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Acting Method as an (Embodied) Worldview

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová

The S Word: Stanislavsky's Last Words... Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU), The S Word, and The Stanislavsky Research Centre (University of Leeds/University of Malta). 11–13 November 2022. Haller Hall, Prague.

Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts hosted a symposium organised jointly with The Stanislavsky Research Centre. During this two-day long event, with over thirty speakers mostly from different countries of Europe or the USA, K. S. Stanislavsky's life and work were revisited, focusing primarily on his late approach to acting. The program was composed of panels, workshops, keynote lectures, and a book launch, which started the event.¹ The book *The Routledge Companion to Vsevolod Meyerhold* was introduced in Kafe DAMU by Jonathan Pitches (University of Leeds, UK), one of the volume editors,² shortly before the official symposium opening, which was followed by the first keynote presentation by Maria Shevtsova (Goldsmith University of London, UK).

Maria Shevtsova, who recently published a treatise *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (Cambridge University Press, 2019, 2022 paperback) on Stanislavsky's legacy, set the focus for the weekend event: reinvestigation of the legacy of Stanislavsky's late work in various contexts including today acting practice and scholarly work, in an impressive fashion. Her keynote lecture focussed mostly on Stanislavsky's contri-

buton to the music theatre developed in his Opera-Dramatic Studio in the 1930s. She emphasised that Stanislavsky's system should not be understood as a 'simple' technique or a set of instructions but above all as a worldview.

From Saturday morning on, the shape of the main topic of the symposium became more and more evident. Several illuminating 20-minute presentations focused mostly on Stanislavsky's last acting and acting teaching method – Active Analysis. Revisiting Stanislavsky's life in theatrical art almost a hundred years later proved to still be inspiring. Contemporary issues attracting the attention of theatre practitioners, (acting) teachers, and theatre studies scholars were quite naturally intertwined with the questions Stanislavsky and his collaborators and followers (especially Maria Osipovna Knebel or Grigori Kristi) raised and maybe even answered for us in their times. In the second half of the day, Sharon Marie Carnicke in her keynote speech discussed mostly the problem of 'belief' as 'the foundation of foundations' in acting in the work of Stanislavsky's proponents – especially in Maria Knebel's approach.

Just after this keynote lecture, the afternoon session took a turn back to Stanislavsky's times. Renowned cognitive studies scholar Rick Kemp (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA) approached

1 I will not comment on each contribution. My comments are selective for the purpose of outlining the scope the symposium provided.

2 The volume is co-edited with Stefan Aquilina.

Stanislavsky's later practices through the lens of cognitive science. It is worth noting, that some up-to-date challenges to Stanislavsky's thinking had been already mentioned in the Saturday morning session: e.g., in Julian Jones's (Rose Bruford College, UK) exploration of the relationship between an actor's emotional connection or expression and the spoken word, which evolved into Sanford Meisner's so-called 'repetition exercises'; or in Jon Weinbren's (University of Surrey, UK) investigation of possible mechanisation of creativity within the field of AI-Assisted Image Creation that can be called into question by applying elements of Stanislavsky's later legacy.

In the wake of several other contributions which were remarkable in their delivery and refreshing in their insight, the Saturday programme was closed by special guest Bella Martin leading one of the workshops – where she introduced the elements from Active Analysis.

The next day programme (Sunday) zoomed in more on area-specific issues. First, two parallel sessions were held in the morning. For example, Diego Moschkovich (University of Sao Paulo, Brazil) presented a new view, based on archival materials, on Stanislavsky's last experiments, suggesting that the Physical Action and Active Analysis methods were derived 'post-mortem'. Moschkovich was followed by Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu (CNRS, France) and Tomasz Kubikowski (Aleksandr Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy in Warsaw, Poland) who, similarly profound and dialectical in examining the archival materials, outlined the affinities of solutions of Stanislavsky's practice, as well as the pros and cons of the later 'authoritative' systems.

The Czech-language session, happening in parallel to the one mentioned above, featured Czech historical applications of (and interactions with) Stanislavsky's acting techniques. Three scholars from two Czech academies of performing arts Lukáš Rieger (Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts), Martina Musilová (DAMU and Masaryk University) and Zuzana Sílová (DAMU) re-visited some crucial concepts of Stanislavsky's thinking on theatre and investigated in the discussion, which followed, the issue of the specificity of Stanislavsky's legacy in the totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes in former Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, respectively. Even though the discussion was very fruitful and illuminating, it lacked the contributors from abroad, since – pity to say – foreign symposium participants preferred the parallel section; therefore no one from abroad could contribute to the discussion and no one (from abroad) could be affected by the issues the presentations raised.

At noon, the special online session with three participants – all from Ukraine – took place. Les Kurbas' name was the most mentioned in discussing the Ukrainian paths of Stanislavsky method. One cannot help but admit that the dramatic moments of the present-day war were not quite 'latent', since one of the speakers had to change the time of his presentation because of the air raid sirens warning of an approaching Russian missile attack. Despite his light going on and off due to the voltage fluctuations and an unstable power supply, the speaker Mykola Shkaraban (Kyiv National Karpenko-Karyj University of Theatre, Cinema, and Television, Ukraine) very professionally gave his lecture on the reformer's (Les Kurbas') work.

The final words of the symposium, in another special plenary talk, were said by a theoretician and researcher from the field of cognitive studies Rhonda Blair (Southern Methodist University, USA). She outlined possible cognitive theatre studies interpretations/explanations of elements of Stanislavsky's thoughts and (acting) practice, mostly in commenting on the interconnection of action and cognition from the point of view of 4E cognition approach, and the concept of linguistic bodies. This inspiring lecture completed the symbolic 'arch' of ideas about Stanislavsky and his methodology that had been gradually drawn during the symposium: finally, Stanislavsky's concepts and acting methods are starting to be approached from the cognitive theatre studies view. How fruitful this merge can be will most likely come to light in the future but at the moment it gives credit to Stanislavsky's em-

bodied approach and definitely his visionary/progressive 'cognitive-like' thoughts.

All in all, I would mention that the symposium was well organised and took place in a very friendly atmosphere of the Theatre Faculty under careful supervision of its vice-rector and former rector Jan Hančil, who proved to be an engaged, enthusiastic, and attentive host of the event.

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