



Pavis on Stanislavsky

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We asked him to reflect on his experience of Stanislavsky in the context of French theatre.

How has Stanislavsky impacted on your own work?

It did not impact directly on me as an actor, a little as an occasional director. My knowledge of Stanislavsky was more intellectual, for instance when I taught a course on ‘the theories of the actor.’ Thus, I always reflected on him in comparison with other artists, never as the author of a system or method. My main reference was Brecht. I knew of and was impressed by Brecht’s admiration of Stanislavsky and his counter-system. I loved the idea of comparing and relativizing their specific systems.

I read Stanislavsky in German, because, in East Germany, he had been published and translated directly and excellently from the Russian. The French translation of *Building a character*, for instance, was not directly translated from Russian, but from English, leading to the errors and imprecisions you can imagine.

At the University of Paris 8 in the 90s, I organized a workshop on Russian acting theories. I had invited specialists from GITIS: my friend Serguei Issaiev, Rector of the School of Theatre, and a specialist in Stanislavsky; A. Karpov, a Meyerhold expert, leading a workshop on biomechanics; myself, also a practical workshop and seminar on Michael Chekhov, particularly on his notion of ‘Psychological Gesture’. Issaiev once told me that it is somehow artificial to separate abruptly S, M and C. I was struck and happy that Chekhov’s PG and Stanislavsky’s ‘role’ seemed very close and

similar notions. Later, when discussing with Barba the notion of '*Partition*' (score) of the *mise en scène* and of the actors themselves, I again came across the pioneering role of Stanislavsky, when he writes about 'the work on the role, apropos the Revizor'. Only much later did I find out that Anatoli Vassiliev's own system was developed through his own former teacher at GITIS, Maria Knebel, who had been a pupil and disciple of Stanislavsky. Somehow I felt I had to confront the idea of *Building a character*. Theories with other theories seen as opposite and contradictory to his spirit. I always kept in mind that Meyerhold once remarked: 'Konstantin Sergeievich and me we are looking at art in the same way, just that he goes from inside to outside and I go from outside to inside'.

What kind of impact do you feel that Stanislavsky's work has had upon French theatre and performance practice in general?

I think his impact was both fundamental and marginal. His influence was important at the turn of the twentieth century, when naturalism was a new discovery in France, particularly Andre Antoine, and in Germany (Saxe-Meiningen). Stanislavsky was thus received more in the perspective of the rise of the director than as a theoretician and trainer of the actor. This might be the beginning of the misunderstanding, until later French directors were often very Brechtian in their approach, discovered the notion of physical actions (for example, Antoine Vitez). This however did not happen before the rise of structuralism and semiology in the sixties and seventies.

In France, Stanislavsky was never the only and main reference, because of a very different historical tradition and style of acting, coming much more from declamation, *commedia dell'arte*, and melodrama: a more physical and gestural view of the theatre and of the '*travail de l'acteur*'.

As far as I know, the Russian master was never the basis, or the alpha and omega of the actor's training as it was and still in Russia and in East European countries until 1989 and even later. In France, there was always a certain suspicion of '*stanilavskism*', as it easily leads to the American Method acting and training of the Actors Studio, which never took root in France and was only present through a few gurus' workshops or schools.

Do you think that Stanislavsky's teaching is still relevant to French actors and directors today?

Not really. Or, shall I say: not officially, not as the core of the training, as is the case, I believe, in

many other European and English-speaking countries. Some directors reject the idea of a long *travail à la table* (for instance, Vitez, Mnouchkine, Pommerat). The sceptical French now seem to reject any idea of a system for actor's training. The search for truth or authenticity in acting or staging is no longer a priority. The advice to look natural on stage is often rejected: the theatre should stress its theatricality, its conventions, its construction.

Do you feel that Stanislavsky is compatible with semiotics either theoretically or practically?

It all depends which Stanislavsky. Probably not the one of the psychologically trained actor. In a way, theatre semiotics (semiology) was established against a type of criticism based on a psychological, impressionistic, understanding of the actor, the text and the performance. However, the method of physical actions was for me a way to connect Stanislavsky with non-psychological acting theories such as the directors Jouvett or Copeau, and even Brecht. I 'met' Stanislavsky again when working on the notion of the actor's score.¹

However, combining Stanislavsky with Meyerhold and M. Chekhov, opened for me a new way of reading him. As I was working on a 'portable anthology of the notion of score ("partitura") from Stanislavsky to Robert Wilson', I came across a text of Stanislavsky: 'Addition to the Work on the role. (The Revizor) Working plan on the role'. The notion of score helped me examine in what way it was used by all Russian directors of the time.

Let me point out the specific points in Stanislavsky's check-list, which I constantly used and adapted, when working on the semiology and theory of the actor and of the *mise-en-scène*²:

1. 'Narrative (in general, not too detailed) of the story of the play': this seems to me of utmost importance - naming the story (i.e. fabula) in general (as opposed to the detailed plot).
2. 'To play the exterior story following the physical actions': my 'semiotic' use of this lies in the final view of Stanislavsky, of 'designing' the line of actions through external observations, which can be done systematically, and which encourages us to follow the line of actions, signs or rather cluster of signs after cluster.
5. 'One delimits a temporary but general super objective': this global, structural method helps the actor and director to build the work with a global and provisional ensemble of signs or energies.

¹ P. Pavis. « Anthologie portative de la partition, de Stanislavski à Wilson », *Degrés*, n° 97-98-99, 1999.

² P. Pavis. *Contemporary Mise en scène. Staging theatre today*. Translated by Joel Anderson. Routledge, 2013.

There is thus a welcome back and forth between the general and the particular, one constantly correcting the other.

6. “On the basis of the received material, one begins to determine the line of the provisional, approximate action.” Here we understand that the ensembles of signs (in time and in space) can be questioned any time during the process of staging/directing of moments or clusters of signs for the production in the making. Stanislavsky adds: “the recurrent question: what would I do if...” Might we say: ‘what would I achieve as a director if I do this and that?’ The line of actions (for the actor, but also for the director) keep changing.

7. “in that respect, one divides the play in several broad segments.” This, inversely, seems to be one of the methodological laws of narratology which here coincides with dramaturgy (dramaturgical analysis, when ‘building a story’).

10. “Building a logical and chronological line of organic, physical actions”: It is interesting here that Stanislavsky makes a clear distinction between ‘logical’ and ‘chronological’, which need not always coincide. The work of the director thus seems to be able to combine elements sometimes logically, sometimes chronologically. This is in fact exactly what a structural analysis of a text does: connecting elements as temporal or as logically/illogically bound.

17. “The correct inner line emerges during the process of justification of the physical and other lines. (...) “tell in your own words: 1) the line of thoughts, 2) the line of imagined representations, 3) explain these two lines to all partners of the play, in order to build a reciprocal link and a line of inner action.” It would seem that Stanislavsky gets as far as possible in his project of a meeting of inner thoughts and stage images connected through the physical actions. Here cognitive psychology and kinaesthetic empathy offer new tools to give Stanislavsky a sound foundation and a new start.