

# Stanislavski and brecht : performance theory



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Konstantin Stanislavski and Vsevolod Meyerhold are seminal figures within performance theory of the modern theatre, most notably for their individual development of systematic approaches to actor training during the turbulent period in Russia between 1898 and 1940. In a superficial comparison of Stanislavski and Meyerhold's performance techniques they appear to be polarized opposites.

Stanislavski established himself as a prominent figure in the modern theatre through his revolutionary investigations into psychology and its capacity to unite an actor with his character in order to produce psychological realism and emotional authenticity within performance; in contrast, Meyerhold approached performance from a more physiological perspective and was fundamentally concerned with symbolism and social commentary rather than emotional realism. Although different in their stylistic concerns Stanislavski and Meyerhold share similarities in their practical methods of actor training.

Both practitioners based their approaches to acting on the premise that mind and body actively engage in a psychophysical continuum, which they viewed as fundamental in the development of a performer. In the following paragraphs I will compare and contrast Stanislavski and Meyerhold's varying approaches to the hybrid relationship between psychology and physiology within theatrical performance while acknowledging the social, philosophical and cultural movements which influenced their approaches.

I will begin with an introduction to Stanislavski's advocacy for a psychological approach to performance through a discussion of his

psychoanalytical approach to characterization and its capacity to inform physical action. I will then compare Stanislavski's method to Meyerhold's physiological approach to performance through an investigation into his use of biomechanics and objective psychology. Konstantin Stanislavski was the first modern practitioner to investigate the hybrid relationship between psychology and physiology in theatrical performance and training.

According to Sharon Marie Carnicke in her essay, *Stanislavski's System: Pathways for the Actor*, ' Stanislavski rejected the Western conception that divides mind from body. [1]' and embraced the concept of psychophysicality in his approach to theatrical expression. During his career Stanislavski developed a quasi-scientific approach to actor training informed by the study of Psychophysics, a science that investigates the duality of human experience as both psychological and physical.

Psychophysics is essentially interested in the ways in which stimulation of either the body or mind affects its counter-part, that is, how psychological stimulation affects physiology and similarly how physical stimulation affects psychology. The concerns of psychophysics are relevant to theatrical performance because in order for an actor to perform convincingly he must have an acute understanding of the relationship between his body and mind as well as how to utilize this relationship.

As noted by another seminal practitioner interested in psychophysics, Vsevolod Meyerhold, ' the arts differ according to the nature of their medium...the actors medium is himself. His own face, his body, his life is the material of his art; the thing he works and moulds to draw out from it his

creation. '[2] Stanislavski was interested in psychological stimulation and its affects on physical action within the theatre. His psychological approach challenged traditional notions of theatrical performances such as pantomime, which focused primarily on physical expression.

He stated, ' One must give actors another path: One of these is the path of physical action. But there is also another path: you can move from feeling to action, arousing feeling first. '[3] His approach was largely informed by French psychologist Theodule Ribot, who believed that emotions never exist without physical consequence. Stanislavski thus developed a new ' path' to guide actors in their preparation for performance in the form of a systematic approach to acting that he referred to as the System; he was in fact the first practitioner of the Twentieth Century to articulate such a system.

The System advocates psychophysics as an effective method of actor training, providing a variety of psychological and physiological exercises that train actors in techniques that encourage an accurate representation of human experience on stage. Stanislavski's approach to characterization is particularly revealing of his psychophysical method of actor training. He encouraged his actors to treat characters as psychologically complex individuals and founded his approach to characterization on the notion that their physical actions are fundamentally informed by their psychological motivations.

This approach is referred to as an individualist centralization of character and reflects the changing political climate of Stanislavski's contemporary Russia which shifted away from a system of monarchy following the

Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and as a result saw an increased interest in expressing the concerns of the citizen or the individual in the arts.

Stanislavski aimed to 'portray the inner life of a human spirit in a part. [4]' He professed that in order to present a realistic representation of a whole character, that is one of physical and emotional complexity, an actor must first engage with the characters psychology. 5] His method required actors to develop an empathetic relationship with their character through a creative process of psychoanalysis in which they would examine both their own psyche and that of their characters. The psyche may be understood as an internal force that constructs an individual's sense of self through its influence on thoughts, behaviours and personality. Studies of the psyche were prominent among many of Stanislavski's contemporary theorists and scholars, most notably Sigmund Freud who revolutionized studies of psychology through his ideas on unconscious impulses as determining forces.

Stanislavski viewed an actor's capacity to empathize with his character as essential in achieving a convincing performance. He encouraged actors to achieve empathy through extensive preparation work prior to any form of rehearsal or performance. This preparation required actor's to treat fictional circumstances as if they were real through a visualization of their characters world and circumstances. Stanislavski asked performers to analyze the Given Circumstances of the play through a naturalistic study of the impacts of the environments on the character and a consideration of the character's relation to other character in the play.

Actors were also asked to identify the Units and Objectives within the script. They examined the psychological motivations of the character and how they informed the characters physical action in order to create logical and purposeful action on stage. The internal motivations were categorized as the characters objectives; the physical actions that resulted directly from these objectives or psychological motivations were referred to as units of action.

It is during this initial process that actors begin to investigate the relationship between psychology and physiology within the role of their performance. This process is referred to in the System as a Metamorphic Exercise, intended to create total identification between an actor and his part so that he has the psychological grounding to achieve a performance in which he can naturally 'live the role' of his character on stage both emotionally and physically. The capacity to 'live' the role of a character is referred to by Stanislavski as a state of 'experiencing,' to experience ones character.

Stanislavski's desire to achieve immediate physical and emotional experience on stage reflects the concerns of a prominent philosophical movement in the early 20th Century known as phenomenology, which advocated immediate experience as the ultimate source of truth and knowledge. Stanislavski's methods were most utilized by realist modes of performance and his methods were eventually adopted by Stalin and the Soviet Union in 1934 as the only lawful artistic style: 'The state deemed realism superior to any type of formal or abstract art, and the physical material world superior to anything spiritual or transcendental. [6]

Stanislavski's approach was disputed by other theatrical practitioners of the

time such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, who advocated transcendental modes of performance and a more physiological approach to actor training. Vsevolod Meyerhold rejected Stanislavski's realist approach to theatrical performance and led an avant-garde movement in Russia, which challenged realist theatre and promoted Symbolism and transcendental modes of expression. Meyerhold was more concerned with theatrically presenting the essence of emotional states and situations through abstract means than developing psychological empathy through realism.

Although he rejected Stanislavski's stylistic interests he acknowledged the significance of his psychophysical approach to acting and applied it to his own theatre, however instead of utilizing psychology as a catalyst for physical action, Meyerhold advocated physical action as a form of emotional expression. He stated, 'A theatre built on psychological foundations is as certain to collapse as a house built on sand. On the other hand, a theatre which relies on physical elements is at very least assured of clarity.

All psychological states are determined by specific physiological processes. [7]' Thus, in order to symbolically represent emotional states Meyerhold utilized the expressive nature of the human form and movement. He advocated movement as the ultimate means of theatrical expression, 'The role of movement is more important than that of any other theatrical element. Deprived of dialogue, costume, footlights, wings and an auditorium, and left with only the actor and his mastery of movement, the theatre remains the theatre. 8]' In my discussion of Meyerhold's psychophysical approach to theatre I will be focusing on his work in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and his development of a biomechanical

approach to performance that was informed by Taylorism and objective psychology. Robert Leech outlined the psychophysical nature of biomechanics in his essay *The Actor's Business*, 'Biomechanics...meant the study of the physiological and psychological laws that govern the actors body as a normally functioning mechanism so that it's every gesture and movement might be employed with the greatest efficiency. [9] Biomechanics efficient approach to movement was influenced by the studies of Frederick Winslow Taylor, an American mechanical engineer who sought to improve industrial efficiency through his invention of time and motion studies. His theories on efficient manufacture were highly influential in Soviet Russia and impacted greatly on Meyerhold's treatment of performance. The efficiency of movement as advocated in Taylorism was adopted by Meyerhold in the form of efficient stage movement.

Meyerhold treated his actors as workers, reflecting the industrial revolution occurring in Russia at the time. Meyerhold discusses the biomechanical actor, 'Man at last will begin to harmonize himself in earnest. He will make it his business to achieve beauty by giving the movement of his limbs the utmost precision, purposefulness and economy'[10] Meyerhold utilized Taylor's studies of efficient working cycles and constructed his own form of acting cycles which consisted of three parts: intention, realization and reaction.

For example, the acting sequence involved in shooting a bow and arrow would be as such, the intention is to shoot the bow, the realization is launching the arrow and the reaction is the joyous leap in the air once the bow is launched. Meyerhold's theatrical biomechanics thus established



principles for precise analytical execution of each motion through the differentiation of each motion for purposes of maximum precision and demonstrativeness. He trained his actors to externalize their emotions through rhythmical movements that were planned and drilled until they became second nature.

This method advocated his belief that physical actions evoked or excited emotional responses as natural reflexes to certain muscular activity. The significant role of reflexology in Meyerhold's approach to performance is of a psychophysical concern that highlights the relationship of body and mind. Informed by the study of objective psychology and behaviorism, which viewed emotion as the body's physiological response to a stimulus. Meyerhold sought to give authority to the actor's movements by training the psychophysical apparatus of the actor.

Through vigorous physical training he developed in his actors a hypersensitivity to cues, ' reacting almost instantaneously to a given stimulus, as if shocked by an electric charge'[11] He required his performers to engage with their creativity and emotions to stimulate physical reactions. He referred to these stimulating emotions as evoking a state of ' excitability. ' In the given example, the action of launching the bow evokes or ' excites' a joyous reaction. Similarly, physical actions such as raising the eyebrows and dilating of the pupils will evoke fear. conclusion here) Later in his career, Stanislavski adopted a physiological approach similar to Meyerholds objective approach to reflexology in a technique he referred to as a Method of Physical Action. He had become concerned that an overemphasis on psychoanalysis and emotional empathy was resulting in tensely self-

conscious and cerebral acting. He wrote, ' People on stage act, and these actions – better than anything else – uncover their sorrows, joys, relationships, and everything about the life of the human spirit on stage. 12]' Similarly to Meyerhold's belief that physical actions create states of emotional excitability, The Method of Physical Action developed by Stanislavski studies the concept of physical stimulation in performance and its capacity to inform psychologically realistic performance, however the method is still concerned with Stanislavski's interest in producing a psychologically realist and emotionally authentic performance. The rehearsal technique assumes that emotional life may sometimes be more easily aroused and fixed for performance through work on the physical life of the role, rather than through inner work.

Stanislavski encouraged his actors to write down the sequence of their actions as they performed thus creating a score of their actions that would guide them during performance, similarly to Meyerhold's acting cycle, each action in Stanislavski's score logically and consecutively continues from the previous. ' During performance, the actor places full attention on carrying out the required action, with the character's emotions arising as a natural result. By focusing solely on action, the actor experiences something akin to the role's emotional life as a subsidiary effect. '[13] The score of actions denotes what the actor does to solve the problem set before the character by given circumstances of the play. The score includes external movements and strategies that the actor needs to carry out to make clear the purposeful action of the play. He then engages in technique known as the Silent etude.

The purpose of this technique is to test the physical score through silent improvisation of the scene.

This non-verbal action physicalises the scene and identifies credible gesture and blocking which can be transferred into a completed scene which includes dialogue. Stanislavski combined his physical and psychological approaches to actor training in a method known as Public Solitude. It is a rehearsal technique which develops an actor's capacity for psychophysical concentration once on stage. In order to present a realistic representation of his role an actor must be absolutely absorbed in his role and seemingly unaware of his audience's presence.

In order to achieve such psychological and physical concentration Stanislavski's System teaches performers to sharpen and control their senses through practice at focusing and concentrating each sense, that is sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste and also emotion. Although Konstantin Stanislavski and Vsevolod Meyerhold appear to be polarized opposites in their stylistic approaches to theatre we may conclude that they share similar approaches to actor training through their interest in the psychophysical nature of performance.

Stanislavski, through his interest in psychological realism and the capacity of the sub conscious to inform motivation and physical action and Meyerhold, through his interest in symbolism and physical movement's capacity to evoke an emotional response from both audience and performer. The influence of both Stanislavski and Meyerhold's approach's to actor training have affected practitioners throughout the world and their techniques

continue to be practiced in contemporary actor-training. ----- 1]

Sharon Marie Carnicke, ' Stanislavski's System: Pathways for the Actor' in Alison Hodge (ed. ), Twentieth Century Actor Training (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 17 [2] Robert Leach, ' 3 The Actor's Business,' in Vsevolod Meyerhold (Cambridge: C. U. P, 1989) pp53 [3] Sharon Marie Carnicke, ' Stanislavsky's System: Pathways for the Actor,' in Alison Hodge (ed. ), Twentieth Century Actor Training (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) pp 17 [4] [5] [6] Sharon Marie Carnicke, ' Stanislavski's System: Pathways for the Actor' in Alison Hodge (ed. , Twentieth Century Actor Training (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 14 [7] [8] [9] Robert Leach, ' 3 The Actor's Business,' in Vsevolod Meyerhold (Cambridge: C. U. P, 1989) pp53 [10] Robert Leach, ' 3 The Actor's Business,' in Vsevolod Meyerhold (Cambridge: C. U. P, 1989) pp53 [11] Jonathan Pitches, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Routledge Performance Practitioners, ed. Franc Chamberlain (2003) pg. 116 [12] Stan 1923: 165 [13] Sharon Marie Carnicke, ' Stanislavsky's System: Pathways for the Actor' in Alison Hodge (ed. ), Twentieth Century Actor Training (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 25