

about releasing emotion with almost no textual or dramaturgical analysis, he sums up the difference:

*Whereas in the System, each section of the play contains something an actor has to **do**, in the Method it merely contains something an actor has to **feel**.*

—Jean Benedetti

Stanislavski created an acting system that is as flexible and misunderstood as any political system, including our own. It is based on behaving truthfully in imaginary circumstances. His contribution has been effectively summed up by the most renowned actor in the history of the Moscow Art Theatre (who was also the wife of Anton Chekhov):

[Stanislavski deserves credit for posterity for] summoning us all to be scrupulous and honest in our approach and understanding of art. His name is our conscience.

—Olga Knipper

The System includes a close, careful look at the world of the character and then gradually enters the character's perspective. It is composed of objective means for taking on the subjective views of the character. It allows the actor to portray any person, however despicable at first glance, without judgment. It is based on the most humanizing trait, empathy. Any actor who chooses not to accept and employ the gifts of the System has an obligation to do so informed, rather than ignorant. Stanislavski's System is likely to provide you with the basics on which you develop your own. His contagious spirit may give you the courage to change.

Note: Additional exercises for Chapter 4 are in Appendix D. Open Scene Score and Stanislavski Observation forms are on the book's website.

5

Stanislavski Stretched

The system twisted and expanded

I don't like the idea of having to mess yourself up to be a good actor.

—Carey Mulligan

The older I get, the more I refuse to use so much of my personal stuff in creating characters. It just feels more like therapy than acting. I don't think the character is as good if it is just you suffering.

—Penelope Cruz

Create your own method. Don't depend slavishly on mine. Make up something that will work for you. But keep breaking traditions, I beg you.

—Constantin Stanislavski

*How did I prepare to play a stoner [in *True Romance*]? Method, baby! A lot of research!*

—Brad Pitt

There's a fine line between the Method actor and the schizophrenic.

—Nicolas Cage

Beyond Stanislavski

He got more than he bargained for. Huge gaps of time separated English-language translations of his works. Thirteen years went by before the second major part of the System was revealed in this country, and these in inadequate, often inaccurate translations. No wonder there was and still is so much misunderstanding! Stanislavski's admonition to go beyond his concepts presumes that one will at least *know* those concepts first.

Stanislavski has been stretched in many ways. His ideas have been distorted, distended, and pulled out of shape by some. They have been expanded, augmented, and amplified by others. Developments in behavioral sciences have helped his flexible system thrive into the 21st century. His ideas have proved to have plenty of elasticity.

As a brilliant teacher, he had a powerful influence on other teachers, who in turn influenced many others. Six of them took his ideas and developed them into their own. He always encouraged innovation, experimentation, and exploration. However, these teachers are so closely associated with him that many people mistake their ideas for his.

Stanislavski in Russia: Three Artistic “Sons”

Stanislavski mentored three great artists who were each part of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT). They each had a distinct vision of what the work of the actor should be. Stan gave them what they needed to start them on their way. In many ways, they were his artistic sons.

Evgeni (Eugene) Vakhtangov (1883–1922)

Although 20 years younger than Stanislavski, the gifted Vakhtangov was the co-founder of MAT First Studio after only one year's membership in the company, eventually heading the Third Studio on his own. His short brilliant career ended when he died of cancer in 1922 at age 39, though supporters continued his work for many years at the Vakhtangov Theatre.

Significance

He combined Stan's inner technique with a vivid and exciting theatricalism and was dedicated to exploring the “grotesque.” Though he was fond of exaggerated and distorted characters, all were based on inner truths. You could say he pushed the envelope on how large or eccentric a character could be and still have actors thrive by using a deep inner technique.

Key Ideas

- *Adjustment:* Using motivations completely unrelated to the content of the play, secrets unconnected to the dramatic events, impulses that no one in the audience would recognize but would produce powerful emotion. For example, an actor playing a character avenging his mother's death might find asbestos or some other dangerous material in the dressing rooms and consider suing the theatre management, “avenging” all the actors who might be

potential victims of management's carelessness. This is not what most actors consider “substitution” because the performer is not really attempting to find a parallel situation from his own life (an experience with his own mother or an actual murder) but rather an entirely different source of emotion.

- *Justification:* Finding reasons to come to the theatre that “justify” your participation in the play. For example, you are the one hope your character has to ever come alive again and be heard. In this case, putting yourself in the service of something higher may motivate you to a higher level of commitment. This moves the actor outside of self-preoccupation and the immediate needs of the character.

Contribution

Vakhtangov managed to employ the Stanislavski System beyond the confines of realism, bringing it into other periods and genres, including classical theatre and highly “stylized” performance. He showed the System worked with numerous styles, including what he called “fantastic realism.” He was profoundly influential on giving honest inner lives to characters in large, exaggerated circumstances. Vakhtangov influenced Richard Boleslavsky, who taught MAT techniques in New York and who in turn influenced Lee Strasberg.

Who Should Study Him?

Anyone who believes the System cannot be applied to nonrealistic contemporary works and anyone seeking inspiration for doing so.

To Read More

Malaev-Babel, Andrei. *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Simonov, Ruben. *Stanislavski's Protégé Eugene Vakhtangov*. Translated and adapted by Miriam Goldina. New York: DBS, Inc., 1969.

Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940)

A founding MAT member, Meyerhold acted with the company for four years, leaving in 1902 to start his own theatre (Comrades of the New Drama) after a falling-out with the management. He always maintained good relations with Stanislavski, however, who set him up several years later with a studio of his own. Stanislavski always hoped that Meyerhold would take charge of the experimental branch of the MAT, but Meyerhold's ideas were too extreme for many of its members (the master sometimes referred to him as his “prodigal son”) and for various

governments. He sought a revolution in the theatre and supported the Russian Revolution of 1917 but repeatedly incurred the displeasure of authorities. He was arrested, exiled, and died (and may have been executed) in 1940.

Significance

Meyerhold sensed a fatal flaw in many of Stanislavski's actors—a lack of physical expressivity. He turned to commedia, pantomime, circus, Kabuki, Noh drama, boxing, and gymnastics to help train the actor's body to respond fully. From the Eastern theatre, he took the idea of centers of gravity; from clowning, ideas for the expressive mask, exaggeration, foolishness; from pantomime, an actor's need to develop strength and flexibility; from commedia, the idea of mastering *lazzi*, or bits; and from all of these, committing to theatrical excitement. He felt that art is not an imitation of life, with audience members looking through a keyhole but, rather, always something more. He always asked what was theatrical about theatre and pursued it. He rejected naturalism as irrelevant. He sought an Expected Unexpectedness in which actors bring a sense of mystery and anticipated excitement to their work.

Key Ideas

- *Constructivism*: The set as playground, its bare bones uncovered, even flaunted, many different performance levels and possible routes, with actors "playing" in highly gymnastic fashion.
- *Biomechanics*: A way of training actors to best convey emotion, desire, movement, and gesture through rhythm, dynamics, economy, and focused attention, employing their bodies as expressions in space. Exercises that produce an actor/athlete/machine/clown (not with the improvisational freedom we often associate with clowning but more a mastery of clown techniques). Mind and body are disciplined to acrobatic precision. Biomechanics trains balance and general physical control, rhythmic awareness, both in space and time, responsiveness to one's partner, the audience, and the ability to attend closely and to react.
- *Sixteen Etudes*: A series of precise exercises containing all the basic expressive situations in which an actor might be asked to respond.
- *The Acting Cycle*: Intention, Realization, and Reaction, Refusal, or Point of Repetition.

Contribution

Meyerhold developed a purely external path to emotion: surface to core—an arousal of feeling from the outside. And his concern (unlike

that of Vakhtangov) was not for the inner life of the character/actor but for the response of the observer. His work was a constant reminder that creation of feeling in the audience is far more important than that within the actor. He continued a long tradition that emotions are not necessarily felt but shown in performance, a direct link back through Delsarte (1811–1871) to Quintilian (first century A.D.).

His insistence on bare-bones theatre helped clear out the clutter and unessential elements that tended to burden older theatres. He drew in physical disciplines that constitute the body training part of acting programs today and influenced Bertolt Brecht's and Jerzy Grotowski's ideas of performance and training. Meyerhold's concept of actor/athlete is widely supported. His emphasis on the lower body was adapted by Michael Chekhov and then picked up many years later by Tadashi Suzuki.

Who Should Study Him?

Those interested in the theatre's effect on the spectator, on bare-bones theatre presentation, and on an intensely physical approach to actor training.

To Read More

Bruan, Edward. *Meyerhold on Theater*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1969.

Leach, Robert. "Meyerhold and Biomechanics," *Twentieth Century Actor Training*. Edited by Alison Hodge. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Michael Chekhov (1891–1955)

The nephew of the legendary playwright Anton Chekhov was admitted to MAT in 1910. As an actor, he was widely admired for being able to become wildly eccentric in performance without ever losing believability. He wrote affectionately about Don Quixote, whom he used as a model for employing brilliant and even feverish imagination to transform the commonplace into the magical. He left Russia in 1927 and then taught in numerous countries. His professional career as an actor brought him to Hollywood, where he was nominated for an Oscar for his role in Hitchcock's *Spellbound*.

Significance

Chekhov placed more emphasis on imagination than Stanislavski had. He encouraged actors to move past emotional memories from their own

lives to imaginary events and images, to seek stimulus from totally fanciful experiences, impossible in a literal world but highly suggestive. For example, actors might be led to achieve a sense of giddiness and joy by imagining that they were walking on clouds or a rainbow with almost none of the gravitational limitations they would feel on Earth.

Key Ideas

- *Atmospheres*: A source of moods and waves of emotion from one's surroundings, a relationship, or an artwork, equivalent to musical keys.
- *The Higher Ego*: Creative individuality that makes each actor's performance of a role different from that of any other actor, including a sense of ethics, sensitivity, control, compassion, and humor, which free them from the restrictions of the narrow, selfish ego.
- *The Psychological Gesture (PG)*: A physical action that reveals the inner feelings and personality of the character. For example, a character with great ambition but constant self-doubt might rise from a chair and then immediately sit down again. Although the actor might do this several times throughout the performance as a kind of defining physical manifestation of a troubling psychological state, it will far more likely remain a rehearsal device. This PG might also become a single move, with half the actor's body reaching up and out while the other half clings to the chair and safety. At various moments, the audience might sense an impulse of this kind without the actor actually standing up and sitting down, so that the PG provides a subterranean support for basic character urges.

Contribution

His Psychological Gesture, used throughout the world, is perhaps Chekhov's shining achievement, though he also influenced our use of abstract, fanciful, even illogical imagery to achieve effects. What we now call *conditioning forces* (see pages 146–147) originated with Chekhov, though he never named it. All our behavior is based on two immediate influences: physical (such as a sweltering hot day or a brisk one) and psychological (a feeling of foreboding or a sense of playfulness). Both change how we might do the simplest act, such as combing our hair or buttoning a shirt.

He influenced acting teachers by the unleashing of imaginative and fantastical elements. He promoted the idea of each performance during

the run of a show being different and to some degree improvisational, within set limits. His use of visualization has become nearly universal.

Who Should Study Him?

Any actor or teacher interested in finding more abstract, fanciful, and purely imaginative ways to approach performance.

To Read More

Chekhov, Michael. *To the Actor*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
Chekhov, Michael. *The Path of the Actor*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
Chekhov, Michael. *On the Technique of Acting*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1991.

Stanislavski in the USA: Three American Adapters

How did the influence of Stanislavski and his "sons" manage to travel so far from their homeland? In the early 1920s, the Moscow Art Theatre toured the United States for a year and a half. Everyone was knocked out by them and wanted more. Americans had never seen such depth, ensemble, and incredible detail onstage. The demand was so great for training of the kind offered by this company that two members, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, opened the American Laboratory Theatre, which offered a two-year program in the basics of the System. (Unfortunately their leaving the company at this point meant that they were therefore not exposed to Stanislavski's continued growth and development of the System.)

The MAT tour led to the formation of other companies trying to emulate them. The first and most influential was the Group Theatre, founded in 1931. The Group strove mightily to become an American-style MAT and had astonishing success with many of its early productions. These shows, for the first time on our homegrown stages, had deeply focused, genuine ensemble work. Three members of the Group Theatre became teachers of great consequence. Their names are still an important part of actor training, and schools they have founded still thrive.

Oddly, each of them picked up some part of the System and left out many others. And they each chose different parts. Nevertheless, their collective influence on actor training in America has been huge.

Lee Strasberg (1901–1982)

Our whole theatre would have been less vital and ambitious without the influence of this one man, Lee Strasberg.

—Elia Kazan

Lee Strasberg tried to take credit for teaching me how to act. He never taught me anything.... To me he was a tasteless and untalented person.... He never taught me acting.

—Marlon Brando

I think Stanislavski got strangled, mostly by Lee Strasberg.

—Anne Bogart

Probably no one is more responsible for misinformation about Stanislavski than Lee Strasberg. Much of what he presented, however, he never claimed to come straight from the master, and he was sometimes even openly critical of Stanislavski. He described his work as a “reformulation” of Stanislavski. Strasberg is probably the most famous American acting teacher of the past century and is widely revered as a great guide. Still, there are many falsehoods out there. First, he never taught Marlon Brando, the performer most associated with his Method Acting. Strasberg was not a founding member of the Actor’s Studio, the place where the Method has flourished, and he had no real influence there until a number of years after it was formed. And while he did study with MAT teachers Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya, he dropped out of their program before the second year. Their program, like Stanislavski’s two main books, dealt with technical matters in the second half, all of which Strasberg missed.

Strasberg developed the Method based on a small part of the System, placing huge emphasis on emotion memory (in practice now largely used synonymously with *affective memory*) and neglecting almost altogether actions, given circumstances, objectives, characterization, and other elements. He mentored numerous famous actors (Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Paul Newman, Robert De Niro, and Marilyn Monroe, just to name a few) during his lifetime, and many film actors in particular revere him.

Significance

Strasberg ironically defended and widened the use of emotion memory even as Stanislavski moved away from it. Without Strasberg’s evangelical emphasis, it is quite possible that this concept would have faded from use rather than becoming the very center of many actor training

programs. He is sometimes unfairly accused of encouraging actors to indulge in immediate real emotion, even though he was always quite adamant that it is important to use remembered emotion from circumstances distant enough (at least seven years) to have control. He differed vividly from Stanislavski, however, in changing the “Magic If” to include one’s own response without the necessity of sharing the character’s cumulative background, allowing what he called a “substitute reality.”

Although the production of genuine emotion in performance is a widespread goal, Strasbergian actors have sometimes been accused of displaying emotionalism and he of violating a core of privacy within performers.

Key Ideas

- *The Method*: While the concept of an inner technique for expressing deep feeling came from Stanislavski, the idea of using one’s own personal history as such a strong resource is definitely Strasberg’s. The name is his. And placing it at the center of one’s work rather than as simply one of a number of items in one’s toolbox is all Strasberg.
- *Private Moment*: A far more extreme version of Stanislavski’s public solitude, involving doing something others never see you do and that you would normally alter considerably if you thought they were, as a means of losing self-consciousness in the presence of an audience.

Contribution

Strasberg developed very specific processes to help actors achieve relaxation, which we now widely use as warm-ups. He also came up with ways to help concentration. Actors tend to be sabotaged by tension and distraction, so these are important aides in process.

His emotion memory and private moment techniques remain controversial, but they have clearly proved useful to many actors. Many believe the techniques work better on film than in the theatre. Onstage actors may appear to drop out of the scene to get their “moments” as they search within themselves and in fact to be preoccupied with themselves. The nature of film is that an actor can take time to achieve such moments just before the camera rolls or his dropouts can be edited later.

To Read More

Strasberg, Lee. *A Dream of Passion*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1987.
Hethman, Robert, ed. *Strasberg at the Actor’s Studio*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1965.

Stella Adler (1901–1992)

Stella stresses imagination and Lee stresses reality. You use Stella's imagination to get to Lee's reality.

—Ellen Burstyn

What an extraordinary combination was Stella Adler—a goddess full of magic and mystery, a child full of innocence and vulnerability.

—Elaine Stritch

Don't use your conscious past, use your creative imagination to create a past that belongs to your character. I don't want you to be stuck with your own life. It's too little! It's too bitty-caca.

—Stella Adler

Stella was kinda like [infamously tough basketball coach] Bobby Knight. Hey, I'm a lazy f---. Everybody can be. We need somebody to push us so we can learn to push ourselves. Stella was like that. Stella made Bobby Knight look like mashed potatoes.

—Benicio Del Toro

An original member of the Group Theatre, Stella Adler came from a family of prominent actors and was probably the most successful actor in the organization. Frustrated with some of Strasberg's classes, she went to Paris to visit Stanislavski in 1934 and worked with him for much of that summer. He told her that he had abandoned emotion memory because it had led to hysteria in some actors. He provided her with less direct ways of summoning emotion.

She returned and taught classes for the Group and then eventually opened her own studio in 1949. Two schools bearing her name continue, one in New York and one in Los Angeles. While Lee Strasberg spent a great deal of time opening up the actor's own emotional life, Stella Adler focused on the actor's creation of character through evidence in the script.

Significance

Adler felt that delving into her personal life, as emotion memory required, was unnecessarily invasive, so she pursued and developed other paths. Her teaching helped bring forth the greatest emphasis on imagination,

circumstances, and actions, just as Stanislavski intended. She taught that emotion should come from the actor's commitment to the circumstances and that a clear and deep understanding is critical for expressive truthfulness. She trained actors to do research into the world of the text and the world surrounding it, sort of like an actor/anthropologist.

Key Ideas

- *Defictionalizing the Fiction:* A process by which the actor fills in the details within the character, events, and place as if they are real, lives within those circumstances, and investigates character and circumstances with the same tenacity as a journalist might pursue a hot news story.
- *Paraphrasing:* Trying to do lines that are similar to but not the actual ones in the text by way of creating the sense of coining and newness when actually speaking the text. These paraphrases might ultimately be lines that your character rejects just before selecting the actual scripted ones, just as, in real life, we all consider and reject some things to say before we make an actual choice.

Contribution

Adler served as a strong reminder that not focusing on emotion itself but, rather, the physical embodiment of it—gestures, voice, animation—can be the most effective pathway to feeling. Even more important, she established the value of the actor putting himself in the place of the character rather than vice versa. She also took the concept of actions and broke them down intoactable units. More than anything else, Stella Adler brought into public awareness all the close careful attention to text and analysis Stanislavski endorsed.

To Read More

Adler, Stella. *The Art of Acting*. Edited by Howard Kissel. New York: Applause Books, 2000.

Adler, Stella. *The Technique of Acting*. Edited by Howard Kissel. New York: Bantam Books, 1988.

Sanford Meisner (1905–1997)

If there is a key to good acting, Meisner's work is it, above all others.

—Gregory Peck

Out of his passion and his brilliance, Sandy developed a profoundly organic and healthy approach to training actors.

—Larry Silverman

If Strasberg is the most famous U.S. acting teacher of the past century, Meisner is probably the most revered—one of the few whom actors have consistently honored in their awards acceptance speeches. An original member of the Group Theatre and a successful actor himself, Meisner, like Adler, was troubled by Strasberg's heavy emphasis on emotion memory. Meisner was greatly influenced by Michael Chekhov and interested in finding techniques that worked beyond the confines of realism.

Meisner, who founded the Neighborhood Playhouse, wanted acting to come from the heart, not the head, and was bothered by a loss of connection between actors, particularly Strasberg actors who would go into their own reveries, losing touch with other performers.

Significance

Meisner focused his work on one of the most neglected aspects of Stan's system and one that the master had held in the highest esteem—*communion*, a sense of *profound connection between actors*. He knew that crackling energy and tension in a scene comes from interaction, and virtually all his work is between partners—while most Strasberg and Adler exercises are done alone. A primary area of disagreement between Meisner and Adler was in the use of paraphrasing, which he never employed.

Meisner required actors to learn lines by rote away from partners (unlike collective line runs), so that textual encounters would be sure to surprise. His favorite metaphor was that the emotional life of character is a river, with the text riding on top of it like a canoe.

His work is primarily aimed at *creating a truthful exchange between actors*. Meisner did not dwell on actions, objectives, beats, obstacles, and strategies, which he considered overly intellectual and dry “head” work. Nor did he deal with emotion memory work, which tended to be so private as to potentially block communion.

Key Ideas

- *Preparation*: Creation of offstage emotion, coming onstage with something going on, with a full inner life.

- *Particularization*: A series of very specific inquiries to move forward the results of the Magic If.
- *Impulses, Not Cues*: Working not with the end of your partner's line but the place within speeches or silences where the will to respond comes.

Contribution

Meisner gave us one of our most respected definitions of acting: “*behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances*.” His attention to communion brought forward one of Stan's major concepts, all but neglected by other disciples and descendents. His ideas have contributed to ensemble and group dynamics, often overlooked by others in class or rehearsal. His beliefs that others in the show or class are your lifeline; that your work will depend on theirs; and that *just as mountain climbers are roped together because their safety depends on it, so too will scenes live or die depending on the invisible rope connecting actors together* have had a profound influence on the elimination of petty competition and on the *building of trust between actors*.

His intensive partner work helps people get fully present in each moment because you are never certain how your partner is going to respond. You need to listen with everything you've got. Developing this habit in class and rehearsal has also influenced actors in being attentive and respectful to what is new and different at each performance.

To Read More

Meisner, Sanford, and Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. New York: Random House, 1987.

Silverman, Larry. *The Sanford Meisner Approach*. Four workbooks: 1. *An Actor's Workbook*, 2. *Emotional Freedom*, 3. *Tackling the Text*, 4. *Playing the Part*. Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1995, 1998, 2000, 2001.

Summary

Each of these six teachers stretched Stanislavski forward in time. Each gave us a whole new direction. From Vakhtangov, we received expansion of the System into stylized and exaggerated works beyond realism. From Meyerhold, a greater emphasis was placed on audience response and the concept of the actor/athlete, the need to rigorously train one's physical instrument to respond fully. From Chekhov, we evolved the use of abstract and purely imaginative sources of inspiration, the actor's creative mind as source for characterization.

The Americans stretched Stan's ideas differently. Strasberg developed an intensive central focus on emotion memory; Adler developed a careful process of analysis and characterization; and Meisner renewed and further developed a sense of communion between actors. Because each of them stressed some but not all aspects of the System, each may be to some degree responsible for the incomplete knowledge so many actors have of its totality. Strasberg placed huge emphasis on the individual actor's resources, Adler on the text, and Meisner on connections with one's partner and the audience. All three developed text-related improvisation, for Strasberg, the use of gibberish in place of script; for Adler, paraphrasing; and for Meisner, repetition. None of the three ever worked much outside the limitations of contemporary realism, nor did they work with college freshmen. Actors who worked with them already had some training, experience, and maturity.

Strasberg's home—The Actor's Studio, a kind of glorious acting gymnasium—remains a revered haven for performers at all levels of experience. The Stella Adler School and the Neighborhood Playhouse, where the other two taught, continue as among the most prominent professional academies in this country.

Postmodern Stanislavski

Postmodern performance is characterized by irony. It juxtaposes the old and new, affection and contempt, the wonderful and the terrible. It often mocks itself, tending to be highly self-aware and to generate preemptive, reflexive laughter and emotional disengagement. *Seinfeld* was a postmodern sitcom, *The Simpsons* a cartoon, and the *Late Show with David Letterman* a talk show. A postmodern performer has an ability to step outside the material and wink at it on demand.

Playing with Dials

It is common for those lacking "Stanislavski smarts" to claim that his system is ineffective for the newest plays and productions. In the postmodern age of semiotics, didactics, deconstruction, dialectics, and problematizing (do not worry if these terms have no meaning for you now), a careful, internalized process can certainly seem inadequate and even inappropriate. You may be required to present a bold, self-referential performance with constant audience interaction. You may be asked to make sharp, sudden changes, following no psychologically clear behavior pattern. You may have to be outrageously in-your-face

with your audience and to constantly change what you want and even who you are.

How can this careful, truth-based system support such a performance? This question is as naive as asking how democracy can embrace changing views of women, local government, privacy, family, drug abuse, poverty, or public access. The answer is in its flexibility. This acting system, like our political one, is designed to adapt. That is why it remains preeminent. Although other thrilling approaches have emerged, so far none have included an all-encompassing process. Nothing else starts with basic training followed by a progression for how that training might develop over a period of years. Nothing else starts with the very first time you pick up a script and then takes you through every phase of rehearsals all the way through the final performance. This is why it deserves to be called a System—because advice is offered for each step in class, rehearsal, and performance. All other approaches address only part of the process, so everything else is still bits and pieces, no matter how exciting those bits and pieces may be.

Why don't we offer much postmodern training to beginners? Because most acting teachers believe you need to learn to fully inhabit a character before you learn to step outside and comment on one, that you need to find an immediate tangible truth before shooting for a more abstract one. In fact, many inept novice actors are constantly stepping outside of character by mistake. It is a skill to be developed consciously, with the actor in control.

It is also far too common for new approaches to claim incompatibility with others and to declare the irrelevancy of past approaches. Most actors learn, sometimes by painful digression, that the most useful approaches are infinitely compatible. "Stan's Plan" will remain where most actors start. He never even considered that this would be where they would finish. It is fascinating that almost any "new" position on where actor training needs to move is simply a variation on one taken many years ago by Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, or Chekhov. So, the same concerns and possible solutions have been around for a very long time.

There are two major pitfalls in using the System. One, characterized in the last section, is to take only one or two of its parts, elevate these to a status Stanislavski never intended, and neglect the other crucial elements entirely so you never really have anything more than a "systemette." The other is to slavishly grant all ingredients equal status in every situation. This is like cooking with an equal quantity of every ingredient in a recipe instead of considering each time you cook how much of any ingredient to use. Stanislavski had provided the ingredients with the hope that you will develop your own recipe.

*When I act I imagine I'm a mixing board at a sound studio.
The pattern in the board is me. When I play a character
I go "I'll turn these knobs down and these ones up."*

—Heath Ledger

Imagine that you have a control panel in front of you with 20 dials. The first 10 are labeled:

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| 1. Relationship | 6. Text |
| 2. Objective | 7. Subtext |
| 3. Obstacle | 8. Interior monolog |
| 4. Strategy | 9. Evaluation |
| 5. Tactics | 10. Beats |

These first 10 dials deal with any moment onstage.

Now, one level below them on your panel, you have the following:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 11. Given circumstances | 16. Endowment |
| 12. Magic If | 17. Recall |
| 13. Super objective | 18. Images |
| 14. Through-line of actions | 19. External adjustments |
| 15. Scoring the role | 20. The creative state |

These next 10 deal with the whole performance.

As an actor, you train to master all 20—not with the idea that each will have equal importance in every performance but to be able to dial them up or down to suit any script, any production concept, any occasion. For a performance asking for outrageous, self-referential behavior and quicksilver shifts in moods, even identities, while affronting audiences, you might dial 1, 4, 5, 7, and 10 way down and 6, 8, and 9 way up, so that the moment-to-moment struggle of the character becomes subservient to quick changes and connections with those in attendance. The System provides you with an overview—a thorough set of questions to launch your performance.

You may look at 1 (relationship) and decide there is none. This is always a possibility. You may also find that your primary relationship is not with other characters but with your audience, your schizoid other self, an obsessive memory, an inanimate object, or even an abstract idea. But asking what relationship, if any, exists each time you go onstage is always worth asking. If you are playing an archetype, your given circumstances are dialed down to relative insignificance

because you do not wish to particularize this character. But given circumstances are always worth examining. All 20 dials deserve dialing, even if the direction is down.

And as exciting as the work of some of the artists noted in Chapter 9 is, the idea that these replace the basic system is absurd. Actors with professional aspirations need to be trained for where the work is, and the work is largely realistic—almost exclusively so for film and TV. No matter how much innovative, nonfacsimile performance grows in popularity, there will always be a huge appetite and market for convincing, realistic portrayal. We may want to see plays deconstructed, twisted, and reinvented, but we don't want to see that all the time! Sometimes we want to watch stories where everyone behaves as most of us do. Sometimes we just want to sit and watch people like us acting like people like us.

Stanislavski Bozos

Whenever I can't make something work, I always like to blame whoever told me how to do it. Don't you? So if I think I've followed the Stanislavski System, but I'm not getting cast, how comforting to believe it's the System and not me that needs work. If I think I'm teaching Stan, but not getting results from my students, it must be Stan, not me, who sucks. The same is true if a play I am directing is not coming together. But most criticisms of the System are, in fact, criticisms of Strasberg or other adapters of Stan's work.

Stanislavski has been around so long. Isn't it time for something newer, hotter, more cutting edge and beyond? We tend to look around for something better to show up. But contemporary concepts should add to our choices beyond the classics, not replace them.

The world is full of those willing to offer opinions (often harshly negative) about Stanislavski without ever having done their homework. Some are heads of theatre departments, major playwrights, stars, even officers of international theatre organizations. Some are revered and have been so meticulous in their other homework that it seems shockingly unbelievable that they could be misinformed and misinform others in this area. But they do! A highly respected colleague of mine announced to me that a highly respected colleague of his had totally disproved Stanislavski; he showed me the article in a highly respected European journal "proving" it. What the article dissed was pure Strasberg, not the System. If someone, no matter how prestigious, continues spreading ignorance, simply think of him as a Stanislavski Bozo. You can have respect for certain people in all other areas, but they can still be an S.B.

If you have S.B. suspicions, ask any one or more of these 10 questions:

1. Could you describe the System for me in a nutshell? (If they start on emotion memory, they're dead.)
2. What are the 20 or so basic ingredients?
3. Where did your Stanislavski knowledge come from?
4. What have you read that he himself wrote? How long ago?
5. How did Stan encourage actors to approach a role externally rather than just internally?
6. Can you tell me how Stanislavski's ideas changed (especially about emotion memory) throughout his life?
7. What other acting system covers all the bases?
8. Where does Stan actually say (or even imply) that the ideas of (insert whatever) are wrong? How does the System not welcome such ideas?

S.B.s often spread B.S. If someone else quotes an S.B.B.S. to you, simply say, "He's a brilliant historian (or whatever) but doesn't know his Stanislavski." Of course, there are also those working in theatre who are simply Total Bozos (or T.B.s.).

The very first thing a casting director ever said to me was, "We often have a problem with Broadway actors because they tend to be too broad." I'm thinking, ohmygod she thinks that's why it's called Broadway!

—Peter Gallagher

When I got to Hollywood, this fat man with a cigar asked what I'd done, and I said I'd got some good reviews in "Of Mice and Men." And he took the cigar out of his mouth and said, "You played a mouse?"

—Liam Neeson

Stanislavski Extended

Many fields of knowledge have opened up since Stanislavski worked and wrote. He was in favor of anything that worked, admonishing actors to move beyond his discoveries to their own. If anything would upset him as much as how his concepts have been misunderstood, it

would be the degree to which they have been slavishly imitated. There are disciples who refuse to tolerate an exercise or a phrase not dropped from the master's lips. But his System is open-ended. The following ideas did not come from Stanislavski himself but, rather, through those expanding his methods. They are in the Stanislavski "way of thinking," springing naturally from what he started.

Private Audience

Your own private audience is that group of people whose opinions are important to you and to whom you have always felt some need to prove yourself. They influence you so strongly that you have trouble getting them out of your head. You are walking along, dragging your feet, slumped over at the shoulders, and you hear your mother (who lives 500 miles away) telling you to "Stand up and walk right." You may automatically straighten up, or you may mutter "Buzz off" and keep slumping, but she is very much present in your audience in either case.

This group includes supporters and nurturers as well as major detractors, competitors, and abusers. When you have a triumph, and you think of someone and mutter to yourself, "I wish the S.O.B. could see me now," you have acknowledged a member of your private audience. Ex-husbands and ex-wives are always private audience members. I keep waiting for the day when someone wins the Oscar or Tony and instead of thanking the world, says something such as, "I won't bore you with thank-yous, but I do have a list of people who tried to stop me. I'd like to name them. First, there was my terrible second-grade teacher, Miss Markowitz, who didn't cast me as Cinderella. Then, there was ..." and so on. The winner would be acknowledging unsung members of the private audience.

Your private audience includes your own vision of God as well as those whom you idolize to godlike status but have never actually met, such as a favorite author or actor.

Grouping

Grouping is looking at others in general terms instead of as individuals—of endowing in large numbers. Bigots are the worst Groupers, branding all members of a race or creed with the same qualities. But everyone groups to some degree. Theatre majors tend to view business majors as uncreative aliens. Liberals tend to view conservatives as intolerant and selfish. No one is entirely guiltless of the sweeping label.

Grouping others (as powerful if you are cast as a timid soul, ignores if you are playing an intellectual snob, thieves if you are a miser) helps you actively use all the other people onstage and in the

character's world in a collective Magic If. It helps you avoid playing an "attitude." You can't play "timid," "snob," or "miser" as isolated clichés. The more eccentric or unbalanced a character is, the more essential this technique becomes, so you aren't tempted to play her zaniness or craziness, but instead let yourself experience other people as she does, in which case your behavior is likely to be automatically appropriate and free of stereotyped choices.

Substitution

While inserting your own experience in the place of the character's may seem thoughtless and shallow, there are instances when you may have no choice. Something in the character's life may be outside your experience. Nothing should be outside your imagination; you shouldn't have had to rule a kingdom to play a king. But you may not have a frame of reference. Uta Hagen writes about shooting someone and being shot—experiences foreign to most of us. But stepping into the shower and expecting warmth but being hit with and stunned by ice-cold water is a reasonable sensation for a bullet hitting you. And, while you may have never hounded another human with a pistol, you have probably pursued, swatter in hand, a fly or wasp that has been driving you crazy, stalking with genuine menace and malevolence. These suggestions act as "triggers" for the imagination. Some actors categorically deny that a character's actions are in them to perform. Substitution is a superior solution to denial.

For many actors, substitution also happens naturally. I have played roles in which the people in my life who treated me similarly to the way the character was treated, and the feelings I had at that time, would simply superimpose themselves in my mind as I spoke the lines—unbidden but welcome, giving the moment a powerful boost. As long as this did not change the moment so suddenly that it was about me and not the character, it did not hurt and often helped the performance.

Conditioning Forces

Within a character's given circumstances (see page 107), some factors influence behavior of the moment. Conditioning forces are immediate, physical, and sensual. If it's raining outside and you enter the stage wet, this force conditions the very first moments of the scene, influencing each decision you make—a hierarchy of given circumstances, starting with your whole life (how you were raised, family traditions and values, major events) to the last year (perhaps a death in the family, the end of a love affair, or a change in your financial status) to this minute

(like it's too dark to see to put your key in the front door). Conditioning forces are about right now. Standard ones include:

1. *Temperature/weather*: How hot/cold, wet/dry, constant/changing? May include variable conditions, as a cold palace room with one fireplace, so that proximity changes feelings.
2. *Light*: How bright or dark, and what kinds of difficulties do you have as a result? Are there pools of light and shadow so that your vision and sense of security vary from space to space?
3. *Comfort*: Any irritating little aches or pains? Any discomfort that comes and goes, depending on how you move? Any stiffness? How do your clothes fit? Do you need to go to the bathroom? Is your foot asleep? Are you hungry or thirsty?
4. *Time*: Actual hour? Are you running late? How late? How long have you been up? How fatigued or energized? How anxious are you to get this over with? How willing to play around and sustain the encounter? What is the relationship between your outer and inner tempos? Do you need to accomplish something quickly but are feeling sluggish inside? Or do you need to move slowly so that you do not mess up a job, but your heart is racing with excitement and tension inside?
5. *Space familiarity*: Who owns it? How much right do you have to be here? How well do you know it? How curious are you about it? Who do you know here? Has it changed since your last visit?
6. *Distractions*: Are there loud noises from the street outside? From the next room? Is there an unpleasant, intriguing, or tantalizing odor in the space? Are your senses diverting you from your objective? Are you terribly curious about something? Terribly aroused by someone? Is any force or activity making it hard to focus your attention?
7. *Mood*: Do you feel unexpectedly buoyant and optimistic? Do you have a strange foreboding? Are you influenced in this encounter by your last one with this person and your anticipation of what this will mean?

Actors often mistakenly play in a utterly neutral space, without any discernible physical influences. They also tend to play only two physical states: vibrantly healthy or dying. Consider the effect on the scene if your character had one glass of wine too many last night and, while not truly hung over, has this tiny little irritation at the side of the temple and is just a bit sluggish. Then, there's that silly cut on your little finger where the Band-Aid won't stay on. And the neon light above is a bit glaring, but you don't have the energy to turn it off and a lamp on. But

there is a nice breeze coming in the window, relieving the heavy humidity in this room. Our state of well-being is relative, not perfect or terminal. Conditioning forces are especially important as you enter the scene because it is here that they often change (moving from dark movie theatre into glaring sunlight, heat wave into air conditioning, space uncertainty to relieved familiarity) and their effect on you may then modify as you grow accustomed to the new environment.

Rehearsed Futures

The same way actors rehearse for the opening of the play, we also rehearse our futures in our heads, thinking about some moment ahead when our lives will come together or possibly fall apart. There are three kinds of rehearsed futures: *best possible*, *worst possible*, and *wildest dreams come true*. Rehearsing your future is a way of holding on to your sanity and surviving present misfortunes. The future can be freely fantasized in both practical/possible visions and in wild/unlikely terms that require windfalls or even miracles.

For many actors, a best possible future would include getting a Master of Fine Arts degree from a respected program, working for some regional repertory companies, and perhaps doing some successful runs on Broadway. A worst possible might include flunking out of your present undergraduate program, never getting the courage to leave town, and spending the rest of your days bussing tables. A wildest-dream-come-true future might include being discovered tomorrow, becoming a household name overnight, winning Oscar, Tony, Emmy, and Grammy awards—all several times over—having all the great writers of the world beg to create vehicles for you, and all the great lovers of the world beg to sleep with you, as you somehow manage to create peace and harmony among the peoples of the world with your art and have a newly discovered planet named after you, in honor of your accomplishments.

Taking the time to develop your character's rehearsed futures adds to the liveliness and energy of your performance and an additional dimension to the Magic If. Knowing your character well enough to fantasize from his perspective gives confidence. Thinking about and yearning toward his future tends to make your performance alive with anticipation.

Suppression

Much of our energy around others is devoted to trying *not* to reveal how we feel or how strongly. This *suppression of emotional display* helps us avoid making complete fools of ourselves but can also stifle our freedom and spontaneity. Review the section on offstage suppression in Chapter 1 (see page 10). Instead of trying to cry, if you can identify, as Stanislavski

has suggested, the conditions of the body that lead to crying (maybe you start to pause at odd places, your voice moves back into the throat, your fingers begin small spasmodic moves of their own) and then play directly against revealing those symptoms, the result will either be tears or a truthful struggle. Actors who *attempt* to cry are approaching the phenomenon exactly backward. Having planted the character's given circumstances, next plant physical symptoms he wishes to avoid revealing. Remember that what is hidden just under the surface, what is not fully shown, is often what is most interesting.

As an actor, you tend to want to show everything—but that's not true to life. What's compelling is the sense that something isn't being revealed—you just see little flashes that give you a hint as to why somebody is acting the way he is. That's what draws people to characters—that mystery or possibility. Will we know? Will we be shown?

—Glenn Close

Working with a Partner

Stanislavski suggests that one must learn to infect a partner with your very soul. Never one to understate, he espouses the need for complete respect, trust, and connection between acting partners. You share so much responsibility with and for your partner that the working relationship should be one of self-disclosure, nonpossessive caring, trust, risk-taking, mutual acceptance, and open feedback. Stanislavski calls this working relationship a state of "communion," which is a step further than communication toward complete sharing.

Partnering

When you work on a scene, you need to learn to partner. If you have tended to be self-absorbed, this is the time to change. The two of you are in this together. You have no right to sabotage the work of someone else, even through ignorance and carelessness. You need to step up. This collaboration can prepare you to partner in projects far beyond theatre.

Good partners:

1. Always call

If you are going to be late for class or rehearsal or if you are going to miss either of these, you call your partner to warn her. Call her

to update her about today's class if she was not there or even if she was late and may have missed some important announcements.

2. Will try anything

Whatever your partner suggests, you never say, "That makes no sense," "That's lame," or "My character would never do that." You try it. If it falls flat, okay, but you always give it a chance. Never prejudge and never sabotage the idea with your total lack of commitment to it as if your intention all along was to show how bad that idea was. Instead, regard it as a great new way of potentially opening up the work, and just give it all you've got.

3. Do their homework

x If you are in a scene, you will read the whole play. Your scene partner will also read it. There should be no moment in rehearsal in which a question about the scene comes down to your not understanding how this particular moment fits into the whole play or how tied to the time period the attitudes of the characters are.

4. Bring stuff to the table

x A good partner has ideas, experiments, stuff to try when you meet. Don't show up without contributions. You may have an easygoing, go-with-the-flow self-concept, but that is not enough in collaboration. You need to be flexible and stimulating. Think of both of you as lightning rods who are full of ideas and may make sparks at this rehearsal.

5. Have your back

If do need to miss class, a good partner will always take good notes to pass onto you, collect an extra copy of any handouts distributed, and contact you to make sure you are up to speed on where the class is now and what is going to be required next time. If you drop a line or mess up some moment in class presentations, a good partner will never blame you, but accept that in fact more rehearsal may have served you both.

6. Compensate for you

If you are not feeling well and cannot give your all in a class presentation or rehearsal, your partner should respond to that with increased energy and commitment to keep the scene alive, sensing what is necessary right now to make it all work. This is like a dance. It is very much about being in the moment, staying connected, and being willing to step up to make the scene work.

7. Ask for help, never direct

You may want your partner to change something because you do not think he is making the right choices. But you are not

experiencing what audiences are, so it is possible his performance is reading differently than you are experiencing it. Ask for help if your partner is slow in picking up cues or not giving you enough anger or not seeming to be sufficiently devastated by your big pronouncement, but always do so in terms of your own needs as an actor instead of a critical assessment of her work. So, instead of saying, "You need to pick up all these cues," you say, "It would really help me if you could almost cut me off at the end of my lines. I'm having trouble keeping the energy going."

8. Give you full candor, with no B.S.

Partners sometimes get caught in the need to falsely praise and encourage each other, like some pathetic parents at soccer matches who will honor any effort as beyond brilliant. The two of you should establish a contract of candor, right at the beginning of rehearsal, vowing to always tell each other the truth. The hard feedback should not be given sensitively, but it needs to be direct and honest.

9. Gently raise the bar

f The ideal partner will stimulate you to be better. To make bolder choices, to work harder, to try stuff you never even considered before. Try to be that person. All theatre departments have actors everyone is anxious to work with, not necessarily just because of their talent but because through their work ethic and quality of effort, they always set a standard.

10. Give you permission

You need to feel able to get silly, wacko, experimental, edgy, to just *try* things in rehearsal. You never deny your partner's suggestions, and your partner in return will also never get in your way and always encourage you to just go for it today, trusting your judgment about what to keep and what to pull back from these adventurous explorations. Rehearsals should often be about stretching the limits and comfort zones of the scene. A good partner will accept and applaud any damn thing you want to try because you are willing to try.

Your relationship is like a small, short-term marriage, with *all* the give-and-take and need for mutual support that implies. The *two of* you need to know each other better than can be accomplished *accidentally*. The partner exercise in Appendix E imposes some *structure and* speeds up the process. It does not force an artificial *instant intimacy*, however, because you always have the freedom to reveal *only as* much information as is comfortable.

Stanislavski and his company had the extraordinary luxury of working and living together for many years, so that members of the Art Theatre were like family. This is the best exercise I know for gaining some semblance of self-disclosure between people who have no choice but to trust each other.

Acting is an intimate thing. You entrust your partner with something very private, a tremendous bond develops and that intimacy is like love.

—Kevin Kline

You work with some people who may be hot, but when you look them in the eye, they don't really look back. You can see they just don't have it. Connection. And they know it, and they know you know it.

—Ving Rhames

Pulling It All Together The amount of terminology associated with the System may seem vast, but there are really only 36 core terms worth committing to memory. These constitute your working vocabulary. Review the next three paragraphs, which summarize the basic vocabulary of the Stanislavski System as originally designed by the man himself with additions brought about by time. Go back and review any idea from this chapter still not entirely clear to you. Don't reject any of these actor's tools until you know you have tried them.

Begin by determining the *given circumstances* of your character and by using the *Magic If* to place yourself inside those circumstances, including *endowment* of objects and people with physical and emotional qualities. You explore the character's *relationships* with everyone she encounters, developing her *private audience* and her *grouping* of others. You use your five senses to *recall* impressions, with *sense memory* adding detail and texture. You sometimes tap *emotional memory* to connect with the character's feelings. *Release pictures* can be especially powerful in this process. You explore not just the character's past and present but his *rehearsed futures*, including his fantasies. Each time the character appears, you identify *conditioning forces* that may influence his behavior in an immediate, sensual way.

As you explore the *text*, you seek *images* to bring each line to life so you can connect fully with your partner. You work closely and in sufficient trust with your partner for mutual *communion* to occur. You discover the text's underlying *subtext*, including the character's *interior*

monolog and *evaluations* where *alternatives* are explored. In each scene, you find her *objective*, the *obstacle* in the way, and general *strategy* and specific *tactics* employed to make it happen. You find many small *actions* or *bits* where any inner impulse has an outer execution, and you experiment with the *method of physical actions*, balancing the psychological and physical ingredients of each action. Instead of trying to feel the emotions for each moment, you concentrate on *planting* the physical symptoms of emotions, sometimes including *suppression* of emotional display. You section the role into *beats*, changing as individual transactions are completed.

You attempt to identify the character's *super objective* and to find the *through-line of actions*, connecting all the strategies, tactics, and individual maneuvers executed by the character along the way. All this work is placed in the *score* to guide the process. Although a number of changes in your own habits have occurred automatically, some *external adjustments* are likely to be needed as your own body and voice change to suit the character. Attention to *tempo-rhythm* is especially important in entering the character's experience. If all these ingredients have been carefully pursued, you have a good chance of entering the *creative state* and are almost certain to achieve a performance based on *truth*.

NOTE: Additional exercises for Chapter 5 are in Appendix E.