

## 4.2 *Konstantin Sergeievich Alexeiev (Stanislavski) (1863–1938)*



Figure 4b Konstantin Stanislavski at the time of founding the Moscow Art Theatre

## 4.2.1 A CHRONOLOGY

- Born into a very rich family **1863:** Born 5 January into one of the richest families, if not *the* richest, in Russia.
- 1877:** His father transforms a wing of their country house (dacha) into a theatre, for the entertainment of friends and guests.
- Theatre was an early part of his life **1877, 5 September:** First performances as an actor. From this first experience he begins the lifelong practice of making notes about his performance.
- With a stage name, enrolls for training **1884:** Appears in operatic excerpts at the Conservatoire. Begins to use the stage name Stanislavski, acquired to keep his acting activities a secret from his family.
- 1885:** Briefly enrolls at the Moscow Theatre School, but leaves within three weeks, unsatisfied by the training.
- 1886:** Invited to take over as chairman of the Russian Music Society and Conservatoire. His business plan for improving the Society's school is accepted.
- Decides to take up acting as a profession **1887:** A performance of the Russian premiere of *The Mikado* at his family's Moscow home is directed by Stanislavski. The event gains a professional review. Given permission by his father to continue a career as an actor, Stanislavski forms the Moscow Musical–Dramatic Amateur Circle.
- Travels to see European theatre **1888:** Finds the Society of Art and Literature with his colleagues Komisarjevski and Fedotov. This has a school attached. Travels abroad. Researches the rehearsal process at the Comédie Française and the teaching programme at the Conservatoire.
- As an actor he begins to create more and more new roles. His work in the family business takes a back seat.
- Is influenced by the Meiningen company **1890, April:** Tour by the company of the Duke of Saxe–Meiningen. Stanislavski notes the radical production style, resulting in disciplined and artistically coherent productions.
- Is now in control of a theatre company **1891:** The affairs of the Society of Art and Literature are wound up, but the associated theatre company survives. Stanislavski takes absolute control. Tolstoi's *The Fruits of Enlightenment* is a great success, both as the new director's first production and for his acting role in it. Preparations had been made using the example of the Meiningen Company.
- Acting with professionals he is out of his depth **1892:** Acts with members of the Mali company (the leading professional company at this time) and, despite favourable opinions, finds himself out of his depth. Is urged to turn 'professional'.
- 1894–1895:** Produces *Acosta*, a now-forgotten drama, which he prepares with obsessive detail, in both the acting and the design. His performance is criticised for its anti-heroic, more natural elements.

- Preparations include a search for detail Begins to prepare for *Othello*, a part that had fascinated him for years. Extensive preparations involve a trip to Paris to buy books on costume and fabrics, and to Venice for research into the architecture and to buy props.
- Shakespeare and psychological realism **1896:** *Othello* opens to great critical acclaim. Stanislavski, though unhappy with his role, is deemed to have brought a deep psychological realism to the part.
- Meets his partner Nemirovich for the first time **1897:** Meets Anton Chekhov. They discuss the formation of a popular Russian theatre. Meets Nemirovich-Danchenko, who among his other duties is leader of the drama department at the Philharmonic School. Among his pupils are Olga Knipper (later to marry Chekhov) and Meyerhold.
- The plan for a theatre takes shape 22 June: Stanislavski and Nemirovich agree to form an Art Theatre with a resident ensemble.
- 1898,** 9 April: Assumes the role of Principal Director of what is known as the Moscow Open Theatre. Begins to instil the disciplined working practices that he has planned for, heavily influenced by the Meiningen company. Forms a lifelong friendship with Meyerhold.
- The Seagull* by Chekhov is a triumph The first season includes *Tsar Fiodor*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Antigone*, *Hannale* and Chekhov's *The Seagull*. The season opens to mixed critical notices and a number of outright failures. The opening of *The Seagull* is a triumph.
- The theatre is renamed the Moscow Art Theatre.
- Uncle Vanya* by Chekhov, another great success **1899:** Directs premiere of *Uncle Vanya* and plays Astrov. A critical and artistic success. He is shouldering most of the administrative tasks as well as playing leading parts and directing.
- 1900:** Begins to rehearse Chekhov's new play, *Three Sisters*, while the author supplies continuous rewrites. Nemirovich contributes to the direction.
- Three Sisters*. His own role is considered his best yet **1901,** 31 January: *Three Sisters* opens. He plays Vershinin at the last moment. It proves to be one of his greatest performances.
- 1902:** The company moves to a new permanent home. An existing theatre is gutted and rebuilt with the latest technical and lighting equipment. This forms the base for the Art Theatre for the next 70 years.
- Realism/Naturalism: see pp.227–30 A new production of Tolstoi's *The Power of Darkness* highlights the conflict between 'realism' and 'naturalism'. Premiere of Gorki's *The Lower Depths*; despite rigid censorship, the play is a great success; Nemirovich takes over the direction at a crucial moment. The director and cast make extensive preparations in researching the characters from life.
- Gorki's *The Lower Depths* is a success
- Quarrels with his partner Meyerhold leaves the company. Divisions begin to emerge between the directing styles of Stanislavski and Nemirovich, and although the breach is healed it is the beginning of the end of their close partnership.
- Begins the habit of extensive pre-production Mise-en-scène: see Glossary **1903,** October: Preparations for *The Cherry Orchard* begin. He prepares an extensive production plan, which details not only ideas for the mise-en-scène but also psychological motivations of the characters in some detail.

**1904:** Chekhov's death at the end of June leaves him grief-stricken.

- Symbolist dramas are seen as experiments Begins to be influenced by the Symbolists, particularly the plays of Maeterlinck, a Belgian playwright (who much interested Chekhov towards the end of his life). Decides to direct three one-act texts by Maeterlinck. The plays are received badly as no-one can make much sense of the style, not least the director.
- Meyerhold in charge of the first Studio experiments **1905:** Creates the Theatre Studio and gives the running of it to Meyerhold. It is intended for experimental work in new theatrical forms and texts. Meyerhold's experiments are a failure. Productions are shelved and the theatre is closed after the abortive revolution of 1905, which is brutally suppressed. He decides to take the company on its first foreign tour.
- The first Russian Revolution
- International tour by the company **1906:** Touring with, among other plays, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters* and *The Lower Depths*. They visit Berlin and towns throughout Germany and Austria. The tour is a triumph and succeeds in creating an international reputation for their work.
- Draft of *A Manual on Dramatic Art*: the foundations of the System take shape He begins to write a draft of *A Manual on Dramatic Art*. This is the first foundation of his 'System'. He returns to Moscow with the germ of an all-consuming objective.
- A mission statement re-affirms experimentation **1907:** He is isolated by the bad feeling in the company and the calls for his resignation. Writes an important letter restating his belief in the Art Theatre's mission of experimentation.
- His role is redefined **1908:** Finally a solution is reached that satisfies. He is to mount one 'experimental' production each year and others by arrangement. His work as an actor in the company is to continue. Nemirovich becomes chairman of an administrative committee. Such an arrangement enables Stanislavski to concentrate his life on developing the 'System'.
- He concentrates on the System
- Isadora Duncan: see section 4.1.4 Meets Isadora Duncan. Is fired with enthusiasm for her dance and how it might relate to Maeterlinck's *The Bluebird*. Duncan writes enthusiastically to her ex-lover Gordon Craig about production possibilities.
- His last spectacular production is a symbolist work Begins to apply new methodologies (such as extended improvisations and discovering the 'objective') in the rehearsals of *The Bluebird*, much to the dismay of the company. The production is however a great success, much copied throughout Europe. It is the last of his spectacular productions.
- First mention of Emotion Memory Begins directing *The Government Inspector*. Mentions, for the first time, 'emotion memory'. Experiments with new rehearsal techniques, giving back to the actors responsibility for their work. The production is a critical success. Begins to leave behind his work as a director/actor, except as it advances the building blocks of the 'System'.
- Craig: see section 4.1 Gordon Craig arrives in Moscow to discuss the possibility of directing/designing *Hamlet*. This is agreed.
- 1909:** Work begins on *Hamlet*, though it is not to be mounted for another year.
- Collaboration with actors Begins to direct Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*. Elaborate preparations are discarded; collaborative work with the actors is paramount. The text is

broken down into 'units'. The cast find rehearsals difficult; the 'System' is still in its infancy, but developing fast.

- He contributes to *Hamlet* rehearsals **1910:** Craig proves intractable and vague, so he takes control of *Hamlet* rehearsals. The actors are muddled between the new 'System' and the old methods of 'demonstration', to which he returns simply to achieve results. Craig is absent in Italy for much of the time.
- Screens: see section 4.1.3 The production with Craig's screens is a partial success – at least Craig believes so, and continues to foster this view. Its notoriety transforms European stage practice for the next half century.
- The Method:  
See section 4.2.5 **1912:** He establishes the (First) Studio, which is to recruit actors from both within and outside the company. Those that join include Richard Boleslavski, Vaktangov, Michael Chekhov (the playwright's nephew) and Maria Ouspenskaia. By **1914/15** the Studio is established as a centre for original and exciting experimentation.
- Struggles continue to find ways through the System **1913:** Rehearsals for various roles give opportunities for work on the System and its components. The outcome is not always successful. Outward transformations with make-up are not always matched with an inner truth.
- The supreme actor of his time **1914:** Great personal success in Goldoni's *La Locandiera*. Applying aspects of the System results in a superb performance, after sleepless nights of worrying and study. Acknowledged as 'the supreme actor of his time'.
- Work on the subtext overwhelms the role  
Subtext: see Glossary **1915:** The next role is a disaster. Playing Salieri in *Mozart and Salieri* he is savaged by the critics. Acknowledgement of the subtext overwhelms the part and leads to incomprehension.
- Is so lost in the System that he is sacked **1916:** Is sacked by Nemirovich from Dostoievski's *The Village of Stepanchikovo*, unable to reconcile his view with that of the director and obsessively self-critical. He is lost in the complexities of the System and its application to his own work.
- Second Studio created.
- Soviet state is created **1917:** The Russian Revolution. The Moscow Art Theatre is anxious to be seen as sympathetic to the new ideas generated by the social and artistic upheaval.
- 1918–22:** Continues to play major roles, teaches the System, directs or revives productions and creates an Opera Studio. Becomes active in the Professional Union of Moscow Actors.
- Continues to teach **1919:** All theatres are re-organised. The Art Theatre becomes a state 'Academic' theatre, with full independence and subsidy. The 'classics' are taken to new audiences in factories and the army.
- Begins to lecture on the System At the Art Theatre Stanislavski begins a series of lectures on theatre aesthetics, followed by a series on the System.
- The Art Theatre is under attack **1920:** The Art Theatre is under critical threat from all sides as an outdated and outmoded company. The most important work is being done in the 'Studios', leaving the main company to flounder with its outdated repertoire.

- Working with the Habima Company **1920–21:** Works with the Habima company, a group of Palestinian Jewish actors. Vaktangov is put in charge of a Third Studio, created especially for them. The culmination is an internationally famous production of *The Dybbuk*, by Solomon Anski.
- Physical expression of the text **1921:** Directs a revival of Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, with the leading actor Michael Chekhov. It is a huge success. The 'grotesque' and exaggerated physical style is perfectly in keeping with the current mode of production, though very different from the System.
- Tours of Europe and America **1922–23:** After months of discussion as to the way forward a foreign tour is agreed that will take in Berlin, Paris and for the first time the United States. A company is formed and a repertoire decided upon, which includes three plays by Chekhov, *The Lower Depths* and *Tsar Fiodor*.
- Critical acclaim The reputation of the company has preceded them and everywhere there is general critical acclaim.
- Begins *My Life in Art* While on tour Stanislavski signs an agreement with a publisher to write his autobiography. Now aged 60, he leads the company as teacher and actor. Begins to dictate the work that will become *My Life in Art*.
- Meets his future 'editor' for the first time **1924:** On returning to New York at the end of a gruelling tour, he meets the President. His interpreter is Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, who is later to become his editor and translator.
- Meyerhold's theatre is now the most popular **1925–26:** Returns to a changed Moscow. Meyerhold's anti-naturalistic theatre is in the ascendant and the Art Theatre repertoire is therefore considered politically unacceptable. Nevertheless, a new production of Ostrovski's *The Burning Heart* is a great success. He is acting as overall director, with younger assistants undertaking the day-to-day rehearsals; he is then called in to supervise the last stages of production. He is working on the Russian version of *My Life in Art*.
- Rewriting *My Life in Art*
- A productive period of writing and directing **1926:** With Nemirovich abroad on tour, he enters one of the most productive periods of his life, with new plays and a young company.
- Uses a more physical approach to rehearsal techniques **1927:** He is working with other directors on operas, where his main function, it is recognised, is to breathe new life into tired classics. Directs Beaumarchais' play *Le Mariage de Figaro*, which proves to be his last fully realised production. Is still breaking new ground, using the technology of a revolve to keep the action in almost continual flow.
- Technology of the Art Theatre
- The year of his last performance **1928:** Nemirovich returns and re-assumes management. Offers of directing assignments pour in. The jubilee of the Art Theatre is celebrated. It is on this occasion that Stanislavski has a heart attack.
- Seriously contemplates publication of the System  
Rethinking Emotion Memory **1929–30:** Visits Berlin and meets the Hapgoods, who urge him to write a definitive version of the System. He is rethinking the use of Emotion Memory and beginning to propose the 'Method of Physical Action', which he develops in his teaching on his return.
- Text of *An Actor Prepares* complete By the end of his stay in Europe he has completed the text of *An Actor Prepares*, the intended first volume of two that will lay down the principles of the System.

- He defends the theatre from ideological attack **1931:** The System is under attack by the Association of Proletarian Writers. The quality of productions at the Theatre is in danger of being compromised by the requirement to perform so often. He views this as short-sighted and says so; the Art Theatre has gained its reputation for quality with productions that are the outcome of long and detailed rehearsal periods. His protest has a positive result in the renaming of the company the Moscow Art Theatre of the USSR.
- Prepares *Building a Character* **1933:** He is 70. Travels abroad to recover his failing health. Continues work on the second half of what is known to him as *An Actor's Work on Himself*.
- Stella Adler: see section 4.2.5 **1934:** Meets Stella Adler and her then husband Harold Clurman in Paris. She is anxious for his help. Over a five-week period she takes classes with him, which are recorded verbatim. The outcome of this meeting is to have far-reaching influences on the development of the System in the USA.
- An Actor Prepares* is published in America **1936:** *An Actor Prepares* appears in the USA.
- Dies on the eve of the Russian publication of *An Actor Prepares* **1937:** He meets Meyerhold on a regular basis. He is anxious to leave a successor, and his colleague and friend seems the right choice. On the eve of the Russian publication of *An Actor Prepares*, he dies.

This chronology was compiled with the help of:

Benedetti, J., *Stanislavski, A Biography*, Methuen, 1990

## 4.2.2 A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- Important to understand the context Before we embark on a detailed examination of Stanislavski's theory and practice, it is important that we sketch in the circumstances and tradition of the Russian theatre that confronted him at the start of his career. It was just such a theatre that he dedicated his life to changing.
- Russian theatre was a recent development  
Censorship was imposed Since its infancy at the beginning of the 19th century, Russian theatre had been controlled by placing it under heavy censorship and the jurisdiction of the police. In the early years Moscow and St. Petersburg were the only cities to sustain companies of any repute, while in the provinces theatre was little regarded or even known.
- Gogol: see chronology, 1908 By the middle of the century this had begun to change, more or less entirely due to the influence of a few dramatists, who delivered scathing attacks on authority disguised as social comedies. One such was Gogol (1809–52), who wrote plays such as *The Government Inspector* (1836), a portrait of corrupt small-town life which is still continuing to amuse and entertain over a century and a half later.
- Gogol and Shchepkin: see section 4.2.4 Gogol is of special interest because of his friendship with the actor Shchepkin, which brought together two like-minded souls. They succeeded, temporarily, in imposing a disciplined and professional approach on a craft much in need of guidance in the early part of the 19th century. It was their combined and complementary attitudes to prevailing methods that made them of special interest to Stanislavski as he moved towards a soundly-based practice.
- A discipline now in need of renewal

- Theatre standards were appalling By the time Stanislavski came to work in the professional theatre, however, standards were as haphazard as they had ever been. His early years as a director were often taken up with mundane matters such as punctuality, drunkenness backstage and in some cases real squalor.
- Haphazard staging methods Rehearsals were often conducted in the most perfunctory manner. Experienced actors would simply inhabit the stage as they sought fit and deliver the lines of the text downstage centre and out front. There was no accepted convention that actors should address each other directly.
- Traditions were outmoded and outdated Settings were usually drawn from stock, doors and windows being placed conveniently, with no reference to reality. Costumes were often what the actor could provide, or were chosen simply because the theatre had them in store. Stanislavski's trips abroad to do research and buy props and fabrics for costume as he did for *Othello* in 1894, were an unheard-of initiative. Stanislavski has left a vivid account of the theatre in which he gained his first experiences [Stanislavski 1993, Chapter VI].
- His life was in the theatre from the beginning It is important to remember that it was from the background of family amateur theatricals, indulged and supported by his father, that he emerged to become such an innovative director and actor. Not only was there an auditorium at the family home in Moscow, there was also one at their country home, where during the summer months the family could mount plays for their friends and relations.
- The society that led to the formation of the Moscow Art Theatre From this undoubtedly privileged background as an outsider he was in a particularly favourable position to view the work of the contemporary professional theatre. It was his influence and wealth that enabled him to create the first alternatives to such a theatre, with the founding of the Society of Art and Literature in 1888. So began an assault on what he observed as outdated and outmoded practice.
- Worked on experimental texts Throughout his life he insisted on experimentation, both for the actor and in the texts he chose to work on. His close relationship with Chekhov is crucial here, but he was also brave in his decision to work on such authors as Maeterlinck, and later Bulgakov. In the case of the former this was often in the face of incomprehension, in the latter fierce and dangerous official disapproval.
- A quest for 'truth in art' More than one biographer rightly lays stress on the fact that it was Stanislavski's quest for knowledge and his desire for perfection that led him from the closed world of semi-private companies into the national and eventually international world of the professional theatre. With little or no training, he embarked on a quest for truth in his art and devoted his life to that hard journey.
- A systematic actor's training His legacy was a **system** of approaching the inexact science of acting. He tried in a systematic way to lay down ground rules for approaching a character and for how an actor might employ his or her body, voice and mind in such a creation.
- Influential as a teacher He has been and remains enormously influential as a teacher and guide; he has also been much written about, argued about and interpreted by his disciples. But for his system to have any meaning it must be practised, and in the process it will be challenged and re-interpreted more than 50 years after his death.



### 4.2.3 THEORY AND PRACTICE

#### THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE

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See section 4.2.7 The formation of this company is well documented, both by Stanislavski (*My Life in Art*) and Nemirovich-Danchenko (*My Life in the Russian Theatre*). By 1897, Stanislavski was becoming disenchanted with the life of an amateur part-time actor, and when he was approached by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a teacher of acting at the Philharmonic School, he readily agreed to meet.

Meyerhold:  
see section 4.2.5 It so happened that in 1897 Nemirovich had an exceptionally talented group of actors, who would make the ideal basis for a new company. Among them were Olga Knipper (later to become Chekhov's wife) and Meyerhold, both of whom were destined to become founding members of the new theatre and Stanislavski's lifelong friends.

The meeting with Nemirovich lasted 18 hours, but by the end they had, in all but detail, laid the foundations for the policy of the theatre. They went as far as discussing individuals, and not for the last time, Stanislavski used the phrase when vetoing an actor: 'She is a good actress but not for us ... *She does not love art, but herself in art.*' [MLIA, p.295. Our italics.]

Powers of veto and responsibilities As Stanislavski records, he was to be predominantly responsible for artistic matters, such as devising the production plans and some directing, and would continue as an actor. Nemirovich would look after literary matters, such as choosing the repertoire, and would also direct.

Concerned for the proper function of theatre Benedetti [1985. p.11] highlights five separate qualities that at this time concerned Stanislavski:

- Theatre was to be a moral instrument.
- Its function was to civilise.
- It was to increase sensitivity.
- It should heighten perception.
- It should enoble the mind and uplift the spirit.

Shchepkin:  
see section 4.2.4 Fine sentiments, and built by Stanislavski on the foundations of the work and ethos of the great 19th-century actor Shchepkin, whom he quotes in *My Life in Art* [p.292]: 'Seek your examples in life.'

In other words, the actor had to go no further in his quest for truth than to base his art on his cumulative experience of the world around him, mediated and enhanced by the director's interpretation and the rehearsal process.

A permanent theatre is established It took some time to acquire suitable premises and it wasn't until their fifth season that they moved into what became the Moscow Art Theatre. The stage was to be functional, the orchestra pit abolished, and the most up-to-date technical and lighting equipment installed (see Figure 4.10).

Unity and freshness to production values Above all, the two men sought to bring a unity and freshness to all aspects of production and presentation. It was this vital philosophy that distinguished their work from the tired old ideals still so readily evident in the work of their rivals. It was to be a truly coherent company and it was to be based on the ethics and beliefs of the best of the past and present.

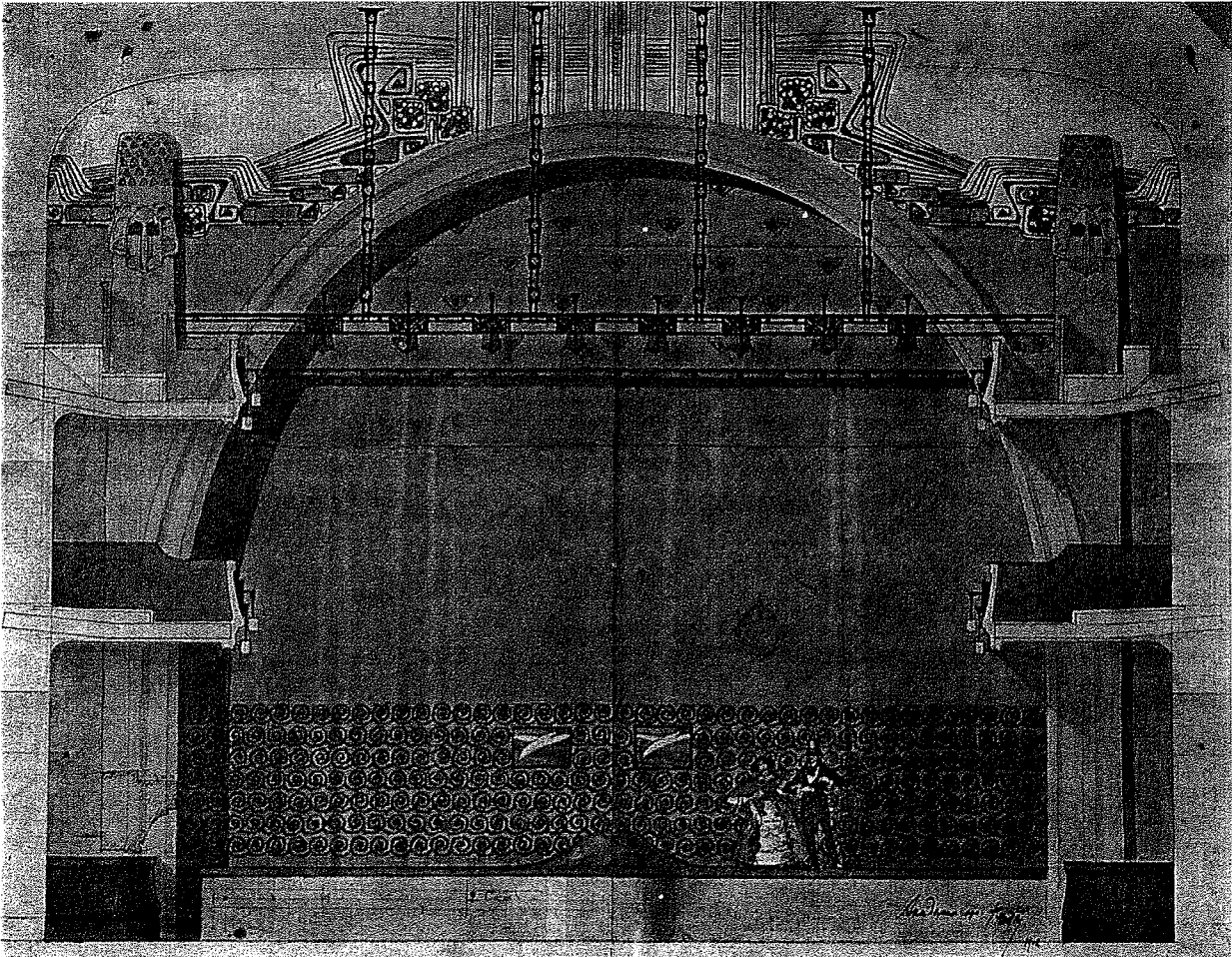


Figure 4.10 Fedor Shekkel's design for the curtain and stage of the Moscow Art Theatre (1901). The seagull became the company's emblem.

To sum up they sought to:

- Choose plays from the classical repertoire, but also encourage new writing
- Treat actors with proper respect. They in turn would be expected to respond with total dedication to the new discipline
- Rehearse all plays for an agreed length of time and mount all productions with new designs and costumes.

## REALISM AND NATURALISM

Realism was the guiding principle of his life

There is absolutely no doubt as to Stanislavski's position on Realism. He made the concepts embodied in it the guiding principles of his life and work and was totally opposed to what he saw as the meaningless experiments of the avant-garde. Though he was noted for groundbreaking productions in new styles, such as *The Bluebird* (1908), he totally failed to appreciate Gordon Craig's point of view when discussing their production of *Hamlet* (1910).

Realism in context

We need to be clear about the meaning of Realism, however, since there are as many definitions as there are contexts and the Moscow Art Theatre is no exception. Since Realism is often seen as synonymous with Naturalism, and since the term Realism is frequently used by Stanislavski, we must be convinced of the distinction.

Naturalism in context Naturalism as a movement in literature and drama was associated with the work of the French novelist Emile Zola. His preface of 1868 to the second edition of his novel *Thérèse Raquin* explains clearly that he looked upon his task as a novelist much as a surgeon may look upon an examination of a human corpse:

While I was writing *Thérèse Raquin* I was lost to the world, completely engrossed in my exact and meticulous copying of **real life, and my analysis of the human mechanism** . . .

[Quoted in Rothwell, A. (trans), *Thérèse Raquin* OUP, 1992. p.2]

Strindberg's Introduction to *Miss Julie* This obsession with exposing a 'slice of life' was for a time very influential, and before the term was eventually subsumed into Realism there were some noted practitioners. For example, Strindberg applied the same principles to his characters in *Miss Julie* (1888) and, like Zola, wrote an introduction that explained his intentions.

So I do not believe in 'theatrical characters'. And these summary judgements that authors pronounce upon people – 'He is stupid, he is brutal, he is jealous, he is mean,' etc. – ought to be challenged by naturalists, who know how richly complex a human soul is . . .

[Quoted in Meyer, M. (trans), Strindberg, A., *Miss Julie*, Methuen, 1967. p.23]

An influential document It was and remains an extremely influential document, calling into question the one-dimensional characters of 19th-century playwriting. It also questions the actors' insistence on facing the audience at all times.

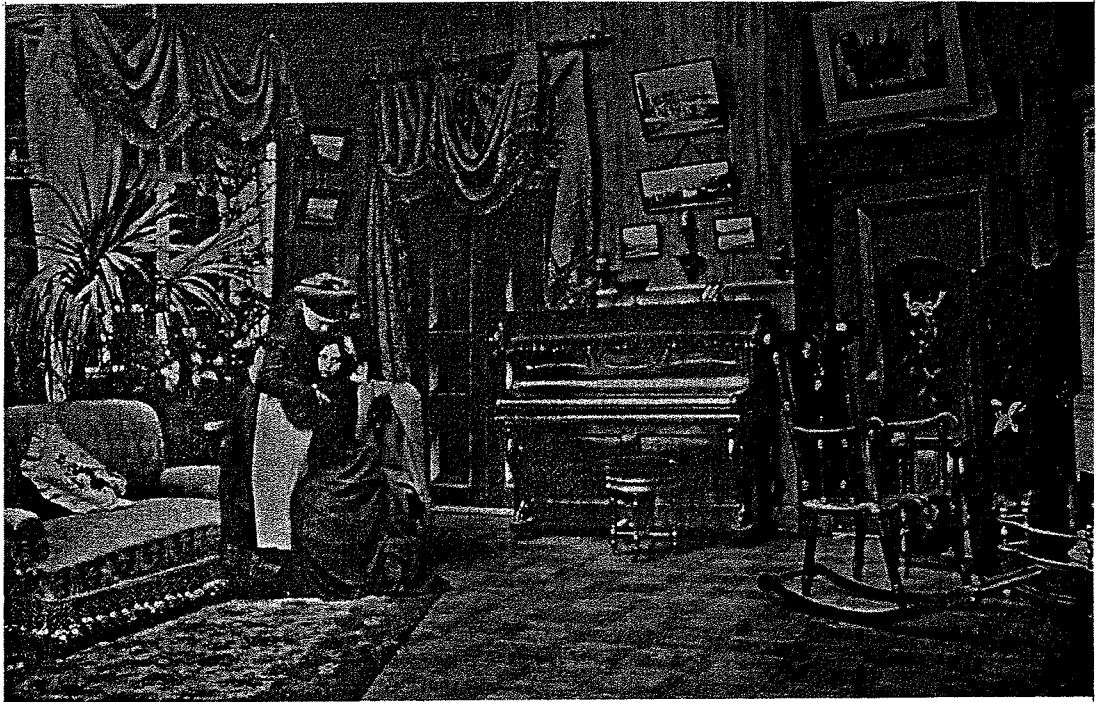
The 'isms' can be interchangeable However, one of the problems for us as readers is that Strindberg, even when writing this thesis, uses the terms Realism and Naturalism as interchangeable.

Obsessive themes of love and death The term Naturalism applied to these two writers' work came to imply a concern with the suffering and degradation of the servant and working class and an obsession with love, death and moral decay.

Drama for a bourgeois audience Realism grew out of Naturalism and superseded it. The desire for an indiscriminate reproduction of lower-class life, sometimes in all its squalor, ceased to fascinate. With few exceptions, the plays that Stanislavski mounted were peopled with characters who reflected the lives of their bourgeois audience, Gorki's *Lower Depths* being one exception to this rule.

Realism involved selection and distillation Realism, then, could be recognised by its **selection** and **distillation** of the detailed observation of everyday life, not the life itself.

Naturalistic detail often swamped the text We have touched on the distinctions between these two terms, but it has to be acknowledged that they are both used fairly indiscriminately by all practitioners, especially by Stanislavski. It might be argued that despite his desire to work towards the ideal of Realism, i.e. extracting the essence of a work, his practice was often otherwise, smothering the real in the detail of Naturalism (see Figure 4.11).



**Figure 4.11** A photograph of Stanislavski's production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* at the Philharmonic School (later the Moscow Art Theatre), 1890. This is an example of the over-detailed naturalistic design that Chekhov found unacceptable.

Chekhov antagonistic to Stanislavski's approach

Over-representational

Text and subtext

Subtext:  
see section 1.1.2, pp.19–20

Meyerhold has left a record of Chekhov's antagonism to Stanislavski's over-detailed *mise-en-scène* for *The Seagull* (quoted in Braun 1978, p.30). Employing artists and designers whose style was highly naturalistic made it inevitable that the overall concept would be a faithful reproduction of life, warts and all. While Stanislavski's instincts for the highest standards of representation for each new production were admirable, they often resulted in a stage picture that left little or nothing to the imagination.

However, what above all distinguished Realism from other genres was its emphasis on the **subtext** of a play. Text was no longer a matter of surface meaning: characters could and did say things that had hidden agendas. It was on the way towards an understanding of this and how it could be communicated with feeling that many aspects of the System were devised.

For a fuller discussion of subtext see section 1.1.2, but you may also find this summary useful.

**Subtext**, as the word suggests, is what can be identified under the text. It is the unspoken nuance that we as an audience recognise and which gives a character more depth or psychological realism.

Part of the pleasure we derive from watching or reading a scene is the fact that we can recognise the sense behind the words. This gives us insights into the characters' motivations often denied to those characters themselves. The subtext must, however, be acknowledged and understood by the actor.

Playwrights whose works we can identify as embodying these principles included Ibsen in Europe and, of course, Chekhov in Russia. It was through his work on Chekhov and then Gorki that Stanislavski was forced to tackle the issue of the subtext.

To sum up:

- Stanislavski was forced to acknowledge **subtext** as a way of deepening meaning.
- With Naturalism discredited he wished to **select** and **distil** detail and meaning on stage.
- A ‘slice of life’ had to be realised **selectively**, with truth and feeling.

## THE SYSTEM: BEGINNINGS

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In this section we examine the System, which Stanislavski developed over a period of 30 years. To understand fully **why** he thought it necessary to embark on such a journey, we have chosen **three** occasions which forced him to evaluate his work.

From the very beginning of his career Stanislavski kept a series of notebooks, annotating and evaluating all his performances and the processes that led to them. As we shall see, it was these records of his work that ultimately enabled him to formulate the theoretical objectives of his teaching.

### SOCIETY OF ART AND LITERATURE (1888)

There is a good account of the formation of this society in *My Life in Art* (Chapter XV), where Stanislavski records the long and painful process of rehearsing and performing in *The Miser Knight* by Pushkin, his first serious semi-professional role.

See chronology  
First exposure to professional practice

Mannerisms were eliminated  
Imitation rather than creation

An extravagant manner

It was a daunting experience, but he was helped by a sympathetic director, Fedotov, who cut away his extraneous mannerisms. Although the work on his character was almost entirely a matter of imitation, and therefore little advanced on previous work, he considered it at least a qualified success.

He also described working on the second piece in the same season (*Georges Dandin* by Molière). He imported a kind of overblown extravagance of manner inappropriately based on his first-hand knowledge of Molière from visits to the Comédie Française the previous summer.

Imitation could be useful but it eliminated process

Again, Fedotov resorted to demonstration, which left Stanislavski baffled since it completely eliminated any *process*. However, he records how the ‘accidental touch of the make-up brush’ on his face suddenly animated what could have been a mere carbon copy.

To sum up:

- Professional directors sought to simplify his approach to the character.
- There was little or no process, imitation still being important.
- External details helped him to animate the part.

### OTHELLO (1895)

A Shakespeare text as a test

Shakespeare’s *Othello* had fascinated Stanislavski for years, and on the verge of the formation of the Art Theatre he decided to undertake both the direction and the leading role.

A trip to Venice to do research

As part of his plan of preparation he visited Venice in 1895, not only to research the locations but to buy fabrics, furniture and properties.

Meiningen:  
see section 4.2.4

He prepared a detailed production plan, which fleshed out the meagre stage directions and gave life and vitality to the text. It was his intention from the first to reproduce as much of the reality of the play as possible, heavily

influenced by the Meiningen tradition, and to his delight he also found his role model for the Moor:

A detailed character study, from direct observation

In one of the summer restaurants of Paris I met a handsome Arab in his national costume [ . . . . ] With the help of the waiter we made the designs of the costume. I learned several bodily poses which seemed to me to be characteristic.

[*MLIA*. p.277]

Imitation again, but in a coherent framework

The production was a great success. Every aspect of the play was focused on the one objective: that of creating an overwhelming *psychological realism*.

The critic Marov, reviewing the performance, said: ‘This is magnificent. What you see is not the way jealousy takes hold of his soul all at once but how passion, little by little, takes possession of his whole being.’ [Quoted in Benedetti, 1990. p.53]

The actor Rossi, complimenting Stanislavski after his performance, also pointed a way forward:

Stanislavski urged to be self-critical

God gave you everything for the stage [ . . . . ] The matter is in your hands. All you need is art. It will come of course [ . . . . ] I can recommend you only one teacher [ . . . . ] You yourself.

[*MLIA*. p.286]

To sum up:

- A detailed production plan with realist design was the basis.
- Imitation again supplied the method of preparation.
- The whole production was focused on an in-depth, realist approach, and his performance on a carefully considered psychological realism.
- He was encouraged by critics to be self-critical.



Figure 4.12 A photograph of Act 1 of *The Seagull* at the Moscow Art Theatre, 1898.

**THE SEAGULL  
(1898)**

See chronology

Mise-en-scène:  
see Glossary

By the time of the third and last example, Stanislavski was joint director of the Moscow Art Theatre. In 1898 a gamble was taken to revive Chekhov's *The Seagull* as part of the first season's repertoire.

For the task of constructing the mise-en-scène, Stanislavski adopted what by now was regular practice of heavily annotating the text with both visual elements:

What is mise-en-scène related to Chekhov?

*The Seagull* notebook is full of stage designs, descriptions of settings, diagrams of movement and grouping, plus hundreds of notes on blocking, picturization, and visual rhythms ...

and auditory elements:

... notes about vocal rhythms, tempo, timbres, phrasings, sound effects, pauses ...

[Jones, D.R., *Great Directors at Work* UCP, 1986. p.19]

In practice it was too much detail

Despite his best intentions, Stanislavski produced imagery that almost threatened to swamp the text, and he was taken to task by Nemirovich for too much emphasis on the excesses of naturalism.

'Sound score' was much applauded

But this time the detail paid off and all critics agreed that the '**sound score**' (the balance of sounds on- and offstage) alone produced heart-wrenching moments of drama, as silence was juxtaposed with sudden bursts of half-heard sounds.

Subtext:  
see section 1.1.2 and Glossary

The emotional motivation of the characters had been revealed through an acknowledgement and understanding of the **subtext**, and altogether the production confirmed a company working at the height of its potential.

To sum up:

- A detailed mise-en-scène was a successful way of unlocking the play's meaning.
- Chekhov's text demanded a deeply psychological approach.
- There was more to a play than surface meaning.
- Subtext had to be acknowledged and developed.

**SUMMARY OF  
BEGINNINGS**

We have focused on three distinct milestones in Stanislavski's early career as a director and actor and have identified in each case a particular learning process.

Time for reflection and consolidation

It was after the company's triumphant tour of Europe in 1906, and after an exhausting schedule of roles, that Stanislavski on his return took a much-needed holiday in Finland. There he began to reflect upon his life and work to date. After years of recording the agony of creation in his notebooks, he steadily began to sift his thinking and over the next two years he began to identify what finally became known as the System.

Begins to identify components of a System

Begins to use the company as guinea pigs for the System see pp233-9

In his production of *A Month in the Country* (1909) these elements were confirmed through the rehearsal process, though the cast were baffled by aspects of the new language and rehearsals were fraught with personal anxieties. For the first time, exercises that later become identified as *Units*

and *Objectives*, *Subtext*, the *Through-line of Action* and the *Super-objective* became defined. [Benedetti, 1985. p.41]

On the following pages we will discuss some of the most important elements that became the System, bearing in mind Stanislavski's dictum:

'The System as a whole way of life'

... the System is not a hand me down suit that you can put on and walk off in, or a cook book where all you need is to find the page and there is your recipe. No it is a whole way of life ...

[BAC, Chapter XVI. p.290]

## THE SYSTEM IN DETAIL

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The texts to look at *An Actor Prepares (AAP)* is the key text from which we draw the main sub-headings for a discussion of the System. It is supplemented by *Building a Character (BAC)*, which contains further thinking and modifications. References are made to *My Life in Art (MLIA)* but as an autobiographical record it is occasionally vague and imprecise.

### **ACTION**

Action as the mainspring of drama

For Stanislavski this was one of the most important elements: he conceived **action** to be concerned with the meaningful, purposeful activity of an onstage actor.

Inner and outer action

From the start, Stanislavski makes the distinction between action for its own sake, as an outward and physical form, and action that can be seen as action because of a concentrated stillness on stage – which he calls 'inner intensity'.

Process of enactment

His objective is to demonstrate that there is never a point when the actor is not engaged in a process of *enactment*, but at the same time he suggests that it must always have purpose:

Acting with purpose

Do not run for the sake of running, or suffer for the sake of suffering. Don't act 'in general', for the sake of action; **always act with a purpose.**

[AAP, Chapter III. p.40]

and later:

... all action in the theatre must have an inner justification, be logical, coherent and real.

[*Ibid.* p.46]

In other words, it must have a 'why'. Why am I coming through that door? With what purpose? What is behind the door? How might I approach the door?

### **ACTIVITY**

Try some exercises based on ideas of entering and leaving a space. We do this a lot of times every day. Try it with different physical rhythms, with different intentions. You will need to justify the why of your action but it should be clear what **purpose** you want to communicate to an audience.

---



The 'why' of action Stanislavski takes as an example the story of the insane man who lurks behind a door (a story that is returned to throughout these texts), and he uses the door and the dilemma of whether to open it or not as an indicator with which to focus the actor's purpose of action.

**IF** Known as the '**magic if**', it opens up possibilities for the actor of 'creating a whole new life', of stimulating new emotions. What would happen **if**...?

The 'magic if' creates a whole new life What would happen if all the canvas and paint were not just a representation but a real place? If the actor next to me were in fact a mother/brother/sister, etc?

What if...? It remains for an actor to make believe: 'sincerely to believe in the possibility of what you are called upon to do on the stage', or what Stanislavski later calls the 'imaginative fiction of another person'. It is not just the person, but the circumstances in which that person can and will function.

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**ACTIVITY** Improvise: What would you do **if** the lights suddenly went out in the middle of a party? What would you do **if** the man who has escaped is behind the door? You receive a phone call to say your long-lost sister is arriving unexpectedly. What would you do?

---

But the '**magic if**' can only be sustained within the context of the next theme.

## THE GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCE

What seems true in 'given circumstances'?

**Given circumstances** are the basis for an actor and his role, they are created by the playwright, the director and designer and form the context in which the the actor can ask: what **if**...?

Stanislavski's list

Stanislavski lists the circumstances:

- the story of the play
- its facts, events, epoch, time and place of action
- conditions of life
- the actor's and regisseur's (director's) interpretation
- the production, the sets, the costumes, the properties
- lighting and sound effects.

---

**ACTIVITY** Decide on a set of given circumstances, taking the above points as a guide. It might be best to plan this round a story rather than a play. Develop a scenario and decide how best to communicate the circumstances. A family funeral? Packing to go on holiday? Create an environment and act out a moment from the scenario.

---

An actor's belief and the development of imagination

The actor must believe in the **given circumstances**; through this belief she or he will be able to function at a high level of involvement. The goal throughout is a quest for truth:

... it is necessary for the actor to develop to the highest degree his imagination, a childlike naivete and trustfulness, an artistic sensitivity to truth and to the truthful in his soul and body.

[MLIA. p.466]

## THE IMAGINATION

Stanislavski then goes on to foreground this notion:

... when you begin to study each role you should first gather all the materials that have a bearing on it, and supplement them with more and more imagination ...

[AAP. p.53]

Undergoing a visual journey

It is useful to note that Stanislavski's teaching here relies very much on visual stimulus for the development of this faculty. The chapter contains more than one exercise that demands that the actor undergo a **visualised** journey.

When, where, why and how

If you speak any lines, or do anything, mechanically, without fully realising **who** you are, **where** you came from, **why**, **what** you want, **where** you are going, and **what** you will do **when** you get there, you will be acting without your imagination.

[AAP. p.71]

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## ACTIVITIES

Develop an imaginative journey: there is a good starting point for one on page 61 of *An Actor Prepares*. After some preparation time question each other, so that gradually the whole group gets to know the story/journey you have developed. It can become quite complex as you have to answer the when, where, why and how questions.

Do some research: take a character from any of the major plays by Chekhov. By careful reading, find out what that character says about him/herself and most importantly what other characters say about that person. You will end up with a very rich study from which to develop further an imaginative life.

Find a photograph or a painting: construct a character study from the picture. Make a list of questions you would ask the person if you could meet them. Exchange your findings with each other. You need to provide an imaginary life, just as you can with a character from a play.

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## CIRCLES OF ATTENTION

A need to find ways of relaxing

During much of Stanislavski's early career he was concerned with his perceived inability to relax onstage and he therefore examined ways to help an actor relax and focus.

The actor as focus

Stanislavski uses a device that he calls Circles of Attention to illustrate his point. Its prime purpose is in giving the student a focus for his or her attention. Like ripples on a pond, these circles radiate from the centre of attention (the actor) and in ever increasing circumferences embrace the whole stage.

Ripples on a pond

In the smallest circle an actor can create what he calls **Solitude in Public**, a condition that focuses the actor within him/herself. By increasing the focus the actor can begin to take in further objects and gradually, by concentration, the whole of the stage/imagined world is brought into focus.

**ACTIVITIES**

Sit in the middle of a large space. How can you make the audience want to watch you? By what you are doing? By what you are not doing? How can you extend the focus? By looking at another person in the space? Can we tell what you are thinking about them? How far can you extend the circle?

Find a hoop. Holding this at arm's length, walk in a controlled way round a space. Can you create **solitude in public**? Drop the hoop and stand within it. Now make your focus the whole space. Get rid of the hoop and do the exercise again. You should have a focus which is clear and concentrated.

**UNITS AND OBJECTIVES**

Units make the text 'manageable'

Like so many of the aspects of the System, these two are both distinct and inextricably entwined.

In essence, the idea of **Units** is common sense: a play can be broken down not just into acts or scenes by the author, but by the director or actor into **units of action**.

They have in-built objectives

These units are dominated and controlled by the **objectives** within them; while it is useful to work on small and manageable chunks of text, each chunk will have its own in-built objective. A unit ends with the end of the objective.

Stanislavski warns against the creation of too many units: 'The part and the play must not remain in fragments.' Using a seagoing metaphor he likens the units to buoys in a channel, as guides for the actor in his voyage.

A unit needs to be active

One of the most important features of the objectives contained within the units is that they are active, driving the text forward. For that reason Stanislavski insists on describing them with a verb rather than a noun. He uses the example of the noun 'power'. Simply by placing the words 'I wish to ...' in front he begins the process whereby an actor can actively free the objective: 'I wish to obtain power over ...'. Immediately, with a qualifying verb, 'power' becomes an active, less generalised, objective. As an example of an active objective we might examine what Stanislavski calls 'the right objective' and the example he gives (*An Actor Prepares*, p.120). Here he suggests that the act of shaking hands with a person to whom you wish to apologise is not a simple act. It requires thought and the psychological exploration of many conflicting emotions. The active element is 'I wish to make an apology ...', while the emotional subtext is dependent on the circumstances of the act within the action of the play.

**ACTIVITY**

Look at the beginning of Act I of *The Seagull*. Where would you end the first **unit**? Just before the entrance of Sorin and Treplev? What is the **objective** for the actor playing Medvedenko? He is obviously in love with Masha, but she is uninterested. Is he seriously trying to make her love him? What verb would you give to the **objective**?

**THE SUPER-OBJECTIVE AND THROUGH-LINE OF ACTION**

Stanislavski emphasises firstly how important it is to identify an overarching **objective** within a play. For example, *Hamlet* is about a man who wants to find a way through the muddle of his life so that he can make up his mind. Secondly, the **through-line** can be described as the main current 'that galvanises all the small units and objectives'. Useful diagrams (*AAP*, p.276) illustrate his points.

**ACTIVITIES**

Look at *The Seagull*. What is the **super-objective** of the play – the main theme? You might decide that it is how lives are lived in conflict with the creativity of acting and writing (two themes that were very close to the life of its author). However, there are other possibilities.

Now consider the character of Nina. She wants to be an actress. This is firmly fixed in the character's imagination, as well as evidenced in the text. This is her **super-objective**. Find how often she makes a statement about this conviction, but also see how her actions help to express the whole theme of the play and how in doing so she creates a **through-line** for herself.

**EMOTION  
MEMORY**

Just as your visual memory can reconstruct an inner image of some forgotten thing, place or person, your **emotion memory** can bring back feelings you have already experienced.

[AAP. p.168]

This aspect of the System was destined to become one of the most controversial, owing to its adoption by some practitioners of the American 'Method' in the late 1940s and '50s. Stanislavski's almost complete disavowal of it in later life was because of both its limitations and the fact that it led to introspection and self-reflective performances that failed to communicate.

Affective memory

His starting point was Ribot's *Problèmes de Psychologie Affective*, which dealt with the memory of feelings and emotions. It was Ribot's contention that the nervous system bore the marks of previous experiences, which could be recalled by a stimulus, such as a sound, smell or touch, in a similar way to the sensation of déjà-vu.

Recall of stimulus

Memory can be stimulated by  
experience

Stanislavski believed that it was an actor's duty to stimulate his or her 'emotion memory' by making a conscious effort to broaden his or her range of experience: to create, as it were, a reservoir of memory from which to draw and on which to build. This memory could then be tapped into when the actor was working towards the creation of a character. Equally, as Stanislavski found, it could be used to re-invent emotions that had been fixed in rehearsal and that needed reproduction in performance from night to night.

Memory as an aid to creativity

Always and for ever, when you are on stage, you must play yourself. But it will be in an infinite variety of combinations of **objectives**, and **given circumstances** which you have prepared for your part, and which have been smelted in the furnace of **your emotion memory**.

[AAP. p.177]

**ACTIVITIES**

Find a stimulus that will provoke a memory of some kind: a picture/ photograph; a piece of music; a smell. Construct the circumstances of that memory and devise a short improvisation to express your feelings from that time. Can you link this to a piece of text of your own choosing?

Make a direct observation of someone. Try to do this without them knowing. Record your impression and then try to recreate that person either by writing about them or by acting out a detail you remember.

**TEMPO-  
RHYTHM IN  
MOVEMENT**

Dalcroze:  
see section 4.2.4

Stanislavski's later preoccupation with this aspect of the System marks a significant move away from the internalised work of **Emotion Memory**. Through his study of yoga and the work of eurhythmics advocated by Dalcroze, Stanislavski goes to great lengths to explain his ideas:

Wherever there is life there is action; wherever action, movement; where movement, tempo; and where there is tempo there is rhythm.

[BAC. p.198]

Rhythm connected with a musical beat

By setting a number of metronomes ticking at the same time but with different beats, Stanislavski shows how an actor must find his own rhythm (inner) while at the same time being surrounded by other actors, all of whom may have their own distinct rhythm (outer).

Inner and outer rhythms in conflict

Thus an actor who might be frantic with worry (inner rhythm) may be acting in a scene where everyone else is discussing something as mundane as the weather (outer rhythm). An inner turmoil could be identified through its outward manifestation, or concealed (in this case) by a show of calm. Two rhythms are created, the one contradicting the other, leading to interesting dramatic tensions within the performance.

Rhythms need to be rehearsed and agreed

It is important that rhythms are kept distinct. All too easily a group of actors can pick up each other's rhythms, creating a generalised beat, which all too often is the slowest. A well-rehearsed rhythm can drive the play forward, with an imaginary conductor keeping all the rhythms intact.

You must get accustomed to disentangling and searching out your own rhythm from the general, organised chaos of speed and slowness going on around you on the stage.

[BAC. p.187]

Stanislavski also tackles the way that different external, physical tempo-rhythms can affect the atmosphere of a particular text, for example a slow rhythm suggesting a ceremonial or a faster rhythm leading to a more chaotic scenario. He draws attention to the strength of stillness, which in itself is a tempo-rhythm, and how that can be contrasted with rapid movement by other characters in the same scene.

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**ACTIVITY**

Look at *The Seagull Act 4*, when Nina arrives to confront Treplev after an absence of two years. He is disillusioned with his life as a writer, she with hers as an actress. Decide which actor is the still one and which the one who moves most. These contrasted rhythms can express each character's internal/external tempo and give us huge insights into the emotional state of these people.

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**THE METHOD  
OF PHYSICAL  
ACTION**

Towards the end of his life, with *An Actor Prepares* all but published, Stanislavski increasingly placed emphasis on physical expression as a way of training.

Improvisation as physical action

Once objectives and lines of physical action had been identified, it was through the *physical*, 'the doing', that the actor might find 'solidity and

depth'. What this boiled down to was more emphasis on **improvisation** as a way of unlocking aspects of both the text and the role.

Text was to be tried and tested in rehearsal

In the last stages of revision of his teaching he continued to refine and draw together the rehearsal process. There is a clear description of this in his biography [Benedetti, 1990. p.339]. Further detail on this later theoretical rethinking can be found in *Building a Character*.

## FINALE

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Stanislavski's System will be argued over and dissected as long as there are actors, directors, teachers and students to do so. Of all the practitioners discussed here, it was Stanislavski with his prescription for approaching the art of acting who has dominated the 20th century.

Springing from the need for an absolute truth of thought, feeling and expression to be communicated by an actor to an audience, this System has ensured that the code of Naturalism and Realism has dominated theatre and, more especially, film for the last 50 years.

It was and is a difficult code to break, and interestingly all the other practitioners in this chapter made a concerted attempt to do just that, attempting to show that there were alternative ways of looking at the process towards the enactment of a text.

Stanislavski's legacy was a System that sought to present a methodical approach to the art of acting and directing. It was an enormous task, but it sprang from his own need to understand and wrestle with his own shortcomings.

As a series of documents, his books demand our attention for the personal and passionate way in which they seek to support and challenge an actor through his or her training, through rehearsal and the nightly task before an audience.

### 4.2.4 INFLUENCES

#### SHCHEPKIN, MIKHAIL SEMENOVICH (1788–1863)

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Stanislavski enjoyed an unbroken connection to this great actor of the 19th century through his teacher and mentor Fedotova, from whom he took lessons in 1888. She had studied under the great actor and passed on to Stanislavski those qualities he in turn came so much to admire and live by.

Ensemble playing

Shchepkin had been born a serf and it wasn't until 1818, after a number of provincial successes as an actor, that he gained his freedom. He was noted for the fresh and simple way that he approached playtexts, predating the fashion for a more 'realistic' style. He was one of the first to recognise the virtues of ensemble playing and the need for company discipline. He also viewed the theatre as an almost sacred institution, in which plays by great writers could find their place. Stanislavski in *My Life in Art* quotes a letter from him:

The actor as self critic      Watch yourself sleeplessly, for although the public may be satisfied with you, you yourself must be your severest critic.

[p.85]

This was the ethos that inspired and guided Stanislavski throughout his life.

Worrall, N.,      *Gogol and Turgenev*,      Macmillan, 1982

## GOGOL, NIKOLAI VASILIEVICH (1809–52)

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Lifelong friend of Shchepkin      Gogol was a writer who lived a troubled life but who was to become a literary figure as much admired as Dickens in England, and who similarly created characters and stories that passed into the national consciousness. He found a like-minded friend in Shchepkin, with whom he shared a passion for theatre, having at one time contemplated acting as a profession.

Russian provincial life satirised      His most famous play, *The Government Inspector* (1836), takes up the theme of the absurdities of Russian provincial life. It came at a time when he was campaigning for a truly national drama, as opposed to imported classics from France and Germany:

... for God's sake give us Russian characters, give us **our own selves**, our swindlers, our cranks! Onto the stage with them, for the people to laugh at.

[*Petersburg Notes of 1836*, quoted in Worrall, N. p.41]

In his *Advance Notice To Those Wishing To Act The Government Inspector Properly* he urges the actors to take the comedy seriously; then and only then will the trivial lives of his protagonists be revealed.

Theatre with a social purpose      His views on theatre as having a serious social purpose were handed down as part of Stanislavski's cultural heritage and were perfectly in tune with the ideas of the two men who founded the Moscow Art Theatre:

Theatre as a power for good      The theatre is by no means a trifle or a petty thing ... It is a kind of pulpit from which much good can be spoken to the world.

[*On the theatre*, quoted in Worrall, N. p.43]

Worrall, N.,      *Gogol and Turgenev*,      Macmillan, 1982

## THE MEININGEN COMPANY

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Detailed realist productions      This theatre company, run by the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, toured Europe extensively at the end of the 19th century. Through its advanced production techniques in the naturalist/realist style it was responsible for influencing a number of theatre companies, including Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre.

Challenges to prevailing practice      Stanislavski first saw the company perform in 1890 and was immediately struck not so much by the acting, which was indifferent, but by the *mise-en-scène*, which sought to challenge prevailing stage practice using:

- settings placed on the diagonal, rather than parallel with the proscenium
- the choreographed movement of extras which isolated the protagonists in dynamic stage pictures

- actors who could and did turn their backs on the audience if the production demanded it
- the placing of architectural or natural features across the stage floor, to reinforce the realistic settings.

The company was run with iron discipline by its autocratic director Ludwig Chronegk. Stanislavski remarked that despite himself he admired and wished to imitate the 'restraint and cold-bloodedness' of this man. Many of the values of this extraordinary company were adopted wholesale when it came to the setting up of the Art Theatre in 1898.

Braun, E., *The Director and the Stage*, Methuen, 1982

Osborne, J., *The Nature of the Saxe-Meiningen Aesthetic*,

Theatre Quarterly, May 1975. p.40–54

## CHEKHOV, ANTON (1860–1904)

A founder member of the Art Theatre

Integrated ensemble playing

Realism:  
see section 4.2.3

No study of this length can do proper justice to this man, who played such a crucial part in the fortunes of the Art Theatre. With Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski he was responsible for the values that the Theatre sought to embody, and after the success of *The Seagull* in 1898 productions of Chekhov's plays became the standard by which the ensemble work of the company was judged. All Chekhov's subsequent work was produced by the company, culminating in *The Cherry Orchard* in 1904, just before his death.

Whilst he is often lumped together with other playwrights in the genre of Realism, what was it that distinguished him?

Let us be just as complex and as simple as life itself...

[Chekhov, quoted in Braun, 1982. p.62]



Figure 4.13 Anton Chekhov reading *The Seagull* to the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre.



Objectivity, observation and recording He sought, by a process of selection and refinement combined with objectivity, to present his characters without moralising. As a one-time doctor he was attuned to the foibles of humanity and he used his gift as a writer to create compassionate statements about what many might consider as wasted lives.

A summary of Chekhov's qualities as a dramatist One of his translators, Ronald Hingley, draws attention to the quality of the writing:

... Chekhov's drama is essentially a study in moods: moods desultory, sporadically inter-acting, half-hearted, casual, yet somehow profoundly moving.

[Introduction to *Five Plays*, 1985. p.xxviii]

Braun, E., *The Director and the Stage*, Methuen, 1982  
 Chekhov, A., *Five Plays* (trans. Hingley, R.), OUP, 1985

## JAQUES-DALCROZE, EMILE (1865–1950)

Isadora Duncan: see section 4.1.4 Stanislavski met Isadora Duncan in 1908, when she was dancing in Moscow, and began discussions with her about her 'system' of movement. It soon became clear that she had no system that could be easily expressed, so Stanislavski turned to Dalcroze, whose work was becoming known throughout Europe.

A teacher of music who used movement His career as a music teacher had led him to use movement as a way of instilling a sense of rhythm into his pupils. As that became successful he began to develop a system that sought to achieve '... harmony of body and spirit through a co-ordination of physical movement and sound

Co-ordination of physical movement movement, musical and spatial elements.' [Quoted in Volbach. p.87]

He called this system Eurythmics, and by 1910, with the help of his great friend Appia, he had opened a studio where some of the most famous theatre artists in Europe could see his experiments. The movement, like Duncan's, was free and expressive, making loosely choreographed patterns across open spaces, juxtaposed with massed groups on tiered steps.

Stanislavski reacted favourably to this work. As he devised such ideas as **Tempo-Rhythm in Movement**, he increasingly urged his pupils to include movement and dance in their training.

Volbach, W., *Adolphe Appia, Prophet of the Modern Theatre*, WUP, 1968

## 4.2.5 FOLLOWERS

In this section we have been very selective. It is probably true to say that every actor in the Western world will at some time have been influenced by Stanislavski's teaching, so we have concentrated on key figures who were themselves very influential.

**MEYERHOLD, VSEVOLOD (1874–1940)**

- A brilliant actor who was drawn to experimental texts Meyerhold was one of Stanislavski's most original and brilliant pupils, and a founder member, with Olga Knipper, of the Moscow Art Theatre. However, from playing leading roles he gradually grew disenchanted with the rather conservative repertoire and left the company. He undertook several experimental theatre seasons in provincial capitals, which persuaded Stanislavski to make him the director of the Theatre Studio in 1905.
- Symbolist dramas were unsuccessful Here he embarked on a series of productions heavily influenced by Maeterlinck and Symbolism, but despite the best intentions they were a failure. Stanislavski commented: 'For the new art new actors were necessary, actors of a new sort with altogether new technique.' [MLLA. p.437] Dark, rather gloomy plays which expressed the poets' inner life were much concerned with dreams; they were in direct contradiction to the realism practised by the Art Theatre.
- Poetic dramas
- Sister of Komisarjevski: see below Another significant venture was Meyerhold's work under the management of the actress Vera Komisarjevskaya in St Petersburg in 1906. His production of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, again challenging realism, was the first in a number of vivid and daring experiments. Audiences and critics gave it a mixed reception.
- Anti-realist productions
- Constructivism: see Glossary By 1908 he had been dismissed by his employer, as the time was not yet ripe for these bold statements. It was not until his work in the **constructivist** style in the 1920s that he consolidated his reputation as one of the most innovative practitioners of the 20th century.
- Stanislavski remained loyal to his friend all his life. As he lay dying he said, 'Look after Meyerhold, he is my sole heir, not in our own theatre but in general.' [Benedetti 1990. p.345]
- But by then Meyerhold had fallen foul of authority. He was accused of not being able to toe the 'party line' and, with his benefactor safely dead, Stalin had him shot.
- Braun, E., *Meyerhold on Theatre*, Methuen, 1969  
Leach, R., *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, CUP, 1993

**KOMISARJEVSKY, THEODORE (1874–1954)**

- A director from the Art Theatre who made the link with British theatre He is important for having brought the influence of the Art Theatre to Britain. His sister, Vera, (see Meyerhold) was considered to be one of the most talented actresses of her generation, and as part of her company he too worked with Meyerhold. Like his colleague he was active in 'experimental' theatre and by 1918 he was noted as a director with new and challenging ideas.
- Chekhov with John Gielgud Leaving Russia in 1919, he sought work in Europe and America, but it was not until 1925, when he was offered a season in a small theatre in Barnes, near London, that he made a dramatic mark on the contemporary audience. He decided to make Chekhov the focus of his work and was fortunate in being able to cast John Gielgud.
- Chekhov discovered Critics and public flocked to these 'new' plays; the British theatre, having been generally ignorant of the playwright's work. A critic could say about a production of *The Three Sisters*:

It . . . has brought to our actors a chance to cultivate under his direction new modes of dramatic expression.

[Quoted in *Theatre Notebook*, 1983. p.67]

The productions in this season confirmed Komisarjevsky's understanding of and sympathy with Chekhov and it would be fair to say that his influence in Britain as an innovative director was far-reaching and pervasive.

Gielgud, J., *An Actor and his Time*, Penguin, 1981  
Komisarjevsky, T., *Myself and the Theatre*, London, 1929

## THE METHOD

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- The influence of the Moscow Art Theatre* The Moscow Art Theatre toured America in 1923–24 and left behind two actors: Richard Boleslavski and Maria Ouspenskaya. Together they formed a school called the American Laboratory Theatre, where they began to teach, basing classes on their intimate knowledge and understanding of Stanislavski's System, up the point that it had then been codified.
- The formation of the Group Theatre Among their students were two actors, Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg, who in 1931 became founder members of the Group Theatre. This based its work on a socialist/realist style and was noted for its fine ensemble playing, using Stanislavski's System as a basis for rehearsal.
- The Actors' Studio used Emotion Memory, although discredited Adler made it her business to meet and work with Stanislavski in 1934 and therefore renewed contact with the System. However, as leader of The Actors' Studio from the early 1950s onward, Strasberg continued to rely very heavily on Emotion Memory. Stanislavski had begun to discredit this in the mid-1930s as he moved towards publication of *An Actor Prepares*, appreciating its limitations and preferring a more outward and practical experimentation.
- The Method actor might be characterised by heavy reliance on his or her own personality and a deeply emotional approach to performance. There is a good checklist of qualities associated with the Method in Vineberg, J., *Method Actors*, Schirmer Books, 1991 (p.6–7). It has provided a sound and methodological training for actors in the American theatre and film industry, where value is placed on intense psychological realism in the construction of character.
- The Method style still in evidence The Actors' Studio nourished actors as diverse as Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe, and in the 1980s was still seen as an influence on such stars as Jane Fonda and Al Pacino, who were noted as intense and compelling film actors. This has resulted in some of the finest performances in the history of the cinema, in such films as *On the Waterfront* (1954) with Brando, and *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955) with James Dean. More recently the series of *Godfather* films, again starring Marlon Brando, as well as a new generation of actors like Al Pacino, has confirmed the "Method's" training.

### 4.2.6 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

#### PLAYS

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**The Seagull** (1898), **Uncle Vanya** (1899), **Three Sisters** (1901), **The Cherry Orchard** (1904) Anton Chekhov

**The Lower Depths** (1902) Maxim Gorky

**A Doll's House** (1879), **Hedda Gabler** (1890) Henrik Ibsen

**Miss Julie** (1888), **The Father** (1887) August Strindberg

Strindberg experimented with many styles, but these two 'modern tragedies' are good examples of a detailed psychological realism.

**Mrs Warren's Profession** (1880) George Bernard Shaw

Shaw adapted much of his technique from Ibsen, and this early play is a good example of a social theme communicated by lively and well-rounded characters.

**Playboy of the Western World** (1907) John Millington Synge

A superb and entertaining 'slice of life' play, based on the life of a community in Ireland. A text of carefully researched realism.

**All My Sons** (1947) Arthur Miller

Sometimes labelled as 'new realism', Miller's writing was heavily influenced by Ibsen. Social themes in a well-crafted realist context.

**Death of a Salesman** (1949) Arthur Miller

This play combined strong scenes of realist dialogue with 'dream' sequences that owe something to an expressionist influence.

**Live Like Pigs** (1958) John Arden

This early play combines a social theme with inter-scene folk ballads. Its detailed setting and examination of 'real-life' characters make it part of the realist genre.

**Look Back in Anger** (1956) John Osborne

A highly influential play, which breaks new ground. It belongs firmly in the genre of realism.

**Chicken Soup with Barley** (1958), **Roots** (1959) Arnold Wesker

Part of a trilogy of plays. Aspects of the writing are realistic, but they were staged in a strongly 'Brechtian' style.

## 4.2.7 BIBLIOGRAPHY

### PRIMARY SOURCES

Stanislavski, K. <i>My Life in Art</i>	Methuen, 1993	Despite the lack of dates, and chapters that are not arranged chronologically, it is a first-hand account.
<i>An Actor Prepares</i>	Methuen, 1993	The primary text for a working through of the System.
<i>Building a Character</i>	Methuen, 1993	The 'second' book of the System, published from notes after his death.

	<i>Creating a Role</i>	Methuen, 1993	The 'third' book in the trilogy. Useful for its perspective on later theory.
Benedetti, J.	<i>Stanislavski, A Biography</i>	Methuen, 1990	A comprehensive account of his life and work.
Benedetti, J.	<i>Stanislavski, An Introduction</i>	Methuen, 1985	An account of the System, its changes and growth.
Braun, E.	<i>The Director and the Stage</i>	Methuen, 1982	A useful companion to all the practitioners.
Cole, T. & Chinoy, H.	<i>Actors on Acting</i>	Crown, 1970	A reference book for accounts by actors of their craft.

## FURTHER SOURCES

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	<i>Stanislavski and America 1</i>	<i>Tulane Drama Review</i> Vol. 9, No. 1, Fall 1964	Original and very useful articles on and about the System and its American legacy.
Schmitt, N.C.	<i>Stanislavski: Creativity and the Unconscious</i>	<i>New Theatre Quarterly</i> No. 8, 1986	Concerns itself with readings of Ribot related to Emotion Memory.

### 4.2.8 QUESTION AND SUGGESTED FRAMEWORK FOR ANSWER ON STANISLAVSKI

**ACTIVITY** Stanislavski said about his System: '... it is not a cook book where all you need is to find a page and there is your recipe. No, it is a whole way of life.'

**Discuss this statement with reference to an actor's preparation for a role. Choose an appropriate play to illustrate your answer.**

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#### POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Choose a text that is suitable for this answer. This will be very important, and it would be quite appropriate if you had acted in it.
- Although it is a long question it is really quite simple: you are being asked to discuss an actor's preparation for a role.
- You should realise that the question is asking you to comment on 'a whole way of life' and that should be dominant in your mind.
- Relevant quotes could be useful.

## A DETAILED ANALYSIS

### *Introduction*

Name the play that you are going to use and the character in that text. Say why you have chosen the piece: for example, its relevance to Stanislavski's theories (realism and characterisation). Explain why the whole System would be useful if playing that character.

### *Main body*

For each of the subsequent sections, take an important aspect of the character. For each section explain:

- what the aspect is and what evidence there is for it in the text
- which elements of Stanislavski's System would assist you, the actor, in creating the role
- *how* they could help you.

For example one aspect of the character might be her variety of moods. You should give examples of these from the text. You should then suggest elements of the System that might help you truthfully portray these: for example, Units and Objectives, Inner Tempo–Rhythm, Circles of Attention. Explain why each would be useful and how you would use it in rehearsal. It is important that you state that it is the *combination* of these elements that would be of particular use; one alone would not be sufficient to help you realise such a wide range of moods. You might also point out that the other elements of the System would be of additional use.

Another aspect of the character might be her relationship with another character. Again, give examples from the text. Name a number of elements that would help you: for example, If and the Given Circumstance, Emotion Memory. Continue as above. The format would then continue for other characteristics, if you have time.

### *Conclusion*

Comment on the quote in the question. Do you agree with Stanislavski that you must use *all* the aspects of the System, or not? Justify your conclusions using examples from your earlier points and from your own practical experience in particular.