Stanislavsky

Notes taken from chapter on Stanislavsky’s System from ‘Actor Training’ Ed. Alison Hodge

“I believe that all masters of the arts need to write to try to systematise their art”

- Wanted to find a system for acting
- Kept detailed notebooks on every performance he gave and saw
- System not complete – dynamic, changing, experimenting, exploring

Philosophy

“One must give actors various paths. 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”

- mind, body, spirit all connected
- emotion never exists without physical consequence
- in every physical action there is something psychological, and in the psychological something physical
- many teachers of Stanislavsky’s method have focussed on one element over the other

Assumption 1: physical tension is creativity’s greatest enemy
- performing demands a state of physical relaxation
- use only enough muscular tension to accomplish what is necessary
- techniques of yogic breathing, progressive relaxation

Assumption 2: acting as ‘experiencing’
- calls acting ‘experiencing’
- compares it to existing fully in the immediate moment
- focus is on immediacy of performance and presence of the actor
- actors remain essentially dynamic and improvisatory during performance

Stanislavsky’s System is designed to foster ‘experiencing’
- creative state of ‘experiencing’ occurs when the actor works through the various elements
- two alternating, nearly simultaneous perspectives - being on stage and being within the role

The system can be categorised into two broad groups:

- **Group One** techniques that foster a proper ‘sense of self’ inducing the state of ‘experiencing’
- **Group Two** pathways into dramatic texts for the successful creation of characters
GROUP ONE (Experiencing)

1. Concentration (public solitude - developing focus, presence, awareness)
   a. Sight
   **Exercise one:** look at an object or person for 30s, look away, give an accurate description
   **Exercise two:** Mirror, pair up (leader and image), face your partner, leader moves, image follows

   b. Hearing
   **Exercise one:** Pair up, person A closes their eyes, relaxes, and listens only for sounds in the room, then sounds in the building, then sound from the street, person A opens their eyes and describes to person B what they have heard as precisely as possible (repeat with person B)

   c. Touch
   **Exercise one:** Place a number of different objects in the middle of the room, pair up, person A closes their eyes, person B chooses an object from the centre of the room and hands it to person A, person A examines object using touch only (no talking yet), person A returns object and person B puts it away, person A opens their eyes and describes to person B, as exactly as possible, the object (repeat with person B)

   d. Smell
   **Exercise one:** Pair up, person A closes their eyes, relaxes, and focusses on what they can smell in the surrounding room, person A opens their eyes and recalls precisely the sensations to person B (repeat with person B)
   **Exercise two:** on your own, close your eyes and imaginatively recreate familiar smells (the sea, hot chocolate, a bouquet of flowers, lemon, strong coffee, bread baking, open fire, fresh cut grass, new books)

   e. Taste
   **Exercise one:** Pair up, person A describes the present taste in their mouth to person B (repeat with person B)
   **Exercise two:** on your own, close your eyes and imaginatively recreate familiar tastes (lemon, vinegar, sugar, chocolate, strawberry, salt)

   f. Affect (Emotion)
   **Exercise one:** on your own, close your eyes, recall your mood when you last saw the sunrise/sunset/stars
   **Exercise two:** on your own, close your eyes, recall a moment of joy, sadness, ecstasy or any other emotion

   **General practice:** read (newspapers, novels, anything), go to museums, concerts, art exhibits – develop your experience of the world and your ability to empathise with others

   g. Circles of attention
   **Exercise one:** walk in a small circle and notice what objects fall within it; then broaden to a medium circle adding more objects of attention; finally walk in as big a circle as the room allows taking in all objects
   **Exercise two:** Sit still, mentally establish a small circle around you and notice what falls within it, broaden your attention to a medium circle, then take in the whole room
General practice: When performing, define your circles of attention carefully to include all objects necessary to the scene. However, if your attention starts to wander, create a small circle in order to re-focus your concentration.

2. Imagination
   a. Visualisation
   Exercise one: Close your eyes, imagine that you are a tree, what species are you? Think about the shape and colour of your leaves. How old are you? Think about the size of your trunk and branches. Where do you grow? As a tree pick a moment from your life and create it imaginatively. Think about the weather, time of day, how did you feel, what did you see, hear, what happened around you.

   Exercise two: Close your eyes, take a familiar event (like your acting class), slowly change the circumstances of that event in your head – time of day, weather, number of participants. Find an explanation for each change, think about how the effect each change would have on the event.

   b. The magic if
   Exercise one: pass around an object, change your relationship to the object by using the magic if 'what if the drink was poison', 'what if the book was a bomb'

   Exercise two: on your own, choose and object and change the ownership of it (my book, my mother’s book, the library’s book)

3. Communication (non-verbal and improvisation)
   a. Rays of energy
   Breathing exercise one: Close eyes, relax, feel breath moving through the body, visualise the breath as a warm, yellow sunlight, energising you. As you inhale see the light travelling from the top of your head down to your toes, as you exhale back from your toes to the top of your head

   Breathing exercise two: Close eyes, relax, feel breath moving though the body, as you inhale breathes in the energy from the room, as you exhale send the energy back out to the furthest corners

   Communication exercise one: find a space in the room, apart from the group, stand with hands held and palms outwards, radiate energy from your palms to someone else in the room

   Communication exercise two: pair up, person A stands behind person B, person A concentrates on a single command (open the door, sit down, shake my hand), then radiates it to the person B (no talking), person B carries out the command (switch around)

   b. Improvisations on silent moments
   Exercise one: pair up, recreate scenes without words
   - In a library, A wishes to greet B, who resembles a famous actor; B does not wish to be disturbed
   - After a serious argument, A and B have fallen silent; A wants to make up but doesn’t want to say so
   - A blind person is at home, a thief breaks in
   - A sits on a park bench wanting to meet B, but C has just sat down on the same bench to read a paper, A wants C to leave

   Exercise two: Using our characters
   - Recreate a dentist’s waiting room
   - Recreate waiting on the platform for a train
c. Improvisations using words

Using our characters let’s create improvisations with words using the following scenarios:
- An art exhibit, several visitors, one dealer
- A second hand store, several customers, one salesperson
- A is waiting for B but C arrives instead
- A visits B to ask for money but B refuses
- A day at work, boss, secretary, janitor

GROUP TWO (Creating Characters)

1. Affective Cognition
   a. Process of Affective Cognition
      - Analyse the details of the play to find out about the lives of the characters (like a detective putting together the clues of your character, pay attention to all details)
      - Research the historical and social world of the play
      - Visualise your character going through a typical day, walking through the house, eating, working, sleeping, socialising

   b. Scoring of Actions

   Stanislavsky distinguishes between actions (through which the events of the play unfold) and activities (that create contexts for the scenes) e.g. in ‘Macbeth’ Lady Macbeth ‘hosts’ her husband’s banquet (activity) and simultaneously ‘covers up’ (action) for her husband’s crazed reaction at seeing Banquo’s ghost.

      - Action seeks to accomplish something
      - Together all actions tell the story of the play
      - Actor write down the sequence of actions for their character (creating a personal score of actions)
      - Actors search for a ‘through-action’ – a uniting thread that links together all the characters actions (should take time to identify ‘through action’, maybe it will only emerge in the latter stages of rehearsal or in performance)

Exercise one: pair up, using your characters each strike a pose, the group will choose an active verb to describe your pose, now use the script [Hello, Hello, Been waiting long?, Ages] using those active verbs for each character.

Exercise two: Sit down [to relax, to hide, to hear better what is happening in the next room, to read a book] Enter a room [to visit a close friend, to meet your lover, to attend a job interview] Wait for [your spouse, your friend, your child, your secret lover, your informant, your boss] Pair up – shake your partner’s hand [to apologise, to be hospitable, to meet a famous casting agent]

The process of identifying an action

Stanislavsky identifies actions by breaking the play into segments or bits (some call it beats). The actor examines the scene for each bit and describes the character’s situation in an adjective e.g. in ‘Macbeth’ Lady M is embarrassed by her husband’s crazed behaviour in public. The situation poses a problem which must be solved by an action. The actor decides what the character needs to do to solve the problem leading to specific action. Lady M is embarrassed (problem) which leads her to
cover up (solution) for her husband’s behaviour. Actor’s use the ‘magic if’: what if I found myself in the circumstances of the scene. The answer should be expressed as an active verb. Then during performance actor focuses solely on carrying out the action (e.g. covering up) and the emotions arise as a natural result.

So the steps are:
1) Isolate a single bit within your scene
2) Define your character’s circumstance with an adjective
3) Then ask yourself: what would I do if I were in this situation?
4) Answer with an active verb which you can use during performance

c. The method of physical actions (movements)
Actors also work with the bits to identify physical movements to carry out the purpose (action) they have identified. For example in the Macbeth scene, Lady M is covering up (that’s her purpose/action) but in order to do so she: seats her guests, takes her husband aside to shame him into behaving properly, sits him back down, and turns back to her guests to reassure them (this is the series of physical movements that help her achieve the action of covering up).

So the steps are:
1) Identify the purposeful action of a bit on which you are working
2) List all the physical movements necessary to carry out this action
3) Test your list by playing the movements of the scene without words (in a real way, not pantomime)

2. Active Analysis (rehearsal technique)
1) Carefully read and assess the facts of the scene on which you are working. Determine the event of the scene, and the impelling and resisting actions that create its dynamics. Notice the style, language, images, and rhythms of each character’s language.
2) Immediately play the scene using your own words; incorporate any facts that you remember.
3) Re-read the scene and compare it with what happened in your improvisation. Did you retain the scene’s basic dynamics and sequence? What images, styles, rhythms were you able to retain, and which did you forget? Did the event occur?
4) Repeat the improvisation again, and again check your work against the text.
5) Continue the repetition until you come as close as you can to the scene without actually memorising it.
6) Each time add something specific from the scene, using images, phrases, lines written.
7) Now memorise the scene for performance.