

'The Method': *Stanislavsky's Acting System Is Widely Misunderstood, But Its Influence Extends Even Beyond Stage and Film*

By WILLIAM PACKARD

The great Russian actor Constantin Stanislavsky has had a profound influence on the American theater, especially over the last 35 years. However, it is difficult to give an accurate account of his famous "method" or "system" of acting, since even today it is still very much open to misunderstanding and controversy.

Stanislavsky's method is essentially a reaction against the 19th Century acting technique, with all of its claptrap melodrama and rhetorical effect and artificial theatricality. What bothered Stanislavsky was that there was no systematic approach to any of this acting—it seemed as if the actors were basing their entire craft on some whim of the gods, relying on a mystique of "talent" and "genius" and "inspiration" to account for their best moments onstage.

In his autobiography, "My Life In Art," Stanislavsky reveals the long history of his own search for artistic truth: "And I dreamed of one thing only—to be myself, to be that which I can and must be naturally, something that neither the professors nor I myself could teach me, but nature and time alone."

He recorded his own slow growth, and how he became aware of the great dangers that lay in wait for any actor—for example, there were all the familiar seductions of flattery: "Let a good looking high-school girl applaud the young actor, let another praise him, let a third send him a letter with his portrait and beg for an autograph, let a fourth one ask for an appointment, and all the advice wise men give him retreats before his conceit."

Baffled by Basic Questions

But most important of all, Stanislavsky concentrated on the actor's craft. And like all true pioneers, he was baffled by fundamental problems that never seemed to occur to anyone else. How should the actor prepare for a performance? And how could any actor play "Othello" night after night after night without occasionally losing touch with the role? Clearly, there ought to be a technique, some creative preparation that could tap the actor's creative energies and be a means of arriving at "the superconscious through the conscious."

And so Stanislavsky developed his own approach, which he later set down in two books, "An Actor Prepares" and "Building a Character." He discovered that the actor should not play for the entertainment of the audience, but for the truth of the character. And when an actor can locate the appropriate emotion his character is supposed to be experiencing, then all of the external aspects of acting will fall into place of their own accord: "... the secret of the voice lies in feeling an emotion. Once that is felt the voice comes of itself. . . ."

Put in its simplest terms, the actor must be able to draw on his own reservoir of emotion, to realize the character he is trying to portray. And to make full use of his own resources, the actor must be able to enter into an imaginative reality that he proposes to himself—"on the stage truth is that in which an actor sincerely believes."

Stanislavsky evolved this theory over a

own theater has been gradual and erratic. In 1897 Stanislavsky formed the Moscow Art Theater, which in its distinguished career included such outstanding artists as Meyerhold, Richard Boleslavski, Michael Chekhov and Vera Soloviova. In 1898 Stanislavsky produced Chekhov's "The Seagull," and he later worked closely with the great playwright on other productions of his plays. And during the course of his lifetime, Stanislavsky also had occasion to meet and work with such artists as Tolstoy, Maeterlinck, Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig.

Americans Enthusiastic

In 1923 the Moscow Art Theater came to America with three plays—"The Lower Depths," "The Three Sisters" and "The Cherry Orchard." American audiences were enthusiastic over such extraordinary ensemble playing and feeling for real life, and many American theater artists later studied with Richard Boleslavski in Manhattan—among them Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Harold Clurman and Sanford Meisner.

With the stock market crash in 1929, America experienced a terrible period of economic and social upheaval, and the deep sense of anxiety and unrest was reflected in our theater. In 1931 the Group Theater was formed with Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Elia Kazan; and the Americans began to apply what they knew of the Stanislavsky method to the problem plays of Clifford Odets, such as "Awake and Sing" and "Waiting for Lefty."

In 1934 Stella Adler went to Russia to meet Stanislavsky, and she complained to him that she was unhappy with his system of acting; and so the two worked together on acting problems for over a month, and when Stella Adler returned to the Group Theater she reported that the Americans had been misusing the system. There was too much attention being given to personal memory work, she said, and not enough emphasis on the given circumstances of the play itself. This new interpretation of Stanislavsky's method gave rise to divisions within the Group Theater and arguments over the method that have never been wholly resolved.

In 1947 one of the most important American acting schools, the Actors Studio, was formed by Robert Lewis, Cheryl Crawford and Elia Kazan. Over the past 20 years it has become famous mostly for the work of one of its teachers, Lee Strasberg.

Strasberg explained his own view of the method in 1956: "The simplest examples of Stanislavsky's ideas are actors such as Gary Cooper, John Wayne and Spencer Tracy. They try not to act but to be themselves, to respond or react. They refuse to say or do anything they feel not to be consonant with their own characters."

This statement brought some protest from other students of the method, because it seemed to be too much of a simplification. But Strasberg's basic point is correct, and can be seen most clearly in such performances as Marlon Brando's in "Streetcar Named Desire" or "On the Waterfront," or the late James Dean's in "East of Eden." These were both Actors Studio-trained actors, they were both directed by Elia Kazan, and their performances in these classic films are

selves refuse to do anything that does not come out of their own inner life and feeling.

At the Actors Studio emphasis is on relaxation exercises, improvisations and the technique of getting in touch with one's own feelings through "affective memory." Strasberg explained this technique in an interview in the "Tulane Drama Review." "You do not start to remember the emotion, you start to remember the place, the taste of something, the touch of something, the sight of something, the sound of something, and you remember that as simply and as clearly as you can. . . ."

This technique is reminiscent of Marcel Proust's pursuit of memory in "Remembrance of Things Past"; but it is also related to Pavlov's work on conditioned reflexes in animals, and presupposes some understanding of behavioral psychology.

And, in fact, the Actors Studio has drawn sharp criticism from some quarters for these very reasons — some say that Studio-trained actors tend to express themselves in mumbles and a kind of neurotic sign language, because they are too involved with their own uninteresting subjectivity; and others say that so much probing into the actor's unconscious is not wise and could lead to serious psychic damage. But one actress, Kim Stanley, defends the Studio approach and justifies the use of emotional memory in her own work: "You have to have something, you can't cheat because you don't feel—an actress must live up to the truth in the scene. . . ."

And it is a fact that the Actors Studio has produced some of the outstanding theater and film artists of our time—including Ann Bancroft, Herbert Berghof, Marion Brando, Montgomery Clift, Paul Newman, Geraldine Page, Jerome Robbins, Maureen Stapleton, Eli Wallach, David Wayne and Shelley Winters.

There are other acting schools in New York that continue to interpret the Stanislavsky system — Herbert Berghof and Uta Hagen conduct one of the most successful schools, the H. B. Studio, which also has a newly incorporated Playwrights Foundation;

Stella Adler was recently appointed professor of acting at Yale Drama School, but she still administers her own acting school in Manhattan, where Harold Clurman also teaches; Vera Soloviova has her own acting classes; Sonia Moors, author of "The Stanislavsky System," conducts her own acting studio; Myra Rostova teaches privately; and Sanford Melsner is director of acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Irene Dailey conducts an acting school which uses as its credo a citation from the writings of Stanislavsky: "Besides the method, actors must have all the qualities that constitute a real artist: Inspiration, intelligence, taste and the ability to communicate, charm, temperament, fine speech and movement, quick excitability and an expressive appearance. One cannot go very far with just the method."

New Stylized Poetic Approach

Today we may seem to be experiencing a reaction against the Stanislavsky method — because some of our recent plays are not so concerned with social realism, and there is a new movement toward a total theater that requires a highly stylized, poetic approach to acting. But Stanislavsky himself produced the classics of world theater, and he worked in period manners and movements, and he also made valuable contributions in the area of non-realistic theater. And so as we go on to explore a different theater world today, we should remember that it is a world that Stanislavsky had already begun to explore, and is not in conflict with any of his own ideas.

The influence of Stanislavsky can be seen everywhere around us today—on the stage, in the movies, on television, sometimes even from the pulpit and at poetry readings and in press conferences. Stanislavsky is, indeed, the foremost spokesman for the modern theater, because he was the first man to focus attention on the actor's relationship to himself and to his work. And in doing this, Stanislavsky incidentally raised the profession of acting to a new dignity, because he also insisted on seeing the actor as a human being and as an artist in his own right.