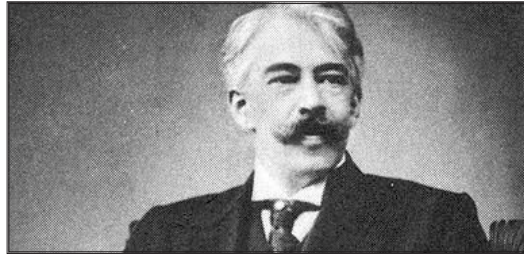# THE STANISLAVSKY SYSTEM— THE PROCESS

by Lindsay Price

What is It?

The Stanislavsky System is an intense character development process that strives to make a performance "real" and not artificial. In order to achieve this realism, the system is used to:

- Bring an actor's experiences into the role.

- Expand an actor's imagination.

Stanislavsky believed that in order to make a character true, the character must be approached from the inside. That means drawing on the real inside life of the actor, most specifically drawing on memories. The actor also has to create the inside life of the character: the character has to have inner-thought, backstory, beliefs, and so on, just as a real person does.

When the actor answers questions about the character, they should speak in the first person. "I am…" "I want…"

The use of the imagination is very important: the system is not about working out your problems on stage as therapy! Stanislavsky always focuses on the art of the process: "Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art."

How Do I Use It?

The System has a set vocabulary of terms. These terms represent specific exercises to be used as the actor works on the script. The exercises are appropriate for any character and any script.

Given Circumstances

The given circumstances are the character details in the script - the facts the playwright gives the actor. They are unchangeable. Focus attention on the geographical, social and historical elements in the script.

Sample questions to ask:

- Where am I?

- What is my specific location?

- What year is it?

- What relationships do I have?

- What has happened before the play begins?

Super Objective

This is also referred to in some books as the Super Task. The Super Objective is the main goal or task that a character is trying to accomplish though the course of the play.

Objective

This is also referred to in some books as the Task. Once the overall theme of the play is established, break the script down into sections. The objective is the goal for your character in each section. It's what the character would like to see happen at the end of the section; what they want.

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This is not necessarily what happens, but this is what the character is striving for. It is the actor's job to focus on the objective and strive to complete it, no matter what stands in the way.

For each Section, the actor should be able to:

❖ Complete the sentence "I want..."

❖ Define the Action the character will do to achieve the want.

For each section you should know what your character wants and what action they are going to take to get that want.

Magic If

Your character is in a specific situation. The Magic If answers the following question: "What would I do if I were in the same situation?"

The "If" is very important. Again, this about your real-life experiences in combination with your imagination. The situation is not real, and the system doesn't assume you have ever been in that situation. But knowing yourself, what would you do? How would you act? Take the imaginary situation and make real life decisions as to how you would behave.

It's crucial to determine the "do" in the question. What action would you take?

» *EXERCISE*

You are in a play that takes place at a bank. As your character is finishing up with the teller, a bank robber enters and shoots a gun into the air.

If you were in a similar situation, what would you do? Would you be a coward or a hero? Would you yell? Would you hide behind someone? Would you run out? How would this information help in your character development?

Emotional Memory

This is also called Affective Memory. In the system, the actor does not "act" emotions. You don't act sad, or happy, or mad. With Emotional Memory the actor remembers a situation when he/she felt the same, or similar, emotions as their character. Recalling the situation leads to emotion.

What's important about this exercise is that the actor must not force a memory, or bring up something hurtful. It's a play, not therapy. It's important not to, as Stanislavsky says, "assault the subconscious." Past memories are used (as opposed to present situations) because they are more controllable.

The actor can also use situations they were not directly involved with - it could be a something they saw, read about or heard about.

Sense Memory is an offshoot of Emotional Memory. The actor recalls a memory, and tries to put all five senses to the memory. What did you see, hear, taste, touch, smell?

If you're working on a play and haven't done this type of work before, I would suggest choosing one moment. How can Emotional Memory help you develop your character at this moment of the play?

» *EXERCISE*

Choose a two person scene. Determine the emotion in the scene. For example, envy.

Recall a memory from your own life where you felt envy. Write the memory down. Be specific. Try to use the five senses in your description. For example: "My best friend and I tried out for the same part in the school play. She got it and I didn't. I tried to be happy for her, but I wasn't. I couldn't look her in the eye. I made my voice sound happy, but I knew I

was exaggerating and I think she did too. My stomach hurt and I had to hold it. I thought I was going to throw up."

Do an improv involving envy. It does not have to be the scenario of your memory. But, keep your memory in your mind. Remember how you acted.

Do the scene.

Inner Monologue

Also referred to as Subtext. These are the character's thoughts. What's going on inside the character during a scene? Creating the subtext is part of developing the inner life of the character.

» *Exercise*

Take a scene, preferably one with two actors. Have the actors face each other. A third person sits with the script and reads out the lines for both characters. After they hear their line, the actor speaks aloud the subtext for the line. To do that, the actor completes the sentence, "I want to..." ❧