anything watching others do it?

What is your understanding of being defensive and being open?

What is your understanding of the terms 'emotional availability' and 'vulnerability'.

What do you think of the activity exercises?

What is your opinion of the improvisations you've seen and taken part in?

What is the role of instincts and intuition in acting?

Is there any value in experiencing authentic emotions?

What is the role of the imagination?

Is there any value using personal materials?

Is there any benefit to acting in spontaneity?

What is your interpretation of a sense of truth?

Has there been any artistic or personal growth as a result of this phase?

(Has your life outside the workshops been affected?)

Has your impression of me changed since the first phase?

Do I give attention to your individual needs?

How can I improve the training process?

How can I improve my teaching approach?

What do you think of the play we're using for the next phase?

Appendix Item 5

Third Phase Interview Questionnaire

How would you compare this phase of training to the first and second?

Which do you prefer?

What do you think of the play?

What have you learnt working with a text?

What do you think of the manner in which we worked?

What is your understanding of textual analysis and having a super-objective?

How would you explain MOPA and Active Analysis?

How has it felt working with imaginary objects?

Is there any value in learning lines by rote?

Do you identify with your character?

Do you still feel self-conscious?

What is your understanding of a conjunction of opposites?

What is your understanding of signification and dual-consciousness?

How have you used elements from the other phases in this one?

Do you think an integrated approach to training is feasible?

How do you rate your acting and that of your fellow actors?

Are you ready to perform before the public?

What have you learnt in the past six months?

How will you use what you've learnt?

Have you grown as a person as a result of it? (*If so, how?*)

How do you feel about the training ending?

Have you kept a journal of our activities?

Have the class handouts been helpful?

Has your impression of me changed since the first and second phases?

How would you rate me as a teacher?

What can I do to improve my approach?

Appendix Item 6

Module 178 – Introduction to acting and stage skills.

„Basic skills in acting and improvisation.“

Lecturer/facilitator: Rufus Swart

Class Handout # 1 (January 31st/February 1st)

- Lecturer/facilitator and students introduction to each other, outlining areas of interest.
- Overview of ground rules regarding class attendance, assignments and workshop ethics.
- Discussion of language(s) to be used in workshops to ascertain individual preferences.
- Overview of training programme (‘*work on self*’, ‘*work with others*’ and ‘*work on role*’).

Acting is Doing

“The foundation of acting is the reality of doing.” – Sanford Meisner (1987: 16)

- Pretending (*indicating*) versus simply doing. Exercise: Do you really listen? Do you see?
- Reacting to sensory stimuli, the basis of every organism’s response(s) to the natural world.
- Truth as behaviour in compliance with the natural laws, not affected, phoney or put-on.

Acting is Action

“An Ounce of BEHAVIOUR is Worth a Pound of WORDS.” – Meisner (*Ibid.*: 4)

- Thinking (*passive*) as opposed to acting (*active*). Exercise: Describe versus demonstrate.
- Actions (*gestures/movements*) dynamic visual communication vs. intellectual abstraction.
- Reflexive connection between actions & feelings. Intro to the Method of Physical Actions.

Acting is Reacting

“Impulses precede physical actions, always.” – Jerzy Grotowski (*in* Richards 2003: 94)

- Impulses the „morphemes of acting“. Exercise: „Pinch & Ouch“ plus confrontation(s).
- The imperative of meaningful interaction, playing a ping-pong game with impulses.
- The notion of an object/other as a source of stimulus to divert awareness off the self.

Acting is Authentic Behaviour

“The liberation and disclosing of the individuality; this must become the principal aim of a theatrical school.” – Evgeny Vakhtangov (*in* Cole 1983: 141)

- First find yourself in the imaginary circumstances. Exercise: The private moment.
- The notion of the transparent actor illumed from within and without.
- Identifying the „higher I“ source of all creativity.

Assignment for next class: To prepare a three minute „private moment“ activity at home involving an everyday ritual, paying attention to detail when handling invisible objects and focussing on merely doing, not indicating, trying to develop a detailed „diction“ of actions.

Appendix Item 7

Module 178 – Introduction to acting and stage skills.
„Basic skills in acting and improvisation“

Lecturer: Rufus Swart
 rswart@sun.ac.za

Class Handout # 2 (February 7th & 8th)

“Our preparatory work on ourselves was to be done quietly in private, with care and concentration. Our daily ritual was observance of the world. Our discoveries were our secrets, not to be bandied about as topics for idle conversation but to serve as material for creation.” – Rotté, J. 2000. *Acting with Adler*. New York: Limelight Editions. 37.

- The aim of the first phase of training, „work-on-self“, is to strengthen the actor’s concentration
- Concentrating on objects to overcome self-consciousness and audience-awareness (*stage-fright*)
- Notion of „objects“ as external or internal mnemonic/historic artefacts, including other people
- Handling inanimate objects to build attention spans and engage the senses in absorbing detail
- Adler’s notion of „travelling“, using object as a starting point for an imaginary journey
- Exercise: Each student to attempt a flight of the imagination based on personal associations

“*The first prerequisite of stage presence is the ability to control our own attention, to use our will-power to focus our attention on the object we have selected.*” – Rapoport, I. „The Work of the Actor“ in Cole, T (ed). 1983. *Acting: A Handbook of the Stanislavski Method*. New York: Three Rivers Press. 43.

- Difference between attention, concentration and observation (*group discussion*)
- Notion of attention linked to focus, to will-power, and „penetration“ of the object
- Discussion of „radiation“ ala Chekhov, and Prana ala Stanislavski
- Notion of „public solitude“ and „circle of attention“
- Exercise: Individuals to show private moment exercises and to discuss each other’s work

“To play the simple truth of the play, from action to action, was, in Adler’s memory, the single most important teaching given to her by Stanislavsky. In other words, the foundation of real acting is successively experiencing each half-minute of a whole play. So, in Adler’s view, every actor in the modern theatre must become an expert in doing the simple reality of actions, with and without props.” - Rotté 2000: 87.

- Clarification of „actions“ in terms of active attitudes, compelling thoughts, verbal actions etc.
- Method of Physical Actions (MOPA) a psychophysical score of active, do-able, components
- Mention of super-objective as spine/through line of play, and beats („bits“) as individual actions
- Notion of rhythm as important feature of action and characterisation (hence beats and score)
- Imperative of creating a structure for work-on-oneself, an etude or Action that can be refined
- Group discussion of possible constructs for etudes, incorporating personal and objective elements

“One cannot work on oneself (to use the term of Stanislavski), if one is not inside something which is structured and can be repeated, which has a beginning a middle and an end, something in which every element has its logical place, technically necessary. ... The structure elaborated in details – the *Action* – is the key; if the structure is missing, all dissolves.” – Grotowski, J. in Richards, T. 2003. *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*. London: Routledge. 130

- Notion of an „Action“ as a personal „kata“ akin to a Biomechanical etude (ala Meyerhold)
- Need for individual structures that can be elaborated and refined, for further teachings to occur

Homework

- To prepare a three minute, repeatable etude based on an evocative object, either personal or symbolic
- To explain Strasberg’s quote (overleaf) in 500 – 800 words, emphasising its practical application

Appendix Item 8

Module 178 – Introduction to acting and stage skills. *„Basic skills in acting and improvisation.“*

First Semester Practical Exams (30th and 31st May 2011)

First Semester Training Overview – Term One

During the first term of the year the seven week training programme focussed on individual development, what Stanislavski termed „work on oneself“, aiming to overcome the actor’s main source of tension, namely self-consciousness, by tasking each student to create a personal etude, or score of physical actions, involving interaction with imaginary objects in a private space. The process thus integrated Stanislavski’s „private moment exercise“ and notion of „public solitude“ within the framework of the „Method of Physical Actions“ (MOPA), to convey the imperatives of discipline and precision when constructing a repeatable, physically orientated performance score. Work began by developing heightened sensory awareness and powers of observation when handling everyday objects in habitual private rituals, then recreating these actions with imaginary objects. This required focussed concentration and attention to detail to construct a rudimentary physical score of actions. Once this was established, and the student’s conscious mind became wholly engaged with the precise execution of actions vis-à-vis invisible objects, the first lesson was conveyed, namely that engaging in authentic, albeit perfunctory, interactions with the external object world alleviated self-consciousness, thus freeing the psychophysical instrument of tension.

The next phase entailed a psychological enrichment of the physical actions, which Stanislavski equated with an artist’s preliminary sketch, through tasking the students to conceive an „inner monologue“ of corresponding mental imagery to compliment the physical score, with an emphasis on imaginary detail. Thus a psychophysical union was created, elevating the technically precise execution of actions into a more holistic portrayal of human behaviour. The final phase was adding a contextual parameter, namely „given circumstances“, which provided the underlying reasons why the private rituals were being undertaken, so that feelings could be evoked. The net result was that the initial private moment of a supposedly mundane, everyday ritual was eventually charged with thoughts and emotions, resulting in a „performance“ of sorts that incorporated all the elements required in a realist dramatic presentation. The results of this initial stage of training were exhibited in an open class at the Drama dept. on April 1st.

First Semester Training Overview – Term Two

In a much disrupted second term, due to public holidays, which resulted in only five weeks of classes, the second stage of training commenced, which I refer to as „work with others“. Instead of students working on individual etudes, they were tasked with spontaneously interacting with living objects, namely their peers. The ideological foundation of this stage was informed by Sanford Meisner’s approach, in which the aim was to transform them into re-actors or, as he framed it, „spontaneous responders“. Work began with the Word Repetition Exercise, in which partner pairs exchanged simple observations („You have brown hair“, „I have brown hair“), which eventually evolved into more sophisticated readings of each other’s behaviour („You seem anxious“, „I feel awkward“, „Why?“, „This is an unusual situation“, „Why does it unsettle you?“, „I feel exposed“, „Is that such a bad thing?“, „I suppose not, but I’m still uncomfortable“ etc.). Once they had learnt the fundamental currency of interaction, namely placing one’s full attention on the other (thereby alleviating self-consciousness), the second phase was introduced, namely the Activity Exercise. This entailed one partner engaging in an activity that incorporated the elements of difficulty, urgency and heightened personal meaning, the latter aspect linked to an emotional preparation, whilst the other partner approached them with an unrelated request, which also demanded their attention, but merely as a neutral friend or neighbour. The final stage required a clearer definition of their relationship, as well as the former neutral partner engaging in an equally important, personal undertaking, so that the resultant encounter between them was underscored by all the elements inherent in scripted dramatic confrontations; namely a circumstantially and situationally induced conflict of interests, which demanded a moment-to-moment interactive negotiation between the parties involved to mutually ascertain how best resolve it. This complex framework of spontaneous behavioural manifestation was then further exacerbated through the introduction of „shared circumstances“ that affect both parties in what remained, essentially, an improvised scenario, not to be rehearsed, but experienced for the first time in class before an audience.

Meisner Training Objectives Delineated

The Meisner stage of the acting student's overall training constitutes the initial aspect of what Grotowski encapsulated in the term „*conjunctio oppositorum*“; defined as “the contradiction between spontaneity and discipline” (Kumiega: 134), namely a “**conjunction of opposites** which gives birth to the total act” (Grotowski: 93). It should therefore be evaluated in context of the overall programme of initial, „basal“, student actor training, and is therefore grounded in the somewhat slippery terrain of process orientated, as opposed to presentational, work. As Richard Schechner correctly postulated, “rehearsals [and, arguably, workshop activities] have become centres of psychophysical, sociological and personal research” (2003: 239), and to conflate the outcomes of these specific objective (aka „learning“) orientated endeavours with a publicly geared performance product, is quite contrary to its inherent aims. Eugenio Barba captures this dialectical quandary in the following assertion:

“The spectator sees results: performers expressing feelings, ideas, thoughts, actions, that is, something which has intention and meaning. The spectator therefore believes that a given intention or meaning is present when the process is begun. But it is one thing to analyse the result and another to understand how it was reached, how the body-mind was used in order to achieve it.” (Barba 2003: 107)

Grotowski points out an additional slippage when presenting private, process orientated work in public, which is, of course, essential at some point, in terms of developing a performing artist whose work is geared towards an audience's response. Namely that a seductive „safety zone“ evolves in which a student artist's perception, once “formulated is very dangerous, because it can transform the thing into an alibi to justify the lack of quality of the performance” (Richards: 133). A certain seriousness is therefore required, even though an informed audience may comprehend that the process work is merely an expression of hitherto acquired skills, so that the trainee performer knows that by failing to achieve set objectives, they may not be forgiven their shortcomings. Whilst process work should not be conflated with performance orientated work, there are nonetheless clearly delineated parameters that must be met if ongoing training is to be grounded on what has been worked on, and achieved, before.

The overall objective of the current phase of work was therefore to encourage spontaneity during each student's interaction with their partner. This incorporates emotional availability, reaction to impulses and intuitions, responding appropriately in the given circumstances and to their playing partner's behaviour (the latter entailing in-the-moment adjustments, responsive choices, and particularisation of reactions). Equally important is the effectiveness of their individual emotional preparations, bearing in mind that they were tasked with using bold colours drawn from a „height-of-the-meaning“ range: anger, as opposed to mild annoyance; despair, as opposed to being merely upset; joy, rather than mediocre happiness, etc.. The ability to self-stimulate their psychophysical instruments, through the use of Freudian fantasy, imagination and substitution (superimposing affective feelings for one onto another), should therefore be considered as part of an overall evaluation. So too with the thoroughness of their physical preparation, namely the choice of clothing and personal properties, to provide a concrete basis for their imaginations to work off. It should be noted that all of the psychophysical preparation for the improvised, spontaneous encounters with their partners in the playing space, was left to each student. This did not entail rehearsing their actions however, merely ensuring that they furnished the imaginary realm with the necessary elements to prohibit „indication“, namely resorting to „acting“ or story-telling to persuade an audience (or their partners) that what they are engaged in is authentic. In this respect they were cautioned not to play a character, but rather to react and respond as themselves in imaginary circumstances. This is an important distinction as it forms the basis of the Stanislavskian notion of „I am“, the foundation for their third stage of training, namely „work with text“, commencing in the second semester, which will focus on teaching them how to embark on creating authentic, organic, and psychophysically integrated, characterisations.

Ref's

- Barba, E. 1995. *The Paper Canoe*. London: Routledge.
 Grotowski, J. 1991. *Towards A Poor Theatre*. London: Methuen.
 Kumiega, J. 1987. *The Theatre Of Grotowski*. London: Methuen.
 Richards, T. 2003. *At Work With Grotowski On Physical Actions*. London: Routledge.
 Schechner, R. 2003. *Performance Theory*. London: Routledge.

Appendix Item 9

Module 178 – Introduction to acting and stage skills. „*Basic skills in acting and improvisation.*“

First Semester Practical Exams (30th and 31st May 2011)

Partner Pairs

					Totals
Exercise preparation (props, clothing etc.)					
Use of imagination to conceive fantasy scenario					
Emotional preparation					
Emotional availability to partner (adjustments)					
Spontaneity during interaction with partner					
Overall level of authentic behaviour in scenario.					

					Totals
Exercise preparation (props, clothing etc.)					
Use of imagination to conceive fantasy scenario					
Emotional preparation					
Emotional availability to partner (adjustments)					
Spontaneity during interaction with partner					
Overall level of authentic behaviour in scenario.					

					Totals
Exercise preparation (props, clothing etc.)					
Use of imagination to conceive fantasy scenario					
Emotional preparation					
Emotional availability to partner (adjustments)					
Spontaneity during interaction with partner					
Overall level of authentic behaviour in scenario.					

					Totals
Exercise preparation (props, clothing etc.)					
Use of imagination to conceive fantasy scenario					
Emotional preparation					
Emotional availability to partner (adjustment)					
Spontaneity during interaction with partner					
Overall level of authentic behaviour in scenario.					

Appendix Item 10

Module 178 – Introduction to acting and stage skills.
„Basic skills in acting and improvisation’

Lecturer: Rufus Swart
rswart@sun.ac.za

First Semester Interview Questionnaire

Please state your name and surname.

We began working together in February, four months ago, right?

Has your understanding of acting changed since then? (Explain)

How would you describe the work we undertook in the first quarter?

What did you learn from it (if anything)?

How might you apply that knowledge in the future?

What is your understanding of The Method of Physical Actions (MOPA)?

Did you benefit from the two essay tasks undertaken? (Explain)

How would you rate your etude in comparison to the rest of the group?

How would you describe the work undertaken in the second quarter?

Have you grasped the fundamentals of the Meisner technique?

How would you define the term „emotional availability“?

How would you define the term „sense of truth“?

Have you benefited from this work? (Explain?)

How might you apply what you’ve learnt in the future?

Do you understand the term „the conjunction of opposites“ (*conjunctio oppositorum*)?

How do you think discipline and spontaneity might co-exist in a performance?

How do you rate your current work in comparison to the rest of the group?

What do you think of the overall group standard?

Has the training benefited you in a personal, non-acting related manner?

Have the class handouts been of benefit to you?

What can I do to improve my teaching approach?

Any other comments or suggestions?

Appendix Item 11

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANT CONSENT TO USE VIDEO MATERIALS

You participated in a research project conducted by Rufus Swart at Stellenbosch University's Drama Department between 2011 and 2013 as part of a PhD Drama and Theatre Studies entitled:

Towards an integrated theory of actor training: Grotowski's *conjunctio oppositorum* and the question of dual consciousness.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The intention of the study was to determine if different actor training theories and methods could be integrated into a basal technique for first year student actors that would enable them to work in all media.

1. PROCEDURES

As a participant in the study you allowed occasional video recordings to be made of workshop processes, and took part in periodic interviews. You were told these materials might possibly be used in the thesis as audio-visual references, but that your permission would first be sought if this were the case.

2. CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information obtained during this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or if required by law. Confidentiality was maintained by not naming participants and all data will only be used for the thesis and not released into the public domain or used for commercial purposes. **All unused materials will be destroyed three years after the study's conclusion.**

3. PERMISSION AND REFUSAL

If you elect that the edited video materials in which you feature may be used in the thesis, it will enhance the value of the study. However, you may request their exclusion without consequences of any kind.

If you have any questions or concerns about the nature of the materials or the research in general, please contact Rufus Swart on 0761758141 or e-mail rswart@sun.ac.za. You may also choose to contact his supervisor: Professor Marie Kruger on 021 808 3092 or e-mail msk@sun.ac.za.

I hereby consent that the video materials in which I appear, which are either training interviews with the researcher or extracts of class work, be used for the purposes of his thesis as referred to above.

Name of Subject/Participant

Signature of Subject/Participant or Legal Representative

Date

I declare that the information contained in this document was conveyed to the participant in a group context during the training workshops, as well as in private interviews that I conducted with her/him.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix Item 12

Module 278 – Acting & Production „*Skills in acting & improvisation*“ Lecturer: R. Swart

Year End (2011) Feedback Questionnaire

Preamble

This is the end of our journey together during the past year. The purpose of this interview is to gain some understanding of your personal experiences during the past seven months of workshops, in order to improve my teaching approach, course content, and overall process for the future. I may want to use some of these materials for my doctoral thesis, in which case I will first request your permission to do so. Otherwise, what you divulge will be confidential. Is that clear, and acceptable to you?

Questions

Please state your full name and age.

You are a second year drama student, and the past year of classes was our first contact, right?

How did my approach to actor training differ from your prior experiences, if indeed it did?

Were there any conflicts between your previous assessment of acting, and my definition of it?

What, if anything, have you learnt from our brief spell of work together?

Has there been any meaningful growth in your development as an actor and person?

(If ‘Yes’.) How would you encapsulate (describe) it?

(If ‘No’.) What could I have done differently to facilitate this?

How would you, and please be honest, evaluate my approach as an acting trainer/teacher?

What can I do to improve it?

What is your assessment of the Meisner technique?

What did you gain from our 2nd term work, on the examination pieces?

What, if anything, did you gain from working with invisible objects?

Did my directorial approach assist, or frustrate you? Explain?

Did the periodic essay assignments serve any beneficial purpose?

What are your thoughts about the second semester work, namely ‘heightened speech’?

What do you think about our final creative product together, namely the abridged MND *?

What was your attitude to Shakespeare when we started, and what is it now?

Have you learnt anything new from how to work with actors?

What suggestions do you have for me to improve my approach as a coach, trainer, teacher?

Would you work with me again?

Any final words?

* A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Appendix Item 13

The following English transcription is a translation of the Afrikaans discussion during my follow-up interview in Gauteng on 28 June 2011 with participants F23a and F26, as shown on video clip 19, who took part in the Ekurhuleni study.

- Me: Did the training process benefit you in a personal manner?
 F26: One becomes more open.
 Me: Emotionally open?
 F26: Yes.
 Me: Do the tears and stuff come easier for you now?
 F26: Yes! (*Laugh*)
 Me: I mean, not in a wailing manner. So, you're not so that you have to keep yourself closed for people and that stuff?
 F26: No.
 Me: That's nice.
 F26: I feel [sorry] for my students. Because after [a class] they'll ask if it's OK to do this or that, and to cry, or whatever. Yes! (*Very emphatic*)
 Me: Great, great. OK, so it's a positive change, yes? And, tell me about you? (*Directed at F23a*) Self-confidence picked up? We all know ...
 F23a: (*Laugh*) A 100%.
 Me: Well, tell me. Like I said, it's six months, which always gives one a bit of time to go deeper into the thing, and so forth. So, what are your conclusions? Was this a good training opportunity for you both?
 F23a: Yes, a very good one. Before I would have worried about what other people thought, and what I say. Now I react totally too much on my impulses. (*Laughter from both*) It's meant that I got a fine as well.
 F26: She's blatant.
 Me: Are you serious?
 F23a: Yes.
 Me: Where'd you get the fine? At the school?
 F23a: No, on the way. I just decided that the simple woman can't drive. You don't drive less than sixty in a sixty zone – after someone had warned me. And the next thing I knew, zoom (*Her description accompanied by a strong gesture*), in front of her. (*Laughter from both*)
 Me: No, you must control your impulses in certain circumstances a little. I mean, one wants to but you also have to think as well.
 F23a: I control my impulse when I want to grab a child behind the neck and push their face so (*strong gesture*).
 Me: Listen, I feel sorry for your husband one day. (*Laughter*)
 Me: But tell me, in terms of relationships with parents and that sort of thing, and brothers or sisters – changes, or not really?
 F23a: Yes. (*Serious*) I now have the frankness to tell them how I feel.
 Me: Yes, because you struggled with that. It was something that you kept inside.
 F23a: Yes, I could not show to them, before them, how I felt.
 Me: And is it, do they accept the fact that you are more open?
 F23a: They don't have a choice. (*Laughter from both*) They just have to.

Appendix Item 14

The 'Singing Animal' task objectives. First year student actor training, term 3. *

The training program I have been experimenting with this past year, as part of my doctoral research, in particular with first year students, has been an attempt to evolve a coherent, progressive process by which an actor's most common problems can be addressed, and hopefully overcome, by devising exercises with clearly articulated objectives that they had to master. In this respect the 1st term was devoted to each individual working on their own to develop an „étude“, or a fixed score of actions, that was gradually elaborated in detail, to eventually arrive at a performance structure that could be repeated with absolute, technical precision. The thematic basis of this training model was derived from Stanislavski's notion of public solitude, namely the trainee actor's ability to enact a personal, private ritual in public without being self-conscious whilst doing so. It also incorporated precepts of Strasberg's private moment exercise, a variation of the same idea, the disciplinary principles that informed Meyerhold's Biomechanics, and was grounded in Grotowski's postulate that repeatability is the ultimate test against dilettantism in acting. Most importantly however, it served as a pragmatic introduction to Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions (MOPA), in which an actor initiates the complex process of idiomatic transformation into a role by first determining what would be their own logical behaviour in the „given“ (*by both the playwright and a director*) circumstances of the scenic situation, before employing their imaginations to elevate this subjective understanding into a more appropriate psychophysical embodiment serving the superobjective of the production, as well as a character's arc of development within it. On a more fundamental level, it taught the student actors how to overcome the inevitable tensions arising from public performance by focusing on form and structure, which demanded an attention to detail and concentration on the precise, disciplined execution of the sequence of their performative actions. For those who mastered these basal demands, it also granted them an opportunity to incorporate emotional motivations for the activities, using affective memories to provide the psychological substance for their actions. The 2nd term was devoted to improvisation, by encouraging spontaneous in-the-moment reactions and interactions between partner pairs, thereby elevating the „work on self“ training into the realm of „work with others“. During this phase the focus on form and structure was temporarily suspended in order to develop their emotional availability and internal sense of truth whilst working with other actors. The ideological premise that informed this phase of training was Meisner's notion that actors should be „spontaneous responders“, reacting off what they encountered in imaginary circumstances without resorting to clichéd, social responses, rather expressing core upwelling's of their true selves and not the masks adopted for social interaction. The aim was therefore for the students to learn to trust their id instincts and feelings, the vital sources of impulses that should underscore authentic scenic behaviour, and was informed by Grotowski's assertion that actors should expose their true selves in an attempt to commune with spectators on a deeper, more „spiritual“ level. The emphasis was also to develop their creative imaginations through devising potential scenarios in which their personal objectives and those of their partners clashed, causing a conflict of interest, the basis of all drama, which had to be negotiated in-the-moment without any prior preparation. The 3rd phase of training introduced the notion of character as a different other and not merely an aspect of the self in imaginary circumstances. To explore the various methods that might be taken towards achieving a psychophysical transformation, it was decided to use Strasberg's animal and singing exercises as the basis for investigating a purely physically-orientated approach in which the emphasis was on form, as opposed psychological content. The students were asked to use Orwell's *Animal Farm* as the thematic basis of their characterisations of domestic animals, and to consider creating a short production based on the premise, as well as using a musical genre for the performance style. These mini-musicals were created by the students with no involvement from the lecturer, to grant them an opportunity to work together as an ensemble, the next logical step from working with a partner, and also to place the responsibility of character creation in the hands of each individual. A principal aim of this phase was to bolster their „actor's faith“, namely the courage and willpower required to be silly in public, and not to allow self-consciousness to inhibit their expressions. The 4th phase will entail more conventional role creation, working from a script and using a psychological approach.

* This sheet was prepared for the other acting teachers during a meeting in late September 2011.

Appendix Item 15

Module 178 – Introduction to acting and stage skills.

„Basic skills in acting and improvisation“

Lecturer: Rufus Swart

rswart@sun.ac.za

Class Handout # 14 (July 25th & 27th)

An Actor’s Courage

“It seems to me that one of the most important causes of tension is timidity. It is possible to crave to get into somebody’s else’s skin, and to have the gift of changing personality in order to become a character, but only when one is by oneself, and not in front of spectators. Timidity renders such an operation impossible.” – Jean-Louis Barrault (*in* Cole & Chinoy. 1970. *Actors on Acting*. NY: 3 Rivers Press. p 244)

Timidity is the opposite of courage, and acquiring the latter is the principal objective of our current phase of training. “Most actors problems”, according to Jack Nicholson, “deal with tension”, and this is because “they haven’t made a vital enough choice; it’s not up to a level that will engage their imagination and get them into pretending unselfconsciously” (*in* Cohen, R. 1978. *Acting Power*. Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishers. p. 60). Making daring creative choices when playing a character therefore counteracts self-consciousness, a primary cause of tension during performance, and leads to having courage, which in turn fosters „actor’s faith“. The choices you make should take you outside your comfort zone, posing a challenge that can only be overcome if you wholly commit all your faculties to mastering it, working with concentrated effort to achieve a clearly conceived, accurately defined objective. This will summon your willpower, the key to harnessing all of your psychophysical instrument’s potential capabilities, and in so doing you lose your self-consciousness by directing all your energies to fulfilling the task at hand. Therefore you should set yourself very specific goals, certainly doable, but difficult to achieve without a concerted effort requiring all you have within you to satisfy them. Acting is not a profession for a sloth, despite how simple it may appear to an outsider. Our aim is to recreate natural behaviour, and that means to firstly understand the elements that comprise it, and then to deliberately, consciously attempt to signify it, whether as mimesis, or as abstract art, namely using pertinent aspects to create a metaphor or symbol representing the „real“. To capture the essence of a thing in a symbolic, objective form is the artist’s ultimate challenge, whose role is that of an interpreter of life, not merely a conveyer of its banal vulgarities. If you are content to merely represent everyday life, or a stereotypical version thereof, you will bore a discerning audience, but if you apply your artistic imagination, instincts and intuition to probe beyond the obvious superficiality, and reveal aspects that make it more poignant to their conscious, or unconscious minds, you can adopt the mantle of „performance artist“ with pride. The beginning of this process is to observe whatever you select as the source for your creative imagination to initiate its essential function with total attention, probing your subject with a scrutiny that penetrates beyond its obvious traits in order to discern what lies beyond them. Why do they behave in the way they do; what makes them gesture, talk and walk in their chosen manner, and how can you capture this essential „otherness“ with your own resources? I have explained that our approach to characterisation during this phase is „outside in“, which implies that your physical embodiment of the unique characteristics pertinent to the object you are impersonating will form an outer shell of the character you are intending to inhabit. Every detail you identify will become a puzzle piece to creating a holistic representation of the „other“, not merely a presentation of what they appear to be. The more detail your imagination has to work with, the less clichéd its recreation will be, using the facts at its disposal to paint a vivid picture reflecting the symbolic essence of the subject you are portraying. This is where your artistic choices become an important consideration. Opting for generalised, „safe“ aspects will render your portrait mediocre, everyday; identifiable perhaps, but lacking the pertinent insightfulness of a true artist. I encourage you to be audacious, daring, attempting to make the alien qualities your own. It is through this encounter with the strange and unfamiliar that your imaginative capacity will grow, or else it will take a backseat to your recreation of the ordinary, reducing your creative ability to that of a mundane copyist of everyday life. Acting, like any art form, is based on determination and sheer hard work, to produce a product you can be proud of, and share with others as an expression of the best you are capable of. Greatness is not an accident, it is the result of total devotion and commitment to the outcome of one’s labours. Nothing worthwhile comes easy nor should it, or else we will never have an opportunity to grow.

“Don’t act, don’t fake, don’t pretend – work! That will train your concentration, your actor’s faith, and, maybe, your emotion. Then you can hold up your head and say you’re learning how to act, and I can hold up mine and say I’m teaching you.” – Sanford Meisner in *Meisner on Acting*. NY: Vintage. p. 55.

Appendix Item 16

Module 178 – Introduction to acting and stage skills.
„Basic skills in acting and improvisation’

Lecturer: Rufus Swart
rswart@sun.ac.za

Second Semester Interview Questionnaire

Please state your name and surname.

You have undergone training with me since February/July this year,* which amounts to approximately 48/24 hours of actual class time, holidays aside, right? Has your previous understanding of acting changed in any way since then? (Explain.)

How would you describe the work we undertook in the third quarter, namely the „singing animal“ exercise?

What did you gain from this experience, if anything?

How might you employ that knowledge in your future as a practitioner?

How would you rate your characterisation in comparison to the rest of your group?

How would you compare your group’s production standard to that of the other groups?

How would you describe the work undertaken in the final, fourth quarter, namely the work based on contemporary, realist-orientated (naturalistic), script materials?

Are you satisfied with your choice of material, and the challenge it might have posed to derive a holistic character from it?

Are you satisfied with the partner assigned to you for this phase of work?

What have you learnt from the various processes employed during this phase of training, namely: 1) Extracting the facts provided by the playwright, supplemented with your imagination, to conceive a biographical sketch as the basis your characterisation. 2) Learning your lines by rote. 3) Working with your partner to evolve a spontaneous exchange of lines, without intellectual interpretation. And 4), both subsequently working with me to employ Active Analysis to practically enact the subtleties inherent in the script.

Have you derived any benefit from this way of working? If so, can you please elaborate.

How might you apply what you’ve learnt in the future?

Has the overall training process benefited you in a personal, non-acting related manner?

Have the regular class handouts, twenty-one in total, been of any benefit to you?

Were you able to integrate your theoretical learnings with the practical work undertaken?

What can I do to improve my teaching approach, both on a practical and theoretical level?

Do you have any other comments or suggestions to aid me towards improving the course?

Do you feel empowered to embark on your second year of drama training next February?

* One group started working with me in July, whilst two had worked with me since the beginning of the year.

Appendix Item 17

Module 178a – Introduction to Acting Methods. „*Basic skills in acting and improvisation.*“

2nd Term Examiner Mark Sheet (June 8th & 9th, 2012)

First Semester Overview

Whereas the first term’s training focussed on a import of physical discipline, precision, and repeatability in performance, with student’s working singly to conceive personal etudes, synonymous with creating a „score of actions“ based on Strasberg’s Private Moment Exercise, as derived from Stanislavski’s notion of „public solitude“, and serving as an introduction to the latter’s Method of Physical Actions (MOPA), the second term’s training focussed on the opposite pole of the actor’s expressive spectrum; namely the need for spontaneous, „in-the-moment“, impulsive behaviours to enliven this performance structure, or score. Students worked in pairs, learning how to interact by instantly reacting and responding to each other in an emotionally-available, instinctive, and intuitive manner, with Meisner’s Activity Exercise serving as the vehicle of instruction, and a core intent of transforming them into „spontaneous responders“, as he phrased it. The exercises you will witness today are therefore totally improvisational, with neither partner having any foreknowledge of the other’s situation. In this respect the only shared information was the nature of their relationship, namely whether they are flatmates, lovers, or siblings, as well as any pertinent facts regarding their independently prepared, imaginary circumstances that would intrinsically be known by the other. That said, the objective of this term’s work was to develop their ability to be totally, impulsively, spontaneous, and even though each student has conceived their own fantasy situation, nothing they do has been rehearsed, and the rule had been to share a minimum of information so that the element of surprise is paramount for both. They are simply being themselves in this imaginary, once-off, never to be repeated encounter, without any prearranged, predetermined notion of how the dramatic encounter may transpire.

Examiner Guidelines

Student A (inside)								
Gen-Prep		Emo-Prep		Interaction		Adaptation		Mark %
Student B (entering)								
Gen-Prep		Emo-Prep		Interaction		Adaptation		Mark %

The table above depicts an abbreviated version of the examiner score sheets I have prepared for the paired improvisational exercises, totalling thirty-one; namely nineteen on Friday afternoon, and the remainder on Saturday morning. This is not intended to be a prescribed format for mark allocations, merely a template that might assist in assessing the process-orientated work being evaluated. In this respect I have specified four criteria that have a bearing on the current term’s training. The 1st, „**Gen-Prep**“, refers to the student’s general preparation for the imaginary scenario in terms of appropriate dress, makeup, and use of pertinent properties (*not ‘set-dressing’*). The 2nd, „**Emo-Prep**“, relates to their emotional preparation, using various psycho-manipulative techniques they have been taught during the past semester to „organically“ surrender themselves to whatever imaginary circumstances they have conceived. The 3rd, „**Interaction**“, pertains to their ability to „commune“ sans audience awareness and self consciousness in terms of really listening and talking to each other in a mutual, highly concentrated manner, and not merely hearing and speaking at the other. The 4th, „**Adaptation**“, implies each student’s ability to emotionally adjust to the other, even if this means a complete change of state, i.e. from happy to sad. Although marks do not have to be allocated for each of these categories, the final percentage mark for the student’s overall believability in the imaginary, improvised scenario must be filled in by all examiners. I have also left a space under each student’s name for any comments regarding their work, and it will be appreciated by them and me if use is made thereof. Thank you for giving up your valuable time at this busy time of the year to adjudicate the students’ work.

Appendix Item 18

The following fourteen questions all pertain to the past semester's work, in particular to your improvisational exercises during the past June exams. I am currently conducting research into different training methods for student actors, and your feedback will be of great benefit to me. Your replies will all be anonymous, and you are not obligated to answer any of the questions.

- 1) During the improvisation exercises, were you self-conscious in any way?
- 2) Were you aware of the audience's reaction to your performance?
- 3) Did you believe in your imaginary situation? Please explain why?
- 4) Did you believe that your partner's imaginary circumstance was real?
- 5) Describe your emotional experience during the exercise.
- 6) Did you feel that you were being yourself, or playing a character?
- 7) How did you feel afterwards, once the exercise had ended?
- 8) Have you previously had a similar experience whilst acting?
- 9) Would you like to work in this way again?
- 10) What was the difference between the first and second term's work?
- 11) Do you think that one must be in control of yourself whilst acting?
- 12) Is there any benefit in being impulsive and spontaneous during a performance?
- 13) Is there any value in experiencing authentic, namely „real“ emotions whilst acting?
- 14) Do you think your acting ability has developed during the past five months?

Appendix Item 19

- 1) During the improvisation exercises, were you self-conscious in any way?

In the first few moments of the exercise I was but later I didn't feel self-conscious.

No, it's like you're so zoned into what's happening 'now', then and there.

No, I was in the zone.

Yes, I was self-conscious.

Yes, I was extremely self-conscious, having no trust in myself and my peers.

I was self-conscious at first, but the more we improvised, the less self-conscious I became. Each time we did the improvisation exercises, the 'fourth wall' became more 'visible' each time.

No, I was not. I felt like I was totally in the zone. That was my reality and the other people didn't matter to me.

Yes.

In the beginning, before I went in class for the exercise, I only focused on my activity and because of my preparation I wasn't that self-conscious and felt quite confident. When I was preparing, I placed myself in my imaginative situation. The movie in the brain was constantly repeating.

No

Only the first few seconds.

Not really during the final exam. However, in the beginning while we were starting the work (and to a lesser extent initially as my partner entered during our final practical) I was aware of what they might think of my reactions to certain things. My mind would flip between options for my reactions depending on the audience's potential reaction. I managed to let go of that during the final exam exercise. It was quite freeing being able to act being aware of them but not caring about what they thought – I was too absorbed in my „world“ (imaginary circumstances) to care particularly about what they were thinking.

Yes. I didn't have the self-confidence to tap into my true self and share that with the audience.

I found that I was self-conscious in most of the exercises with Meissner's work, with one or two exceptions where I was really "in the zone". I was not self-conscious in the exam, whereas I had been in most of the class exercises.

Yes, at first, especially before my partner came in. It is intimidating to be watched so closely by an audience. I was very conscious of my body and started over thinking movements that usually come naturally. But when I had an activity that kept me busy enough or a partner to distract me I forgot about the audience and became less self-conscious.

At first yes. But as I got to know my fellow students, I got more comfortable working with and in front of them

No I was not. During the first term training I learnt to focus and not be aware of the audience.

At first the situation felt too planned, but as soon as a spontaneous response came from my partner the moment was too real to be self-conscious. (Apart from the self-consciousness created by the moment that was only relevant to me and my partner)

No, I was not aware of the people surrounding me.

I was self-conscious doing the improvisation exercises, but I think it was necessary for me to grow and overcome the fear of the unknown. It also helped me to develop the skill to act on impulses and so act true.

Appendix Item 20

- 6) Did you feel that you were being yourself, or playing a character?

I felt I was myself.

I felt like I was myself. I reacted to everything the way I normally would if I was to be found in a similar situation.

I felt I was being myself.

I felt like I was being myself, it wasn't a good feeling afterwards I felt like I had just thrown away all my chances of getting a good mark for that exam because my reaction to her was so non verbal, I felt like an actor would've handled the situation differently and that I had let my own personal emotions and feelings take over.

I was playing a character trying to be very true to myself, but still acting.

Some characters were easier to portray than others. I think it has to do with how good you can emotionally connect with this imaginary character.

I felt that I was being myself, because to me that was my reality. Even though my circumstances were not exactly true, who I was and the way I reacted was.

I felt like I was being a version of myself someone else wanted.

I felt I was being myself. It was actually scary because I believe that I am someone that will never sleep around or do things that will disappoint my parents, and when I was in this state of being someone else but still me, all the emotions that could be associated with me being in a situation where I was alone, pregnant with my roommate's boyfriend, were bursting out and in a sort-of sadistic way I enjoyed it.

I was completely myself, even more honest than I would be in real life.

I felt that I was being myself.

Definitely myself. The emotions that I felt were my own in the sense that it was all an imaginary version of my life and the things I was feeling and did were directly related to how I experienced the situation. Initially I thought I'd have to create a make-believe situation that would drive me to „commit suicide“ (or just create more reasons for me to do it) but in the end I just managed to contort my outlook on life into a depressed one. In that sense I suppose I imagined a different life experience because I was focused solely on the negative aspects and milking my weaknesses to drive me to the point where I was so down and with so little self-esteem that I truly believed that I could and would take my own life. It took preparation to contort my outlook because it was against all that I had conditioned myself to believe in.

No. If my situation were more truthful, then it might have been easier to place myself in that imaginary situation.

I always felt like I was being myself, at least to the degree that I know myself. I found it difficult to access some parts of myself in these exercises that would have allowed me to be more emotionally available and made my improvisations more truthful, but I never felt like I had become someone or something else in my imaginary situation.

I felt that I was playing myself because I usually used scenarios that corresponded with my personal life and I reacted to what my partner was doing in a way that I normally would have reacted in real life.

I was myself.

I was myself. I was not playing a character. I reacted to impulses the way I would do it in a non-imaginary situation.

One of me.

I was being myself and reacted on an impulse.

I felt like I was playing myself.

Appendix Item 21

- 10) What was the difference between the first and second term's work?

The first term was motivated and precisioned physical work. Second term was more emotionally driven work with no focus on movements.

I think that the first term's work helped me lot to be able to do this term's work. It helped with the fact that I didn't need to care about who's watching and I think it takes off a lot of stress not to be worrying about the people around you. It literally felt like it was just me and my partner, in our flat, with no one else around.

In the first term we were concentrating on being organic and real without being aware of an audience about what we do every day, where in the second term we had to do the same but with imaginary circumstances and work with a partner, with more emotion to the exercise.

The first term I worked alone and I was very self conscious, second term we worked in pairs and I was less self conscious but felt like I had more responsibility. Also in the first term I was pretending to do something, in the second term although I was pretending I really didn't feel as if I were pretending.

First term was to get to the true "you", and the second, to use that "you" in any situation.

The biggest difference to me was the fact that in the second term we were fully dependent on our partners. In the first term, if you mess up your etude, it is your fault and you are the only one influenced, but in the repeat exercise, your partner is also influenced by your actions.

First term was more about you and being who you are, just finding yourself. Where as second term I took who I was and empowered it and gave myself the confidence to play with other performers, not letting them bombard who I am.

Second term was exceptionally emotionally straining not in a good way.

In the first term we had to mime short activities that are part of our daily lives in front of the class. We focussed on the detail and being natural. Practicing your etude was very important: the detail of your activity was hard to do naturally, because we do not concentrate on the different small activities that come naturally for us every day. In the second term we focussed on total improvisation and thus could not practice our activity but only prepare mentally for what awaits.

The first terms etudes were about achieving comfort in front of an audience, dealing with the stress and its influence on ones acting and also allowing one to concentrate on what's happening onstage instead of the audience. The etudes focused on creating natural behaviour on stage that through miming the handling of objects allows for detailed, focused work. Once the awareness of an audience watching is overcome one can start to focus on emotional availability. The Meisner repeat and activity exercises allow one to discover true emotions and reactions. How can one play a character in an imaginary circumstance experiencing emotions if one cannot even be ones self? That's what these activities allow one to develop. First discovering how to react upon impulses rather than what's "socially expected", then allowing one to live an imaginary circumstance as well as an emotion and then with that interacting upon impulses with a partner. All of this develops natural, truthful acting as well as developing the ability to truthfully react and act with a partner

The second term's work was easier for me because of having dekor and objects to work with.

The first term was learning how to act naturally and without self-consciousness in front of an audience (other people) and learning the importance of discipline/self-control/precision. The second term was about reacting naturally to other people's impulses and living in believable imaginary circumstances. It therefore built on the previous term's work of acting without inhibitions and not being self-conscious, but the important element of working with someone else and working with (and conjuring) real emotions was added and cultivated. There was also a deeper focus on emotional work in the second term whereas the first term was relatively technical.

The first term was more orientated on our individual work and to share a slice of our everyday lives. In the second term, we had to display that with another partner and place ourselves in imaginary situations. The work turned up a notch from the first term.

The first term did not have an improvisational element. We worked off of a set score, which required and condoned more "head work" than the second term's work, which worked better if you worked from your instinctual impulses rather than your intellectual mind. The first term's work was a lot less daunting for me because I am comfortable working according to a script, and it was easy for me to concentrate on going through the motions of my score in a realistic manner. It did not make me as self-conscious as when I had to create new moments every instant in the partner work.

In the first term, we focused on concentration and becoming less self-conscious. There was no improvisation; everything was planned out beforehand. The emphasis was on physical actions- we didn't speak at all. This term, we focused on spontaneity and improvisation. Physical actions were less important. We still had an activity to do so that we could concentrate on and be absorbed in our imaginary situation, but we had to react to what our partner did and didn't have total control over the situation like in the first term. We had to react in a natural way in an unexpected situation.

The first term was about forgetting that there is an audience and to focus on what you were doing – to create a "small circle of attention" (according to Stanislavsky). The second term was about being truthful in your reaction towards your acting partner: to not react in a way society would want you to, but to realise in what way you as a person wanted to respond using „pure“, „organic“ emotion.

Learning and training to become disciplined, then enforcing it in order to let go of self-consciousness. In second term you had to let your guard down and let your partner see through the walls you build to protect yourself.

The first term challenged the self to accept imagination as reality – focussing on objects, space and events. The second term extended the concept of perceived reality to emotions, a differentiation of self, and the acceptance of another personality into your subjectively created (imagined) space and event.

The second term was more intense with myself and learning about my abilities of emotions and feelings. Also learning about myself and getting to know my fears and insecurities that I do not want to share with the world.

The focus of the first term's work was on discipline, precision and the "movie in the brain", whereas the second terms work focussed on working on one's impulses and acting true, not playing a character.

Appendix Item 22

14) Do you think your acting ability has developed during the past five months?

Yes, very much. At least my understanding has.

Yes, definitely! Thank you Rufus =>)**

Oh yes!! I believe that it has definitely developed so much already, since then!

Personally I think it has, I don't know if I developed drastically and if everyone can see it, but I feel like I'm growing more confident in my acting.

No, I am still learning.

Definitely, the Meisner technique has learned me to explore emotions that is real.

Yes, I think that I am less self conscious over my body and who I am now. I feel confident in whom I am, and I am more relaxed, instead of being in my head over thinking everything.

If anything it has worsened.

Yes!!

Yes

Yes

Yes. I've learnt and experienced a lot. I don't think I realise just how much I've learnt yet.

Yes, but only from the start of the third term. It took me a while to overcome my physical and emotional blockage. Those constraints are still there, but they are starting to feature less in my acting.

I think it has developed exponentially. I have always strived for truth in my acting, and I feel like the past 5 months have equipped me with a few bloody good tools to help me in achieving this truth in my acting in future.

Yes, definitely. I have learnt the difference between indicating and being real, authentic and natural. I have learnt to see the difference between the dramatic, theatrical approach we had at school and a more natural approach. I have learnt more about my own strengths and weaknesses through this work. I have grown, not only by partaking in the exercises, but also watching others and learning from their mistakes as well as my own.

Definitely.

Yes. The thing I have noticed the most is that I am not as self-conscious as I used to be, and I don't think about what I need to do next or plan my actions or words. Its as if things come naturally.

Immensely! Even if my ability did not improve ... my judgement, perception, and general thoughts regarding acting have changed. (Almost polarised.)

Yes, slowly but it is making progress.

I definitely think that my ability has developed thanks to the valuable skills and techniques that I have obtained the past few months.

Note: The answers to all four questions are in the same student order, and the responses are all used exactly as written.

Appendix Item 23

Module 178 – Introduction to acting methods

Lecturer: Rufus Swart
rswart@sun.ac.za

Class Handout # 7 (March 19th & 20th)

We have now reached the conclusion of your first term's work, namely the „work on oneself“ phase of your introductory training programme in which the overall intention is to equip you with a foundational technique. Before we start the next phase, namely „work with others“, it may be astute to summarise what you should have grasped so far during the past six weeks (11 hours) of class time. The overarching law that guided our work during the initial period was the imperative of **discipline** in artistic expression. Most of you are probably tired of hearing me reiterate this term in every class, but it is nonetheless the most essential learning you should take from the first phase of work, because it constitutes one half of the fundamental basis of acting. As you might have realised by now, it is not a single rule but rather a catchall whose constituent second tier principles, and third tier elements, are quiet numerous. To better envision what I am hoping to convey, you should perhaps imagine a metaphorical pyramid, with discipline at its apex. Topmost of the second tier principles governed by this overarching law is the importance of **form**:

form ■ noun – 1 visible shape or configuration. ➤ style, design, and arrangement in an artistic work as distinct from its content.

Without discipline you cannot create a character's external form, or physical appearance, which in turn is reliant on the **structure** of your artistic expression, and is different to the form encapsulating it:

structure ■ noun – 1 the arrangement of and relations between the parts of something complex
2 a building or other object constructed from several parts. 3 the quality of being well organized.

Form without structure is like a kite without the supports bracing it, or a high-rise building without the complex array of metal matrixes that uphold it, or the body's skeletal support. Here too, discipline is what determines the most functional, viable arrangement of constituent parts that will internally uphold/support the external manifestation, and in this respect the structure needs to be based a solid **foundation**:

foundation ■ noun – 1 the lowest load-bearing part of a building, typically below ground level. 2 an underlying basis or principle. ■ justification or reason.

Neither can a foundation exist unless it is grounded, or has a **grounding**, which also requires discipline:

ground ■ noun – 2 (**grounds**) factors forming a basis for action or the justification for a belief.
3 a prepared surface to which decoration is applied. **grounding** ■ noun basic training or instruction in a subject.

Grounding is reliant on your **grasp** of the third tier elements that inform these second tier principles, which requires willpower and fortitude for this knowledge to become usable, both aspects of discipline:

grasp ■ verb – 1 seize and hold firmly. 2 comprehend fully. ■ noun – 1 a firm grip. ➤ a person's capacity to attain something: success was within his grasp. 2 a person's understanding.

You should note that grasp is a verb, namely an active attempt to acquire knowledge and understanding, which are nouns and thus passive. When you deliberately and wilfully set about gaining new knowledge so that it is not merely a theoretical understanding but a tangible know-how that that can be practically applied in your artistic expression, only then do engage in the process of acquiring a method or technique, namely a pragmatic means of doing something. To merely comprehend the importance of the elements of observation, concentration, attention, relaxation, imagination, precision, repeatability, et al is therefore meaningless unless you have integrated them in actual praxis, and physically „grasped“ their importance. The more you personally engage with these concepts and discover how to embody them, which is the whole point of undergoing training, the more you will be able to transform the sands of the unknown into solid matter, so that the ground you are preparing for your artistic expression becomes increasingly stable. No foundation should be laid in loose sand, or the structure will become unstable and the external form collapse. Some of you are resisting this process of acquiring a solid grounding, perhaps because you believe that you already know how to „act“, and that all this detailed, disciplined work is just a waste of time.

Note: This was page one of a two page handout.

Appendix Item 24

SUN Drama Dept's Open Class, Friday 7th Sept., 2012.

The notion behind an 'Open Class' concept in a training environment with several specialisms catered for under the general umbrella of Theatre and Performance studies, is that it provides students and staff members with an ideal, in-house opportunity to benefit from each other's work, thereby, hopefully, enriching their collective praxis. It also affords a showcase for extracurricular work and a platform to try out work in progress before a ready-made audience. For those of us engaged in process orientated work it offers an additional boon, namely an opportunity to publicly gauge the affectivity of training conducted in workshops to determine whether progress is being made in preparing students for the ultimate aim of performance readiness. Today's offering represents such an occasion.

Module 178a. 'Basic skills in acting and improvisation' - Introduction to acting methods Lecturer: R. Swart

The brief given to the first-year students enrolled in the abovementioned course at the start of the 3rd term was that they had to sing a song of unspecified genre, without musical accompaniment, in each week's class. Whilst the 1st term's training emphasised attention to objects, concentration, and physical precision, and the 2nd term on emotional availability and spontaneity, the 3rd term focussed on liberating their vocal potential and overcoming any vestiges of self-consciousness. After five weeks of solo work they were grouped into pairs, trios and foursomes, according to vocal compatibility, and tasked with creating a 5 minute performance piece for presentation in Open Class. They were granted total creative freedom in terms of both their material choices and presentational format.

ORDER OF ACTS

Rag Dolls – Charnelle, Kika

Ladies of the Night - Bonita, Keenan, Simoné, Tina

Imagine Amour - Frik, Marelize

Youth in Revolt - Hanli, Marné, Natasha

The Revenge - Armand, Corlia, Ellenique

Pretty Pair - Francois, Kenly, Nicola

Esther and the J's - Edwin, Esther, Nina

The Monroz's – Bradley, Licia

After Eight – Dean, Lizelle, Roxanne

Nerdilly Perfect – Janet, Kurt, Ninx

Still Dirty - Elaine, Jolene, Patricia

No Name Needed - Genovese, Madelein

Naughty but Nice - Margaret, Maria, Senzo

Formally Three - Andrico, Annabé, Tauné

The Odd Family - Anja, Isak, Marciel

Lyndon and the Dream Girls - Anja, Lizzy, Lyndon

Cupid - Amari, Maéke, Nina

Fiery Steed - Jeandré, Liezl, Magdel

Suspenders - Danielle, Franciska, Heidi

That Night - Ilse-Lee, Kim, Ruan

Can't Buy Me Love - Ameer, Jami-Lee, Jeandré

Appendix Item 25

The following questions relate to the past semester's work. I am currently conducting research into training methods for student actors and your feedback will be of great benefit. Your replies will be anonymous and you are not obligated to answer any of the questions. If you do decide to answer however, please try to provide more information than a simple „yes" or „no" response.

- 1) Please explain what, if any, benefit you gained from the third term's work, namely having to sing a different solo song in each week's class without any musical accompaniment?
- 2) What, if any, benefit did you gain from working in a group to prepare a short musical presentation for the end of term Open Class on Friday afternoon September 7th?
- 3) Was your assessment of your performance potential in any way affected as a result of this work?
- 4) In the fourth term we used the first term's „etudes" as a „score of actions" in instantly conceived, improvisational exercises. Please describe your experiences during this final phase of training.
- 5) What, if any, benefit did you gain from this work?
- 6) What is your understanding of the state of „I am being"?
- 7) What is your understanding of „dual consciousness"?
- 8) What is your understanding of *conjunctio oppositorum*?
- 9) Did you gain any benefit from the class discussions and handouts?
- 10) Was there any correlation between the theory classes and the practical workshops?
- 11) How have your acting abilities been affected by the 40 hours of training with me this year?
- 12) Have there been any changes of a more personal nature? If so please explain what prompted them.
- 13) In Stanislavski's view the principal aim of a theatrical school should be „the liberation and the disclosing of a student's creative individuality," which he believed was „imprisoned by prejudices and stereotyped patterns". What are your thoughts on this?
- 14) At the Moscow Art Theatre school the first year of training is devoted "to develop in the student a heightened sense of the truth of his actions, just as one develops a musician's sense of hearing or a painter's sense of sight." What are your thoughts on this?

Appendix Item 26

- 1) Please explain what, if any, benefit you gained from the third term's work, namely having to sing a different solo song in each week's class without any musical accompaniment?

Even for me (I LOVE to sing!), I gained confidence to sing in front of a crowd without struggling to sing with my emotions and be totally present in my performance.

It gave more confidence. I come across as a confident person, but singing alone in front of people has always terrified me. It taught me so much about how to forget about your audience and just do your thing. I never used to sing in front of people, but I have learnt that I can and now I do :)

I am used to singing in front of people, but not without accompaniment. Having to go through this process without accompaniment, taught me to trust in my voice and gain even more confidence in regards with singing in front of an audience.

In the beginning this was a daunting task as I hate singing in front of people because I'm not particularly talented in that area, but as the term progressed I gained more self confidence in myself and I became less aware of what the audience thought of me, as a person, as I was in essence representing the message that was being sung, and not myself as a person. I really found this a fun activity and was sad when it ended.

The exercise necessitated one to believe in yourself, even when you knew the outcome will embarrass you, and to put your mental-awareness of yourself and your space second to how you feel about the song. In essence it taught me that I cannot be disconnected from even one word or action in performance because if you are you will resonate a false note, and a „fakeness“ will frame your performance as such.

I definitely gained confidence in using my voice – not just singing, but using it to its full extent. I also feel that I discovered things I can do with my voice, that I never knew I could do before. I don't feel so afraid of showcasing my voice to others any more.

In the beginning it was difficult to find the right song, especially to perform without accompaniment, and to perform it without being self-conscious but by the end of the term it became a lot easier.

I gained confidence in feeling free to sing in front of a group of people and actually trying to see if there is a talent for it and trying to make it sound acceptable. There is a general confidence gain if you don't have training.

It benefited me very positively, because it gave me courage and confidence. I am not comfortable with my voice, but it gave me the opportunity to explore with things that I am not good at and making it strength, like when I rapped, or I incorporated dancing.

Before last term I had never sang solo in front of anyone, I simply did not have the confidence to do so and singing in front of an audience was one of the most intimidating things that I could ever imagine. But due to the third term assignment, it seems that any sense of confidence or nervousness has vanished, this is not only noticeable in your class but throughout my entire course. About 4 weeks ago I had “vertolking” with Nicole and I went up to say my Afrikaans monologue (as you know Afrikaans is not my home language) and said it without a nervous cell in my body. Through the third terms work I have grown not only in self-confidence, but also in the manner that I now accept criticism from others and apply. It has allowed me to and given me the confidence to listen and apply the criticism that I am dealt.

During the first week I could not see how any of the term's work would help me. But looking back, I see that it helped my confidence by miles. Although I am comfortable in my class and with my classmates, it is scary to be in such a vulnerable position. After this term's work I have gained a new type of confidence. To sing in front of people, especially without musical accompaniment, is a very vulnerable position to be in. Having to each week sing a solo in class, having to just take a leap and go for it, allowed me to just overcome any self-consciousness and each week I felt more comfortable with the idea of singing, naturally I still felt a little nervous every time before having to sing but once I started I felt at ease and could enjoy the moment rather than being pre-occupied with what my classmates might think.

It was very difficult for me to sing in front of others as it is not my comfort zone at all! But I did benefit a lot from it and it made me to be more at ease in front of others.

I benefitted a lot from this work, since I'm not exactly confident with singing, this however helped overcoming self-confidence and really helped to relax and just let a person's vulnerability go. It made you realize what your voice can actually do, if you work on it.

I definitely think that I benefitted from the work we had done. Having to sing a new song each week was difficult, because you are forced to get comfortable with a new song each week. This was ultimately what was needed to push ourselves and to get comfortable in front of an audience. Having to sing without a musical component was even more daring because the attention was 100% on you as a performer so you had to entertain. This was an effective way of throwing us into the deep end but eventually achieving satisfying results.

Despite the fact that it gave me more confidence to sing in front of an audience, it made me learn how to sing an emotional song without breaking down. It wasn't easy, but I did accomplish it.

Being faced with singing in front of people was a very personal problem I have been struggling for years. My extreme discomfort with the task and reluctant reactions were met with the reality that "singing" is just singing and anyone can do it. The task was simple even though I made of it a mountain. I enjoyed it so much and revitalised my belief of self. I am an instrument and I can achieve anything with just the use of my body.

I for one have an immense fear of singing in front of people. Although I know I don't have a horrible voice, there is just something about the vulnerability that I could never get over. It is because of confidence that I lacked and also a lack of opportunities than never gave me the chance to get over it. I now also have a better insight of how to use my voice to really give meaning to a song and not to merely sing it.

At first I felt vulnerable because it is allowing people to see the real you. It was difficult every time but after a few tries I led go. The group work with it made this possible. In our small groups we developed a closer relationship and this allowed me to open up.

It helped me gain self-confidence to sing in front of people. I took part in two auditions this year – one before we'd finished the solo-singing work and the other at the end of this final term. I was able to sing with more confidence and consequently better at the later one – I'm not sure if it is directly as a result of this learning curve, but I'm sure it helped.

Yes definitely. I become more confident in what I was doing. I am not yet there where I must be, but it is a progress. So that is all that matters.

Appendix Item 27

- 4) In the fourth term we used the first term's „études“ as a „score of actions“ in instantly conceived, improvisational exercises. Please describe your experiences during this final phase of training.

It was fun. It pushed me to explore my imagination.

I love it. It was such a rush, you didn't have to think about what you were doing at any time because your practical structure was sorted. If you knew what you were going to do, move by move, your involvement with your partner, your emotions and becoming your character all can easy.

At first I was very nervous to start the work, as I was afraid I would think too much. But after the first time, I realised that my etude helped me not to go to my head, and experienced the activity as very natural.

I found this very difficult. I felt that your success depended on not only yourself and your own willingness to take part but also your partners, this made me a little sceptical about this exercise as there are some people I find it hard to communicate with in normal circumstances and when put in a position where I am being graded on my communication skills with such a person I find it very intimidating and even more challenging than I would normally.

AWESOME! The physical score helps so much just knowing what you can, and is supposed to, does when interacting spontaneously with another. You never feel static and always know where to go next as the „étude“ is your only motivation, till you get impulses. These impulses are easier to feed-off and respond to because of the more natural the environment becomes due to the „étude“ already puts you in a certain position in relation to your partner.

I enjoyed this work very much – as it was all improvised, I learnt how to respond to impulses – something I had struggled with slightly when we started doing the Meisner work

I felt it was more challenging and natural because there was no way of thinking of possible scenarios or words to say. Therefore I found it better in a sense as well as more spontaneous.

The theoretical concept seems probable and thus has worked but certain techniques are just not suited to certain performers and I am clearly not one to whom this technique is suited. Was an experience of frustration as it was suggested that one cannot be a 'true actress' without this technique.

My experience was good with this exercise, because it gave me the freedom to become a character and not think. I just had to become that character and do what came to my mind. For example when Senzo and I performed, I completely became that character and because of that I just played off everything he said. I became that character and without even noticing it our conversation just sparked.

I feel that I have grown a lot since the first term and having to “re-do” work that I did not really get the grasp of in the beginning of the year was challenging. I also did not have a connection with my „étude“ in the first term and should have changed it because it did not feel “true”. In my first week of assessment I really broke through the wall during doing the exercise, it was liberating and I could have gone on for hours and hours and it made me re-live the reason why I am studying drama. The feeling of organic acting is like nothing else.

This final phase was to me the most insightful and helpful. I had epiphanies almost every week and I realised so much about acting and directing. The work I saw in class was authentic and real. In the last class I was placed in a position that was

totally unrealistic for me, but when I used my etude and everything that I had learned over the past year, I found myself crying over a lesbian relationship that was crumbling with my best friend. Weird ...

The combination of our etudes and improvisational exercises, thought the value of how having a score of actions allows you to interact more spontaneous. I felt less a need to „act“ for the audience when I had a motivation and something to keep me in the space. I found it easier to be honest and truthful towards my partner and to live the fantasy when I had something to occupy myself with. The fact that the objects were invisible further deepened my focus to the moment lived on stage rather than to be aware of an audience.

Ok this was my favourite!! Really enjoyed it very much. There wasn't that awkward silence as we were busy the whole time. It came out more natural for me. I really liked it.

I think it really helped one understand the whole dual consciousness and the etudes helped one to not just stand there and feel awkward and self-conscious it actually supported the improve work.

This activity I can only describe as fun. It was a good idea to combine work that we already had a basis of. Thus this work came much easier. People who did not fully grasp the concept in the first and second term were now more familiar with this work and we could only now start to enjoy this work.

I experienced how it was to really trust myself, to let go and act. To be truthful and just rely on my instrument and its circumstances.

By performing an etude, having something logical to do, one steps into an atmosphere of reality. Both performers having clear conceptualisations of their environment and intentions are presented with the opportunity to really believe and react without preconceived ideas. I started to believe my own reality and become completely oblivious to the fact that I'm being watched.

I find the Meisner exercise extremely fun and at the same time effective. And giving the actor something to do whilst opening up your emotions to the partner is not an easy task, but I think the combination was great! I really enjoyed it.

I enjoyed 'etude' as a score of action more. I knew my exercise was difficult enough and it will allow me to have a truthful and organic experience. I have to be honest this exercise was less intimidating because I knew I played a character therefore I could say whatever without hurting my partner. I knew to be sensitive because I knew I am controlling the character so I could stop if I felt I was insensitive. However I would have loved to play a character completely opposite of what I am.

I didn't do very well in this phase of training. I struggled to shut down my mind and just allow the organic emotions to be prompted and to respond to the impulses given by my fellow classmates during an exercise. I was able to remember and revive my etude because I put a lot of effort and thought into its creation during the first term, but I struggled to balance that specificity and the spontaneity in my interactions with my partner.

At first I was petrified of this exercise because of the Meisner technique and I know I struggle, but it was really a nice experience. I am not yet there where I want to be, I have to learn to let myself go, but it will come with time and practise. It is a process and for the first time I am seeing a glimpse change which is good. It makes me excited because I want to achieve my full potential and it is a slow process but it is progressing and that is all that counts.

Appendix Item 28

9) Did you gain any benefit from the class discussions and handouts?

YES. I gained a lot of knowledge on all the history of performing art and who played huge roles in creating systems. I gained an ability how to approach characters.

Its more information, but the class discussions help more because interaction and asking questions is the best way to take in information

Your (Rufus's) explanations of the work in class helped me understand terms like „dual consciousness“ and „I am being“, and helped me to understand why this term and the third terms work is important, and how it would help me. It also gave me a better understanding of the work of important figures such as Stanislavsky and Grotowski. This work was also explained in theory class, but it is easier to understand it if one can apply it practically.

I think I did, it gave me a better understanding of why we were doing this, and where we wanted to go.

Yes a lot. The additional reading material also helped a lot.

Yes. They give insight into the topic and the work and serves as a theoretical basis for the work we do in class.

Yes

Yes, gave a comprehensive explanation of the requirements of the work

Yes, they gave me a better understanding of the concepts we are using and why they are relevant.

Yes, loads of benefit.

The class discussions was crucial for my understanding of the work. The handouts was then used for further exploration of the class discussions. Without both I would not have had a complete understanding of the techniques used and the methods.

Yes it helped me understand how the exercises fit in to the bigger picture.

Yes. Because it is summaries of the books and work we have to do. So we can learn a lot much easier.

Yes when you understand the theory it's easier to understand and use when performing.

Yes, because we had to do so much in class, the notes helped if we wanted to recap at home when we were moving at a fast pace in class.

Yes, definitely.

The two went together as a puzzle built together. What we examined theoretically was 100% applicable in our practical embodying of dual consciousness and being.

YESSSSS if you read them after every class it helped you gain insight to the “why” and the “because” of each exercise.

Class discussions where most valuable to me. I started to understand the work better and to plan my future work as an actress. What will I use and how will I use it.

Yes. Discussion always opens one's mind to other people's opinions and experiences which leads to more thought on different aspects of the work. The handouts were also useful as it is a lot to take in every lesson and it is nice to be able to revise once one is out of class.

Yes, definitely. Although it was important for the discussions because I did not always understand what Rufus was trying to say but through the discussions and explanations it became clearer. I learnt a lot from the handouts and gave me a new perspective on acting and on life.

Appendix Item 29

- 11) How have your acting abilities been affected by the 40 hours of training with me this year?

To respond organically, and it also made me available to my emotions.

Wow, I really don't remember what type of actress I was back then but I've changed so much this past year. For the better. I have a total different approach to acting and in way more confident. They have helped me so much.

I have learnt to use my body in a different way than I ever thought I would. I never knew that acting worked this way, and I have realised why certain acting is bad acting, and how to become/be a good actress.

I think I am more open, I have more confidence and I now know that I have a lot more potential than I am letting myself use. I feel that this was one of the classes I have benefited the most from in terms of personal as well as performance growth. Time will tell. I feel way better and more confident as a performer and have questioned a lot of misconceptions I had about being truthful and acting.

I have learnt a lot about how to use what I have in my process and how to just let go – I tend to overthink my performances and even though this is something I still struggle with to a certain extent, it is definitely easier for me to trust myself and just act.

I have been able to embody my characters better and be able to focus more (corpse less/ not at all) as well as become less self-conscious.

I learned not to use improvisation and the various techniques taught at all in my acting work, as it clearly doesn't work for me to build a role.

My acting has improved the most due to your class, my actors faith and confidence especially. I feel more comfortable in my body and with who I am.

My eyes have been open to a theatrical world that is so magnificently huge. Coming into the first year, my beliefs of acting and the process were so shallow minded. Through the training, my historical knowledge, abilities and grasp of acting has improved so much it is unbelievable.

My abilities are affected in a way that I see a broader picture of acting. I am more open-minded to other techniques. The classes were enjoyable and thus I made me more eager to learn. I also found the interaction between me and you, though sometimes a bit tough, helped me to push my potential. I also gained the ability to see when someone is truthful and when not. This ability will be very useful for my directing work.

I feel more critical of my sincerity and truthfulness during performance, less aware of the audience and more confident in the space.

It helped me so much. I really learned a lot from you and will definitely use it in the near future. Thank you very much!

Yes, but I still think from my side that I could gain a lot more if I just let go.

Yes. I have definitely learned a new technique of acting.

I grew so much. I have so much more confidence in myself. I can act by being truthful and organic and just let go. To trust my instrument.

Definitely. Having had absolute no experience training wise as an actor, I was definitely taught some of the essence and primary principles. I feel like I can be honest with myself. I enjoyed this year's struggles with you. It made me try harder, fight harder. Thank you.

I had a very bad start I think, because I thought that one doesn't need to prepare for acting or so. I very soon realised that an actor cannot merely "wing-it". You have to dig deep and really get behind that emotion and reasoning. It is not an easy task to

create believability, but once you are TRUE to yourself, you can start to play around with imagination. And that is where the fun and the real challenges start.

I could see improvement in my voice classes. I am not afraid of my voice anymore.

Because I only started to open up in this term with the final phase I still have to apply it to my acting.

Being indirectly taught by so many influential dramatic directors and innovators (Stanislavski/Meyerhold/Grotowski/Strasberg/etc), I've learnt a lot about the actor.

I still need to work on incorporating my new-found knowledge and ideas into my practical abilities. I've learnt more about „what-not-to-do“ than a specific answer as to the question of „how one should act“. As explained to us, we'll each find and establish our own method. I'm still working on mine, but my perspective has been broadened immensely by this year's experience.

It has changed definitely. I have also had a certain view on acting but these classes gave me a new perspective on acting. It is good though.

Note: The answers to all four questions are in the same student order, and the responses are all used exactly as written.

The following are answers to the same question by some of the Afrikaans students:

Definitief. Dit was vir my „n baie groot uitdaging en ek dink ek het baie gegroei. Ek het uit elke klas iets geleer. Ek waardeer die manier wat jy met ons gewerk het, en altyd jou eerlike opinie gegee het. Soms is dit nie lekker om kritisasie te hoor nie, maar dit het my baie laat groei. Ek voel dat ek het baie meer as net acting geleer, maar baie as mens ook.

Jou klasse het my acting abilities baie geaffekteer. Ek het ontdek dat jy wel n lewe in jou het met verskillende karakters en om jou karakter lewe te gee. Om met ander karakters te engage en dat dit jou gaan help om real te wees.

Dit het baie verbeter. Ek sit nie meer aan nie, en is meer truthful teenoor myself en die persoon wat saam met my werk.

Ek het so baie geleer. Dis ironies dat acting so uitdagend is, wanneer dit eintlik net is hoe ons elkeen elke dag reageer en optree. Dis gaan nie net oor om „n karakter te skep nie, maar om true te wees aan jouself en oor te gee aan jou impulse.

Dit het definitief bygedra dat ek uit my doppie kom, om net uit te kom en natuurlik voor te kom en te streef na spontaniteit en egtheid in my performance.

Dit het my vermoëns baie ontwikkel in terme van die feit dat „n aktrise „organically“ moet „act“ en nie „fake“ moet wees nie. Ek as aktrise voel dat ek baie ontwikkel het in daardie opsig want in die verlede was my „acting“ baie „fake“ an aangeplak.

Ja, ek kan nou beter verstaan wat die natuurlike aanslag is wat van my verwag word en ek probeer dit toepas.

Dit het ongelooflik baie verander en verbeter. My „sense of truth“ het begin ontwikkel en nou kan ek meer eerlike geloofwaardige performance gee. Ek kan ook nou in ander se performances onderskei of dit eerlik is en of dit net bad acting is.

Daar is nog baie wat ek kan leer en ek glo ek gaan nog baie groei in die jare wat kom, maar die jaar het ek baie gegroei en wil eintlik lag vir wat my persepsie van acting en performance was voor ek na US se drama department gekom het.

Es ek nou moet terug kyk na die begin van die jaar moet ek se ek het baie verbeter.

My selfvertroue, gehoorbewistyd en my geloofwaardigheid het verbeter. Ek het ook slegte gewoontes afgeleer.

Appendix Item 30



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4 May 2014

Dear Rufus

I wish to thank you for the time spent with Vredendal High's drama group during the holidays and sharing your directing skills with us.

I learnt a lot as a director. I have been directing for eleven years, but have never experienced such a hands on approach. I appreciate the fact that you not only worked with the actors, but also took the time to explain every technique and reason for using it to me.

The techniques you used were very useful and I apply them in every repetition. The actors also gave a positive response. They remember the skills and even correct themselves. They certainly have a better understanding of the meaning and interpretation of the text.

We look forward to our next practise.

Yours sincerely

MdeVilliers

MICHÉLE DE VILLIERS
HEAD OF CULTURE
VREDENDAL HIGH


J.J.M. SWANEPOEL
PRINCIPAL