

Presence in performance: questions of identity



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“ When we are on stage, we are in the here and now.”

“ What is important to me is not the truth outside myself, but the truth within myself.”

-Constantin Stanislavsky

The System

It began, over a century ago, with a man named Constantin Stanislavsky. Considered the father of modern acting, he would revolutionize acting with the creation of his system—a grammar of acting he began developing in 1906. The system is based on the actor being as fully “ in the moment” as possible, while always staying one step away from complete belief. In its all-encompassing approach to conveying truthful performance, the system expounds techniques and training deeply rooted in mindfulness practice. Used correctly, the effect was a profoundly moving performance, as rarely seen before. Actors started drawing from their own emotional experiences in order to fully inhabit their character and solidify their presence on stage. These fascinating and, more recently, controversial methods employed naturally raise existentialist questions about compartmentalizing, distinguishing, and recreating identity in both life and art.

Before the widespread use of Stanislavsky’s system, the prevalent mode of acting in the 19th century was highly theatrical and unrealistically melodramatic (i. e., in the operatic mode, sans music). These performances relied upon grand gesticulation and articulation that might awe the audience with the display of skill (e. g. the stylized performances of Sarah Bernhardt),

but were quite unlike the mannerisms of real life. At the same time, there were handfuls of actors (e. g. Eleonora Duse) who aimed for a more naturalistic, realistic style of character playing, who somehow mesmerized their audiences into feeling, rather than seeing. These actors fascinated Stanislavsky. They blurred the distinction between acting and life—that is, they didn't appear to be “ acting”—they seemed to really embody their characters. He would often approach them after their strikingly unmannered performances and ask, “ How do you do it?”

Their answers would inform the creation of Stanislavsky's system of acting, which has since developed into several schools of thought, including the American outgrowth of the more well-known Method acting. The affected imitations of life seen in the previous, more classical form of acting, had been based on actors “ simulating thoughts and emotions through external means, such as vocal intonation or facial expression” (emphasis added). Within the new system, however, actors were trained to create within themselves the thoughts and emotions of their characters, in effort to develop lifelike performances. Hence, sensitive actors were more successful and compelling in this style than their flamboyant counterparts. Stanislavsky had often noted how great actors could, on certain nights, completely inhabit their character, i. e. fully “ become a role.” He later attributed these flashes of inspiration to a result of several factors coming together in perfect alignment. The actor must achieve emotional truth and psychological realism within his character while maintaining control of the physical, a combination that required complete presence, or awareness, both on stage and in one's rehearsal process. This naturalism was so simple that, in many ways, it is

almost a default technique, or techniqueless technique. And yet, stripping performance down to the artless basics required an awareness and sensitivity that many had to relearn. Stanislavsky would essentially systemize this preparation process, providing actors with a codified means of recreating the magic of presence.

Surface Acting vs. Deep Acting

In her book, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Arlie Russell Hochschild discusses a related aspect of this distinction in acting style, while applying it to life situations. In the chapter entitled, “Managing Feeling,” she explains how we all do a certain amount of acting in life, though she differentiates the two types with the more general terms, “surface acting” and “deep acting.” In surface acting, like the classical form of acting, we simply try to change out how we outwardly appear. “...The action is in the body language, the put-on sneer, the posed shrug, the controlled sigh.” It is an outside-in type of process, or technique. With deep acting, the external display is a natural result of working on feeling—an inside-out process. “The actor does not try to seem happy or sad but rather expresses spontaneously...a real feeling that has been self-induced.” In deep acting, one “create[s] the inner shape of a feeling” rather than “shape the outward appearance of one.”

The main distinction between deep acting in real life and that in the theatre (or film) is, in the latter, the clear delineation of where illusion ends and reality begins. With deep acting in everyday life, one does not have a curtain fall or closing credits to signal the return of reality.

Hochschild recounts the memories of a high school star halfback, who, by his senior year, had begun to battle an encroaching apathy that pervaded both his game and his schoolwork. Wanting to recapture his previous intensity and passion on the field, and maintain his image as a driven player in the coaches' eyes, he tried various ways of summoning up emotions in order to get his adrenaline flowing again. " I did everything I could to get myself ' up.' I tried to be outwardly rah-rah, I tried to get myself scared of my opponents...I tried to look nervous and intense before games, so at least the coaches wouldn't catch on...when actually I was mostly bored... Before one game I remember wishing I was in the stands watching my cousin play for his school." What he experienced as a slipping sense of realness; he felt he should be driven to win and believed that he wanted to feel that way.

When we look back on such internally conflicted events of our own, we understand them in two ways—as genuine and spontaneous feeling at the time, as well as covertly managed feeling. This leads us to question the sincerity and truth of our present feelings—" Am I acting now? How do I know?" This is a more complex variation of the basic existentialist question that all actors must grapple with when building a character: " Who am I?" While the latter question applies to most in life regardless of profession, the first—" Am I acting now?" differs in that it is always answered for us in theatre; we are told from the start who is acting.

There are various parallels between the techniques of deep acting and the mindfulness techniques of managing emotions and thoughts. Mindfulness practice cultivates a distinction between one's essence, or pure being, and the life roles in which one performs and identifies. In other words, I am not

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my occupation; I am not my past (or in the terms of Sartre, I am not my facticity). In life, as viewed through the mindfulness-based philosophy lens, I am analogous to an actor, taking on roles and imaginary circumstances that are ultimately not real. I, as an actor, am not my character role, just as I, as a pure being, am not my life situation. Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* visually echoes this sentiment in the closing mimed tennis scene organized around an invisible ball. The protagonist knowingly participates in the illusory game, before walking off and disappearing, himself. Life, Antonioni seems to say, is a game organized around an invisible ball in which we voluntarily participate. Mindfulness practice cultivates this distinction between truth and illusion within the mind as well: I am not my thoughts, but rather, the awareness in the background, which can observe these thoughts. One is to note the continual commentary of the mind without getting attached or experiencing the chatter with aversion or judgment. Thoughts are just thoughts, and those practicing mindfulness are free to "release" a thought, i. e. let it go, upon the realization that thoughts are not accurate reflections of concrete reality or absolute truth.

Similarly, in performance, both professional and quotidian, an actor distances himself from his thoughts and emotions, treating them as malleable variables to be internally controlled in order to achieve an external, visible result. In essence, one does not identify oneself with one's emotions, but rather, views them as mental tools with which to direct one's outward performance. Of course, this objective understanding of emotions in deep acting differs from mindfulness in being a means to an end—it is used in the overarching purpose of achieving compelling performance (though

some might argue that mindfulness meditation is used by many with the intent to achieve relaxation, attain enlightenment, or some other end result as well). Nonetheless, the hyper-observant nature of almost all creative types, be they writers, musicians, etc., inherently approaches these connected experiences with a more commercialized intent of using them for inspiration later.

Stanislavsky coached actors into being completely in the moment, and yet emphasized that they always keep one step away from complete belief, for the obvious need of maintaining distinction between reality and illusion (we are all familiar with the controversy surrounding Method acting when improperly practiced). Hochschild writes, “ In surface acting, the expression on my face or the posture of my body feels ‘ put on.’ It is not ‘ part of me.’ In deep acting, my conscious mental work—the effort to imagine a tall surgeon looming over me, for example—keeps the feeling that I conjure up from being part of ‘ myself.’ Thus in either method, an actor may separate what it takes to act from the idea of a central self” (emphasis added). In other words, the actor should experience and show the emotions of his character, but still stay detached, retaining his grip on his own identity as a performer. Particularly in deep acting, balancing this full character immersion with a latent awareness of the overall illusion is a precarious act. An actor must remain completely present within his character and set of imaginary circumstances, while remembering to play to his audience, or to the camera angles and lighting. If he steps outside of himself, i. e. his character, for too long, the quality of acting becomes more contrived, less convincing. The

brief loss of true internal motivation and concentration creates a palpable shift in the external performance.

Realistic acting requires an extraordinary level of unwavering focus to stay truly present on stage or on camera. Stanislavsky disparaged results of surface acting in the 19th century plays. He saw actors who were not truly connecting with their character experience because they would be more concerned with the reaction of the audience they were playing to, and he mockingly described them as looking out the corner of their eyes to gauge audience reaction after each line delivery. One could say that such actors did not coexist authentically with the gaze of the other, but rather, allowed the knowledge of surveillance dictate their performance, which became, as a result, disingenuous. In Sartre's philosophy, these actors, literally, act in bad faith. The self-consciousness of these actors is a prison; self-awareness for an actor is freedom.

Stanislavsky criticized these past performances for “[indicating] the outer form of a scene without any attempt to put life or depth into it.” In surface acting, or classical acting, the form is more important than the content. The performers seek to awe rather than truly communicate. It is “less profound than beautiful... It acts more on your sense of sound and sight than on your soul. Consequently, it is more likely to delight than to move you. You can receive great impressions through this art. But they will neither warm your soul nor penetrate deeply into it. Their effect is sharp but not lasting. Your astonishment rather than your faith is aroused.” On the subject of deep acting, however, Stanislavsky declared, “...delicate and deep human feelings are not subject to such technique. They call for natural emotions at the very

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moment in which they appear before you in the flesh. They call for the direct cooperation of nature itself." In her book, *Style: Acting in High Comedy*, Maria Aitken corroborates this view, explaining that powerful performances require energy, which is not necessarily physical. Energy is all about immediacy. It is "achieved by concentration, and, as in almost any other field, concentration proves to be its own reward—the concentration of an actor lures the concentration of an audience. In high comedy, or any other kind of play...there is only one moment and that moment is now. You must engage with that moment, thinking down the middle of the thought as you are saying it."

An Actor Prepares

Late in life, Stanislavsky would state that the art of performance could not be learned from literature, only from action, performance, and observation. His emphasis on direct experience also espoused an intense focus and awareness of all minute components of that very experience, for the sake of later recreating it as accurately and truthfully as possible in a performance. Like the mindfulness exercises of extremely slow walking or an inordinately drawn out process of eating a simple raisin, for instance, an actor studying under the system would soak in every sensual, physical, mental component of the seemingly mundane activity, as if learning and experiencing it for the first time. Just as life is a repository of memories for the actor to draw from, he must experience life with the same heightened awareness with which he hopes to perform. The most compelling acting requires an intense awareness of every aspect of one's performance—one's body, vocal inflections, emotions, et al. As with mindfulness meditation's use of body scan exercises, <https://assignbuster.com/presence-in-performance-questions-of-identity/>

an actor cultivates a connection to every part of his body (many actors practice some variation of a body scan exercise in training), in order to physically perform most effectively.

Aitken especially emphasizes the importance of mindfulness in a double act, i. e. a comedy duo. The actors must have an intense awareness of each other's physical presence, and must listen to each other with their entire body in order to interact with the best chemistry and play off each other's lines. Their sense of comedic timing in interaction is directly linked to their awareness of one another, how highly attuned they are to each other's minute reactions. Aitken warns against familiarity with the text making an actor "too swift" in the delivery of the lines—that is, performing on autopilot and losing a natural sense of timing by not thinking through the lines as he delivers them, albeit for the hundredth time. "You can never let up with the thought process and you must receive or extend each [line] as if for the first time, every time. This means listening. If you listen properly, without allowing your mind to rush ahead, and without distractions, then you will always have good timing." Paying attention allows one to pick up certain cues naturally, from both the costars and the audience. A heightened concentration results in heightened connections. A comedic performance, as described by Aitken, will naturally match an audience's rhythm of comprehension as long as the actor listens and doesn't anticipate his or her lines, rather, "[allowing one's] idea to form when [one has] heard enough data." The idea of anticipation destroys the first time illusion of the performance, as well as taking the actor out of the moment. If one is active and present at every moment on stage, then everything will transition

naturally. Performance, and thus its preparation, must be exquisitely and completely in the present.

Stanislavsky's insistence on deeply analyzing the qualities of a given phenomenon were meant to "give the actor an awareness of the complexities of human behavior, and how easily falsehoods—aspects of behavior that an audience can detect without knowing it—are assumed by an untrained or inexperienced actor in performance. All actions that a person must enact—walk, talk, even sit on stage—must be broken down and re-learned, Stanislavski once insisted." The housewife who washes the dishes in a mindful manner for relaxation, paying attention to the cool sensation of water running over her hands and noting her thoughts that come and go, is practicing the same mindful preparation as the actress rehearsing for a scene in which she must wash the dishes in character. The actress notes every physical and mental sensation in preparation for recreating the scene as truthfully and convincingly as possible in performance. The details of this action are especially important if the target character is very different from the actress herself. The general actions are broken down to their smallest components, analyzed and practiced in extreme detail in the mannerisms of the character, in order to be pieced back together and run in real time. The actress is now aware and in control of even the smallest aspects of her performance, freeing herself to express the character more creatively and improvise or react more spontaneously in the safety and confidence of this now controlled environment.

Emotional Memory

In deep acting, one can either directly exhort feeling, or make indirect use of a trained imagination (the essence of Method acting). The latter requires a more complex understanding of how feeling works. Stanislavsky emphasized the causal relationship of feelings and situations—feelings are the result of something that has gone before. He directs the actor to think of that event which has gone before, with the faith that the emotive result will subsequently produce itself. In this approach, “not simply the body, or immediately accessible feeling, but the entire world of fantasy, of subconscious and semiconscious memory, is conceived as a precious resource.”

The professional actor must accumulate a rich deposit of “emotion memories”—memories that recall feelings—an inherently mindful activity used here for the purpose of his artistic endeavor. Storing these memories effectively requires many to “relearn” how to remember in an open, attentive, vivid manner. “To store a wealth of emotion memories, the actor must remember experiences emotively. But to remember experiences emotively, he or she must first experience them in that way too, perhaps with an eye to using the feelings later.” Thus an actor is first required to go about life in a more mindful, conscientious manner, in preparation for these future performances. This heightened attention is seen in all related scenarios, e. g. a student is more observant and conscientious to spontaneous experience if he knows he must recall parts of it for a later test. An actor must live in the manner he wishes to perform.

The use of emotional memory brings personal authenticity to the performance, but the distinction of identity is further blurred when one

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considers the mix-and-matching of memories and application to character portrayal. One might draw upon an emotional memory to reenact the feelings associated with the tragedy of witnessing a horrific train accident, but the emotional memory one uses doesn't necessarily have to correspond. For instance, Stanislavski explained how even though he had actually witnessed a similar accident to the one described in his scene, he chose to draw upon a completely different emotional memory that was more effective for him (coming across an Italian on the street crying over his dead monkey), which drew him completely into the character.

Deep Acting in Daily Life

“ In our daily lives, offstage as it were, we also develop feeling for the parts we play; and...we also use deep acting, emotion memory, and the sense of ‘ as if this were true’ in the course of trying to feel what we sense we ought to feel or want to feel. Usually we give this little thought, and we don't name the momentary acts involved. Only when our feeling does not fit the situation, and when we sense this as a problem, do we turn our attention to the inward, imagined mirror, and ask whether we are or should be acting.”

Hochschild gives the example of a young man who finds out a close friend has experienced a mental breakdown. He is shocked, but feels that his emotions don't accurately reflect the bad news. His roommate appears much more shaken. “ I thought that I should be more upset by the news than I was. Thinking about this conflict, I realized that one reason for my emotional state might have been the spatial distance separating me from my friend, who was in the hospital hundreds of miles away. I then tried to focus on his

state...and began to picture my friend as I thought he then existed." He visualizes a more vivid, visceral picture of his friend in attempt to create a more complete imaginary circumstance, much as an actor will make up a world he can honestly respond to as his character. " He might have gone on to recall smaller private breakdowns in his own life and thereby evoked feelings of sorrow and empathy. Without at all thinking of this as acting, in complete privacy, without audience or stage, the young man can pay, in the currency of deep acting, his emotional respects to a friend."

Deep acting in daily life is not always so productive, however, particularly when the lines of reality and illusion are blurred to where acting approaches a sort of delusion. Hochschild gives another example of a woman who convinced herself that she was in love with a man in order to justify her continued relationship with him. " This double pretending—pretending to him and pretending to herself that she loved him—created two barriers to reflection and spontaneous feeling. First, she tried to feel herself in love—intimate, deeply enhanced, and exquisitely vulnerable—in the face of contrary evidence. Second, she tried not to feel irritation, boredom, and a desire to leave. By this effort to...keep some feelings above consciousness and some below, and to counter inner resistances on a daily basis—she tried to suppress reality testing. She both nurtured an illusion about her lover and doubted the truth of it. It was the strain of this effort that led to her ' secret nervous breakdown.'"

In theatre and film, the actor creates an illusion that is acknowledged as such beforehand by actor and audience alike. In real life, however, we more often participate in the illusion and can forget the difference after the farce

has been carried on for a while. “ We take it into ourselves, where it struggles against the sense we ordinarily make of things. In life, illusions are subtle, changeable, and hard to define with certainty, and they matter far more to our sanity. ...What distinguishes theatre from life is not illusion, which both have, need, and use. What distinguishes them is the honor accorded to illusion, the ease in knowing when an illusion is an illusion, and the consequences of its use in making feeling.”

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