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“Music, singing, word, action”: the Opera-Dramatic Studio 1935–1938

Maria Shevtsova

Department of Theater and Performance, Goldsmiths University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Central preoccupations of Stanislavsky’s theatre practice and thought involve continuous laboratory explorations, revisions and developments. What emerges as new at one time is constantly renewed, indicating that his work of perpetual change raises the question as to what actually were the defining achievements of the Opera-Dramatic Studio. This was the last of the seven studios that Stanislavsky founded and led, or encouraged and protected under the flagship of the Moscow Art Theatre as he taught to varying degrees in each. The discussion here rejects the commonplace idea that Stanislavsky discovered the “method of physical action” in the closing years of his life, showing earlier avatars of “physical action” while unfolding its different but interconnected aspects, including “word action.” Stanislavsky’s comprehensive approach to acting together with his intensive research on the actor-singer, music, movement, vocalization and other components that bind opera and dramatic theatre gave the Opera-Dramatic Studio its unique identity.

KEYWORDS

Laboratory; études; line of physical action; subconscious; spirit; organic creativity

Never could I have imagined, as my research in Moscow for *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* was coming to a close, that Covid would greet the book’s publication in 2020 and that, before too long, Russia would be at war with Ukraine.¹ Nor could I have dreamt that I would open an address centred on the Opera-Dramatic Studio with reflections on Stanislavsky’s profound humanism. Yet it happened quite simply because our world’s successive wars beyond Europe and in Europe, political confusion, technological imposition, social disconnection, economic chaos, and ecological catastrophe raise the imperative question of what, *today*, a humanist and *humane* culture might look like.

In the face of widespread inhumanity, revealed too by the impact and fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, the very idea of making theatre has been besieged by anxieties as to what kind of theatre *can* be made and, especially, *why* it should be made. Why theatre now? The answer to this core question came from across the globe by theatre people continuing to do theatre – when they actually *could* do it – indicating that theatre was, in times of acknowledged helplessness, an expression of hope that some action would disclose its sense.

CONTACT Maria Shevtsova  M.Shevtsova@gold.ac.uk  Department of Theater and Performance, Goldsmiths University of London, Lewisham Way, London SE14 6NW, UK

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Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko were motivated by comparable questions in the circumstances peculiar to Tsarist Russia when they founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898 and Stanislavsky was to ask them again and again in the devastating contexts that were to follow: the 1905 Revolution, the First World War, the 1917 February Revolution, the 1917 Bolshevik October Revolution, the Civil War, the Class War of the 1920s, Stalin's enforced collectivization through Five-Year Plans, and Stalin's Terror unleashed in 1936 until 1938, the very years of the Opera-Dramatic Studio. An itemized list like this brings home with full force, as separately cited occurrences cannot, just how massive, long, and intensely charged – *that* is an understatement – were these tumultuous events, one after another. It is vital to keep them in view, since they put into sober perspective Stanislavsky's and his myriad colleagues' extraordinary endeavours to keep their theatre, and *the* theatre – a profoundly social practice – alive. His humanism, when confronted by such events, could be anything but an intellectual abstraction, for it was tested by visceral hardships and suffering, personal as well as collective, that threatened beliefs and also broke and killed.

Then, in this maelstrom of history, there were major professional setbacks, including the Kachalov group's unplanned three-year exile in Central Europe due to the Civil War. On the return in 1922 of part of this significant group of actors, technicians, and managers, several who had remained were to take up President Tomasz Masaryk's gracious offer of residency in Prague and, opportunistically, the name "Prague Group of the Moscow Art Theatre." By the time Stanislavsky's activities had encompassed the latecomer Opera-Dramatic Studio, the Art Theatre had proven its fortitude in woe and its invincible resolution to seek the "good" (Stanislavsky) in art and life – even if the "good" did not always materialize – providing an example from which to take courage and look forward, even for our present state of complete disorientation.

Politically, Stanislavsky's humanism was liberal, with Tolstoyan inflections, and, ideologically, it was religious. It was nurtured by Orthodoxy and Old Believer values of personal responsibility and accountability for one's actions in respect of others. The notion of service to society was a baseline. His humanism required consciousness – today's "mindfulness" – and conscience, interlacing spirit and ethics. It was fully embedded in the sacred, in the spiritual dimensions of his very being, as of the System on which he worked while he worked assiduously on himself throughout his life.² The learnt and perfectible psychophysical techniques and wide-ranging skills that, Stanislavsky insisted, were indispensable for the craft of acting (*masterstvo*), were vehicles for the spiritual energy that transformed craft into art. This type of transformation was one of the fundamental aims of the landmark First Studio (1912), and Stanislavsky was to give it new meaning in the last, particularly through its work on opera.

Of course, I shall return to this opera work, but several points that Stanislavsky scholars have generally neglected or, perhaps, thought were too obvious for further reference, need to be registered first. The Opera-Dramatic Studio, unlike the MAT at its inception, was a government-funded institution from the start, which made Stanislavsky answerable to the government; and its public status reflected the official policy of making all manner and kind of education available to a recently emergent and hugely undereducated proletariat. In this, it was firmly linked to the Bolshoy Opera Studio, which, in 1918, Yelena Malinovskaya, backed by her superior Anatoly Lunacharsky, Commissar for Enlightenment, had suggested Stanislavsky set up and

run with state support (financial support meagre in those times of desperate poverty).³ Malinovskaya knew that Stanislavsky had envisaged renovating opera as he had theatre, moreover with a concrete System already fruitfully put to use at the Art Theatre. It is to be remembered, though, that the System was never a how-to-do-it kit, but a worldview in which his practice was incorporated.

The Bolshoy Opera Studio and its subsequent avatars, the penultimate being the Stanislavsky Opera Theatre (1928), had established several precedents: the recognition, for instance, that the “old” humanist culture, of which opera was a sample, was not irrelevant for revolutionary objectives: that crossover between the arts encouraged familiarity with the arts; and that not only revolutionary but also “bourgeois” artists could contribute positively to mass education. Artistically speaking, the Studio had opened up for Stanislavsky enormous scope for exploring opera’s artistic potential, which, he believed, could bring about the metamorphosis of a hidebound genre, presumed exclusive to elites, into an engaging and democratic art.

Operationally speaking, the Bolshoy Opera Studio drew attention to two facts, not usually properly noticed: that opera did not play second fiddle – excuse my pun – to Stanislavsky’s better known work at the MAT; second, that the Opera–Dramatic Studio was a successor and not a maverick stand-alone, spotlighted by Stanislavsky’s supposed discovery in it of the “method of physical action.” Where opera was concerned, the 1918 Studio was the nucleus from which Stanislavsky’s opera research grew from strength to strength as it wove its way through the wax and wane of Stanislavsky’s web of activities. Opera settled in the Opera–Dramatic Studio second to none.

The government’s and Stanislavsky’s interests coalesced in the Opera–Dramatic Studio, albeit tangentially rather than directly, heavily financed, though it was, by the state; and the latter, although keeping watch on “value for money” (our dreaded contemporary language) – through formal invitations, too, to open sessions of work-in-progress – appears not to have infringed on the *kind* of work Stanislavsky was doing. This Studio’s plebian identity, judging mostly by occasional studist remarks, seems to have been more pronounced than that of its opera predecessor: these studists were, after all, the first generation born of the 1917 Revolution and its political youth organizations, dominated by the Komsomol (Communist Youth). By the same token, the Studio’s bold, pioneering and exploratory character compared well with the more socially polished First Studio tasked to challenge and change musty theatre habits.

Memories of the First Studio’s successful études would have stimulated Stanislavsky’s desire to have his last Studio be exclusively a place for testing and trying – in sum, a laboratory that would generate new energies for developing the System but, above all (so his close attention to opera attests), for *expanding* it by means of opera. Even so, although the System was vital for Stanislavsky’s plans, the System *as system* was not what mattered. The principal goal was to upturn and overhaul the opera form, its compositional processes and modes of performance, which would inevitably alter interaction with audiences. Stanislavsky quite likely had this in mind when he mused that “perhaps the ‘system’ was needed even more in opera than drama.”⁴

The scale of Stanislavsky’s enterprise was beyond the limits of his own capacities, but it would be seeded in his artist-pupils to be embodied in the opera of futures to come. There was plenty done within its immediate remit, however, including the model of chamber opera for modern times invented with *Yevgeny Onegin* in 1922 with the Bolshoy Opera

Studio and performed on its tiny stage. Studio and stage were housed in Stanislavsky's *kommunalka* apartment. The heavily restricted space dictated the greatest economy of means, prompting, for instance, Stanislavsky's elliptical ball scene, the opera's most decisive scene, implied by one or two couples dancing among the fifty-strong audience. All told, Stanislavsky's aesthetic reconstruction of opera was immense and this, one of his most important achievements, has been far from widely recognized – consequently, also the case of the Opera-Dramatic Studio's major contribution to them.

A central Opera-Dramatic Studio intention was to cross-pollinate what Stanislavsky conceived of as sung *theatre* with spoken theatre. For practical purposes, the System would be taught in the two specializing groups, thereby more easily enabling the taught to “pass on knowledge to others.”⁵ This is exactly how Stanislavsky formulated the Studio's purpose to the dramatic-theatre assistants-pedagogues in his introductory meetings with them.⁶ Then and afterwards, he impressed on teachers and pupils alike that, whatever their specific characteristics – music was played right through an opera production, for instance – music and song (music theatre) and text and word (dramatic theatre) were not separate arts but part of the same creative continuum. Concentrated work on physical action in the Studio had Stanislavsky assert that opera was one art: it was “musical-vocal action.”⁷

Accordingly, aspects of the curriculum such as pronunciation, diction, voice projection (areas that Maria Knebel taught at the Studio), tempo-rhythm and movement, which were of common importance, were organized in combined lessons. Stanislavsky's near-obsession with crystalline vowels and consonants, in speech as much as singing, gives sharp insights into his practice. Take, for instance, his description of “consonant sounds” as “the muscles of speech.”⁸ To paraphrase: firmly enunciated consonants activate and sustain intelligible speaking and singing; without them the voice is limp and thus incapable of moulding distinct, “textured” (Stanislavsky), words, spoken or sung, let alone of making them heard, especially when large audiences were involved.

It is relevant to recall, for the deeper significance of what Stanislavsky is here saying, his limitless concern with training muscles to relax because relaxation, aided by breath and breathing, is a portal to the subconscious. The subconscious, Stanislavsky unconditionally believed, was the source – his image is the ocean – from which creativity, almost in its entirety, flowed. Creative flow, we could add, swept away pedestrian delivery.

Take also his contention that

for the actor, the word is not simply a sound but the stimulus for images. [...] Visions [*videnya* – images that the actor sees when playing] arising in the actor's *imagination* [my italics] must be transmitted to a partner through the word: listening, in our language, means seeing what is spoken about.⁹

This, by the way, is pure Robert Wilson, “hear the image, see the sound,” arriving at Stanislavsky's door. But already at his door is his “word action” (*slovesnoye deystviye*), the idea that, other than acting on others, the word is an action of its own; and to persuade studists that his thought was not fanciful, Stanislavsky observed that the word is made by muscles – the tongue and the whole “vocal apparatus,” to use Stanislavsky's vocabulary. Stanislavsky had the studists working their muscles maximally with invisible objects, paying particular attention to their fingers, since, “if the eyes are the mirror of the soul, the fingers are the eyes of the body” and could say anything they wanted.¹⁰

His metaphor became quite literal in an exercise – really more of an *étude* – on kneading dough in which the muscular strength, rhythm, precision and attentiveness of the fingers executed the requisite action and made it utterly *visible*. The more the fingers were articulated, adept, and flexible, the more truthful the action became. Bodily truthfulness engaged, as in a fulcrum, not only the subconscious but also the “life of the human spirit” – Stanislavsky’s “mantra,” I call it – of the human-being actor (*chelovek-aktyor*), thereby forestalling purely mechanical rendition of action. It is vital to stress the full significance of this conjuncture of the subconscious and the “life of the human spirit” for it is here that “organic nature” (Stanislavsky) is sparked off and charged, as are, concurrently, emotions and feelings while the whole, together, generates creativity. Creativity was the main goal, embodied in Stanislavsky’s development of actors by whatever means were suitable or seemed fit at a particular point in time of his research.

Movement, of the greatest importance to the Studio (Stanislavsky complained there were not enough teachers), comprised plasticity, acrobatics, gymnastics, fencing, eurhythmic, and dance. At Stanislavsky’s behest, exercises were done to music not solely to relax the muscles but so as to develop the “musical-rhythmic imagination” essential for meaningful, but also graceful, supple, lithe, and thus overall beautiful action on the stage (without saccharine effects).¹¹ A metronome was used for training the ear to exact beat as well as to a movement’s phrasing and duration. Appropriate tempo and rhythm of action were integral to the musical unity of performance, which was integral to the ensemble coordination and harmony of a given performance. Yet the principles of ensemble playing were sorely lacking in the multidisciplinary field that was opera, whose very diverse inputs, starting with singing, orchestra, libretto and ballet (when traditional balletic interludes were observed) demanded utmost collaboration.

The very fact of the Opera-Dramatic Studio’s existence was of no consequence without the reason why it existed – its *sverkh-sverkhzadacha* (super-supertask), as Stanislavsky would say, that is, its motivating idea or guiding worldview, or – that redoubtable term – “mission.” The Studio was a teaching academy, certainly, but one serving its distinctly laboratory drive, expressed, first and foremost, by its consistent employment of *études*. *Études* were the lynchpin of Stanislavsky’s quest to modify opera, a supremely ostentatious theatre of presentation-representation (*teatr predstavleniya*), by the theatre of emotional experiencing (*teatr perezhivaniya*) so as to produce actor-singers comparable to honed theatre actors shorn of “operatic,” stock-in-trade (*remeslo*).¹² The distinction Stanislavsky makes between these categories is fundamental to his thought, regardless of his observation that most actors generally combine all three to varying degrees of assimilation in their playing.

Made-over, actor-singers would be capable of taking in hand the unexplored riches of the operatic form. They, Stanislavsky observed, had not understood and therefore had not made comprehensive use of its inbuilt advantages over the theatre, the main one being the composer’s score, which measured and shaped pace, time, timing, flow, direction, intonation, sentiment, and the quality of action very precisely. “Quality” here is in the sense in which dancers refer to the quality of movement. It is the quality of a movement that communicates the feel of the movement for the dancer, which elicits feelings particular to the viewer, not necessarily correspondent.

The theatre actor, by great contrast with his singing colleague, was disadvantaged by having to invent a score in order to achieve as much emotional clarity,

emotional conviction and captivating flair with far more effort. Learning how to invent a score was, then, an absolute necessity, and that score for the theatre, as I see it, was the “line of physical action,” which belongs to the “method of physical action.” The “line of physical action” was indispensable to the actor when working on a role; and this imperative suggests that Stanislavsky had devised it expressly (but not exclusively) for roles. I have come to believe that he turned his focus on the “line of physical action” to a large extent through his contemplation of opera music. After all, a musical score is composed of many lines identified by key signatures, time signatures, instruments, motifs and melodies. Or, for atonal or non-melodic constructions, the lines could be echoing cords or electronic sounds and sequences like the arpeggios in Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach*. Furthermore, they all come together in an orchestral or otherwise sonic whole. Stanislavsky’s perception of integrated musical composition, while each line held its own, sheds light on his encouragement to dramatic-theatre actors to see how the line of their individual role in a play integrated into that play’s entirety of lines of physical action.

Naming the procedure was all very well, but the principal issue, whether for opera or spoken theatre, was *how* the actor was to compose the “line of physical action” of a role. Stanislavsky: “Action is the essence of theatre art, of all scenic creativity.”¹³ Such a simple proposition, when it comes to practice, is highly complex, but here I have to put it simply. Consider that the actor embarking on a role is no longer a beginner. This actor is used to doing études, and knows to come back to them for help. Pause and note that études are a method for doing actions and, as such, although invented a few decades earlier for the First Studio and evolved in it, should be seen as integral to the “method of physical action.”

If action is where you started from – Stanislavsky is now addressing the directors in the Studio – my question might well be: Where do you find that start?¹⁴ In dramatic theatre, a role comes together with a text. In opera, the role is truer in the music than the libretto, as transpired from Stanislavsky’s work with singers: Stanislavsky started from the music, together with the sounds and sounding of the voice, prompting actor-singers always to crosscheck with the music what they were doing dramatically with voice and body, including gestures, of course. Dramatism, as far as Stanislavsky was concerned, was not in the arms in motion (or the legs) but most of all in the voice.

Here is where Stanislavsky’s textual breakdown steps into the picture, apparently for the most part newly fashioned for use at the Studio. My temptation is to call it the “method of textual breakdown” (or of “textual analysis,” if you like) not from a literary point of view, but strictly for the purposes of theatre performance. A text for performance, besides being a play, could be derived from stories, novels, other prose, epic poetry, and merged single poems – projects already accomplished by the MAT and its affiliated studios, notably the Second Studio (1916) and the Fourth (1921).¹⁵

The injunction of textual breakdown (“deconstruction” might do as well) was that, whatever the text, this text was to be broken down into episodes, which are the larger components of a text, and then into its constituents, which are events and facts. All three elements were found and justified in relation to precisely identified “proposed circumstances” and to precisely identified tasks set off – mobilized – by the proposed circumstances for the actors in this or that moment of their roles. The case is compelling enough

for me to state that, since textual breakdown is a means of indicating to actors what they can physically realize as *scenic* action, this textual breakdown necessarily belongs to “the method of physical action.”

“Proposed circumstances” and “tasks,” we know, were efficaciously hewn with the System. Nevertheless, they were already active before Stanislavsky, on paper in 1909, named his markedly changing ways of working “the ‘System.’” Something rather like this appears to have happened with the idea of “the line of physical action.” Stanislavsky used this very phrase when working with Leonid Leonidov on the actor’s role of Othello (1926–1930), first in person and then by letter and annotated wads of text, sent by mail when Stanislavsky was in convalescence abroad. Perhaps his most revealing account of his then definition – “the line of physical action – this is the line of physical tasks and pieces” – concerns the role of Othello.¹⁶ At issue is what Shakespeare marks as Act III, scene iii, when, Stanislavsky contends, Othello’s role and Leonidov’s playing really begin.¹⁷

It is not difficult to understand Stanislavsky’s claim, given that everything in the play starts to unravel at speed right here. Desdemona asks Othello to help Cassio, which Othello lovingly promises to do. He questions her request only when Iago implies that Desdemona was unfaithful, soon to assert that his insinuation was fact. The main consequence of Iago’s accusation was, for Stanislavsky, Othello’s crushingly destroyed faith in Desdemona’s human goodness, an image so mightily different from the savagery that Othello, an army general, had known on the battlefields. Much in Stanislavsky’s commentary revolves around the horrors of war and their brutalization of warriors; Othello, so conscious of dehumanization and so disillusioned in Desdemona, can do nothing other than react violently to that disillusionment. Framing the situation in these terms, Stanislavsky categorically rejects the standardized view that Othello is motivated by jealousy, assigning to Iago the dubious honour of that emotion: it is Iago who is jealous of Othello, glorified by war, political leaders, and love.

Stanislavsky then runs a parallel piece featuring Desdemona’s ensuing bewilderment, at first over her lost handkerchief (two scenes in Act III, scenes iii and iv) and then over Othello’s state of being, which spills into Act V, scene ii. Stanislavsky’s thought skips over Shakespeare’s intervening events and dialogue of Act IV to go straight to the ghastly endpoint. In other words, he heeds his own advice to Leonidov to break the play up into reasonably sized pieces or chunks (*kuski*) according to *main events* and to carry them through. Stanislavsky’s vision of the intolerable grief and dismay that Desdemona and Othello endure respectively, and of their swift psychological and spiritual collapse is, indeed, powerful and its force underlies his outline of Leonidov’s line of physical action from its very start in Act III. Stanislavsky keeps in mind how Desdemona’s line intercepts Othello’s, but it is not sketched out. In any case, his manuscript is incomplete.

Stanislavsky had, in fact, worked closely only with Leonidov, which explains why Leonidov became his focal point and why even tacit plotting of lines of physical action for other roles do not exist. The barest hint of a line appears for the role of Desdemona in a concise summing up but seen from within Othello’s line of physical action and so from his perspective. It is titled “An Outline of Physical Action: Desdemona’s Scene in the ‘Bedroom.’” I have taken its skeleton, dropping Stanislavsky’s briefest of commentaries, except for the third action:

- (1) *Physical action: searching for the handkerchief.*
- (2) *Elementary-psychological action: ascertaining sincerity*
[This involves Othello's interrogation of Desdemona and so his extreme pressure on her to prove her sincerity and, hence, her innocence. M.S. commentary.]
- (3) *Elementary-psychological action.*¹⁸ [Blank.]

The third, “elementary psychological” action, is unnamed but, beneath it, Stanislavsky writes: “I would call it: *What is this?* [What is this all about?] Translate this name into a verb.” Patently, Stanislavsky is asking Leonidov to perceive this third action through a verb because it is a *doing* word, which testifies to his emphasis not solely here, but in varying formulations throughout his work, on psychological factors as *activators* of a role rather than merely descriptors for it or of it.

Stanislavsky's reminders to Leonidov to refer back to “proposed circumstances” so as to understand which actions were suitable were rule of thumb, as were occasional nudges to remember the “magic if.” He knew that Leonidov, steeped in the System, could check any doubts by doing an *étude* or two (as you do!); and he was confident in Leonidov's ability to have one task connect up with another as one action anticipates the next. In other words, Stanislavsky and Leonidov's work on Othello had established a substantial forerunner of the “method of physical action” on which Stanislavsky was, opportunely, able to *concentrate* in the Opera-Dramatic Studio.

Etudes, Stanislavsky reiterated at the Opera-Dramatic Studio, echoed by the Studio pedagogues, were small actions, and actions were linked to other actions – “threaded,” Stanislavsky explained, “like a string of beads.”¹⁹ As the role took shape, smaller actions cumulatively generated bigger actions that, linking in to each other, formed a large, clearly perceptible “uninterrupted line of physical action:” by now Stanislavsky was stressing the uninterrupted character of the line. Large lines of physical actions were necessary, as well, because, with their guidance, actors could eventually see the through action (*skvozhnoye deystviye*) of their role and, concomitantly, their role's overarching idea (*sverkhzadacha*). If they had played their hand well, they would also have grasped the play's overarching idea and, perhaps, the incipient production's emerging overarching idea.

Crucially, actions, when let free, engendered a momentum in which actions led one to the other organically, effortlessly, also intuitively, “of their own accord” (Stanislavsky's phrase). In this “of their own accord” or – another translation – “all by themselves,” the subconscious plays a major liberating part. Following Stanislavsky's thought, it is possible to say that, here, in the rush of “all by themselves,” the subconscious *and* organicity (Stanislavsky's “organic nature”) converge, and the actor's very own, individual organic nature infuses the actor's role. Stanislavsky reassured studists and pedagogues that emotions and feelings by no means needed to be forced, since they came all by themselves as physical actions followed their course. He had said as much to Leonidov.

The archives of the Moscow Art Theatre Museum hold thirty-eight unpublished transcripts of lessons on the Studio's dramatic side.²⁰ Among them are short outlines of its curriculum – structure, contents and emphases – and extracts from straightforward dialogue between teachers, studists, and Stanislavsky, generally using his terminology but

without theoretical embellishment. Manifestly, sedentary, overly intellectualized detailed analyses of plays were discouraged, particularly at the early stages of learning, Stanislavsky having witnessed over the years how analytical marvels of table talk were all forgotten the minute actors were up on their feet.

Beginner actors had first to do études in their own words to *own* them and be the authors of *their* texts before they learned the words of “others” in order to make others’ words their very own for a role.²¹ Ownership of this kind facilitated sincere, natural rather than faked, playing. More still, the practice of ownership and of études altogether promoted and sustained *independent* creativity, not creativity spoon-fed by, or on command from, teachers and directors. This was hardly a banal thing to do in the mid-1930s during show-trials, sudden night arrests, disappearances, the gulag and widespread fear. But scholars/practitioners the world over have not appreciated enough, if they have ever noticed it at all, the sociopolitical pulsation behind Stanislavsky’s faith in independence, together with the moral percept of taking personal responsibility, *owning* one’s *actions* and being *answerable* and *accountable* for them beyond one’s own ego, that operated by its side.

Points like these appear in the unpublished transcripts, parts of which Lidiya Novitskaya, a key teacher of the Dramatic students, reproduces in her *Uroki Vdokhnoveniya (Lessons of Inspiration)*. She additionally paraphrases lessons and adds verbatim material not in the transcripts – or, it seems, anywhere else, except for occasional passages in Knebel’s writings. An aspirant director, Novitskaya shows Stanislavsky in the role of director-pedagogue in the Studio – a role that he had invented and with which his name is now indelibly associated in the Russian-speaking and/or Russian culturally oriented theatre field.

Here, for instance, is Stanislavsky discussing the first act of *The Three Sisters* (1937–1938) whose assistant director was Mikhail Kedrov, the future editor-in-chief of the 1950s Soviet edition of Stanislavsky’s *Collected Works*.²² Stanislavsky had just identified the “kernel” of the play as “everybody wants to live” pointing to evidence of this impulse already in Act I.²³ Then he suggests how it could be tracked in the remaining three acts. And then comes a section, which, straight from Stanislavsky rather than mediated by others (myself included), is worth translating in full. Stanislavsky:

“What do you do next”? You have found the line of action and turned it into [*razdrobili*] many small task and actions. This is only a temporary measure. You need to combine these small actions into large, foundational actions. There will be several of these large actions in each act, depending on the number of episodes and players in each. In this way, you outline your act, made up of episodes. Here is a sample outline of the first act:

First episode. Waiting for the birthday breakfast.

Second episode. The sisters meet Vershinin, an attractive man, close to their hearts.

Third episode. The prose of life bursts out of Kuligin’s face, disturbing the light atmosphere of dreams.

Fourth episode. The birthday breakfast.

Fifth episode. Andrey and Natasha’s declaration of love.²⁴

Can one possibly not smile with recognition at “the prose of life,” since we all live it, but that it should burst out of a face is poetry! Yet Stanislavsky’s poetic sensibility in this context unexpectedly highlights a possible problem lodged in his succinct treatment – here, of the first act of *The Three Sisters*. The issue is one of how in-the-head skilful analysis might go with actions bound to generate feelings. Words are necessary, as Stanislavsky’s emphasis on active words right through his teachings demonstrate. But the question is: How does analysis-put-into words cohere with feelings that emerge of their own accord and with the *videniye* of a line of physical action in and through the actor’s *body* (which contains the brain)? And does a schema of this kind run the risk of prompting tasks and actions that are arid, rationalized and so perhaps even misconceived? “Only practice,” I hear Stanislavsky saying, “will tell, so do it, and see.”

There can be no doubt that Stanislavsky was aware of the risks of rationalization. Take him speaking on another day about *The Three Sisters* (15 May 1938):

Before we used to do a role on pieces (*kuski*) . . . This is analysis coming from the head [and] here there is little heart. But, when I say to you: “What would you start doing in such and such circumstances”? You immediately begin to analyze your role from your inner impulses. Breaking up into pieces – this is big work of the brain. We have crossed over to action so as to call to action the actor’s most organic creative nature as quickly as possible.²⁵

Note the “call to action . . . as quickly as possible,” and this is the imperative crossover when it comes to developing roles that have words. All the more reason, then, to have the actor in études speak the author’s thoughts in the actor’s own words *while* doing actions. The momentum of actions creates what Stanislavsky calls the “logic of action,” that is, “right” actions in the circumstances; and these actions are done afresh, differently, continually different afterwards in changing approaches (Stanislavsky says “adaptations”) to the line of physical action. The line of physical action *itself* is, however, stable. Such adaptations are meant to develop the actor’s “second nature” so that actions can come spontaneously and *become* second nature. They also have the bonus of guiding actors away from clichés.

I have chosen two fragments from Novitskaya’s larger extracts from *Romeo and Juliet* (1937–1938), which she directed, to give you some concrete sense of my “the actor’s own words *while* doing actions” – otherwise it is all just words. The situation is a Studio demonstration and, Novitskaya explains, the actors speak “in their own words, leaning on the author’s thoughts.”²⁶ The first fragment is from the beginning of the first act of the play. The episode is named “Benvolio” and the actor in the role “tries to find out Romeo’s secret.” The secret is Romeo’s alleged love for Rosaline:

Benvolio. I get my bearings, notice Romeo coming towards me, I suss him out – “He’s not happy, he’s thinking about something again.” I make a decision about which side I am to approach him from. I take on a casual [independent] kind of look.

Romeo. I’m walking along and thinking about Rosaline: “Why, why is she so inaccessible? For sure, she doesn’t love me. How horrible this is.”

Benvolio. I attract Romeo’s attention; I block his path and say: “Good morning.” I watch to see what kind of impression this has made on him.

Romeo. Is somebody calling? I stop. “Benvolio.” I size him up: What does he want from me? I realize that he said ‘morning’ [Shakespeare’s Benvolio says “Good morrow, cousin.”] I check, take my bearings in the situation, say: “Is it really still morning?”²⁷

This example shows perfectly clearly that breakdown into episodes directly identifies the What? (“What am I doing?”), which, Stanislavsky asserted repeatedly in the Studio, must take precedence over the How? (“How am I doing it?”).

The second fragment is the episode called “Romeo and Juliet’s Meeting in the Garden – We Love each Other! Away with Impediments!”²⁸ It is from Juliet’s monologue of Shakespeare’s Act II, scene i, reduced here, in the interests of time, to about half of the actor’s lines. The monologue in Shakespeare starts from “Thou knowest the mask of night is on my face/Else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek.” Here is the actor:

Juliet says her monologue timidly, bashfully (I was the first one to declare my love – this is dreadful, embarrassing), but “I am too much in love, dear Montague” – there is a struggle of feelings: bashfulness and love. Romeo, in response to her confession, swears that his love is as deep and strong as hers. He is now very close to the balcony. Juliet stops him out of fright: “Oh, do not swear on the fickle moon.” She trembles for her unimaginable happiness.²⁹

Novitskaya had confirmed that the words on her page are the words of the actor, but it is not at all clear why this actor shifts from the first person to the third. Compare the consistent “I” in the “Benvolio” fragment. The great difficulty, of course, in both instances, is that we can follow the words but not the actions because they are not being done physically before our eyes. Consequently, we cannot sense the emotional innuendoes of actions performed.³⁰

Lessons at the Studio in both wings were not conventional talking sessions, but exercises for stretching technical skills and the imagination. They were, in essence, shows of études, immediately accompanied by observations regarding the in-the-moment practice. Showing was effectively a workshop showing, a try-out, a test, of something done in front of intimates for correction and improvement. But études were the lynch-pin of the entire process, indicating by this that they were the driving principle and formative power of the actors’ lines of physical action.

On the opera side, initial études sought how best to work with words analogous to the libretto and in analogous circumstances, but, again, in the singer-actors’ own words. At a second, more advanced level, études could be directly derived from the libretto, but had to combine with the musical score. Stanislavsky was adamant, however, that the studists were to seek the line of physical action in the music itself, every time.³¹ Etudes had to be tested at all steps of the process against the music, which involved piano accompaniment (as is usual also for opera rehearsals the whole world over), so that actor-singers could make musical adjustments, say, of intonation, while, simultaneously, adjustments could be made to how the music was performed, say, at a faster pace.

The passage from piano to full-scale orchestral playing was problematic, as Grigory Kristi, Stanislavsky’s student and opera pedagogue accurately pointed out: “Loud sounds become drawn out, varied timbres appear, and the actor is obliged to add much that the piano had not shown.”³² Additional difficulties were the different tonalities and registers of orchestral instruments, which could precipitate changes on a *dramatic* level to what had seemed right when there was no orchestra.

Showings were not yet performances. Nor were they leads to a big-bang production destined for the stage. Small productions or part-productions in a laboratory attitude came into the curriculum, in principle, only towards the end of the course. Showings, apart from being overviews of what the studists had absorbed, were, as well, actual examples of how productions could be made. Knebel refers to the Studio as her school for directing, drawing attention, to her great credit, to one of the Studio's less recognized but, most certainly, defining features.³³

Stanislavsky's desire to keep the Studio a *studio* suggests that he had not forgotten the acrimonious debates among studists, within two years of the First Studio's programme, on the limited number of roles and "proper" productions deemed manageable for them. Here they were, rolling out brilliant études and relishing their prowess when what they really, really wanted was to be a *theatre* and shine as creators in the limelight. Laboratories, they might as well have said, were for mice.

More prepared, more experienced productions growing out of the Studio were chosen for envisaged later productions for a larger public – the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, and, in the opera wing, of Otto Nicolai's *Singspiel* comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The latter was prepared at the same time as *Cio-Cio-san*, Puccini's renamed *Madama Butterfly* (1937–1938), which, nevertheless, saw a complete and appreciated *Cio-Cio-san* on 16 June 1938 in the Studio hall, by then called "Onegin's hall." Kristi refers to a favourable (but, it seems, anonymous) article in the Bolshoy Theatre's in-house publication, which had said that here was an example of opera to which the Bolshoy really did need to pay attention.³⁴

Could this have been a subterfuge, and the author – Kristi? No matter, for, in the absence of critics and other information (archival included), this account faithfully conveys the production's principles. It speaks of the production's artistic unity, made possible by the actors' attentiveness (*vnimaniye*) to each other instead of singing arias facing spectators; communion (*obshcheniye*) between partners (I have glossed these terms in my book, pointing out the serious inadequacies of their translation into English)³⁵; ensemble work instead of separate singers; the feeling that everything was in the hands of the singers; the production's subtle attention to *Cio-Cio-san*'s inner life – in other words, her humanity.³⁶ Kristi, when writing in his own person rather than reporting, compares the production's freshness and discretion (both, he notes, prevent the work from becoming exotic) with the Bolshoy's "eyesore garishness" and "tasteless stylization" in its overabundant "Japanese" fans, tables, and such.³⁷

A few extant photographs of *Cio-Cio-san* show great simplicity of performance and design. You might say that streamlined theatre was the necessity of scant cash. Yes, but you could consider, as well, that Stanislavsky's "poor" theatre, like Jerzy Grotowski's after him, was a necessity of their goals for aesthetic, ideational, and perceptual transformation – a tall order at any time, let alone during a reign of Terror! You might, then, turn to Peter Brook whose principal aesthetic tenet was simplicity – not only of uncluttered space, but also, and primarily, of the organic actor. There is no doubt that Brook owed Stanislavsky more than he ever publicly acknowledged, and that this debt is palpable, above all, in his chamber operas. Brook meets the pared-back simplicity, musically and dramatically speaking, of *Evegeny Onegin* and *Cio-Cio-san* some fifty years after Stanislavsky had shown that such simplicity embodied the "life of the human spirit,"

with the accent now on “*spirit*,” as it was also for Brook in his spiritual dimension. *Cio-Cio-san* was Stanislavsky’s last appearance in his Studio, and it was his last work.

There is no need to fetishize “the method of physical action,” or its touchstone the “unbroken line of physical action.” Boris Zon, Lev Dodin’s teacher, reports Stanislavsky as saying in 1933 that he had found a “new method” of action.³⁸ 1933 is not 1935, and I have already indicated that the “method of physical action” was not discovered in the Studio but was focused upon, readjusted, developed, and strengthened in it – put into order, even, to some extent in it – anticipating further readjustment from its practitioners, then and in the future.

But the “new” does not have to be only of today. You can have been working on something for years before you announce it as “new,” which was precisely how Stanislavsky was in the ebb and flow of his work (my earlier “waxing and waning”). The “new” of the Studio was his intensely focused work on opera with this method, which he hesitated to name a “method.” The *uniquely* new was a *studio* teaching directing in a concentrated way – to which I have referred in passing but, regrettably, have had to leave for another time. We know that Stanislavsky hoped to write a volume on directing, the contemplated fourth, for his desired, but ultimately phantom, unwritten, series of books.

Stanislavsky’s “last words?” – to pick up the title of this Prague Symposium. It seems clear that he never had last words, nor could the continuum of his practical work or its continual renewal even entertain such an idea. Many have continued his words beyond his time on this earth, but nor will their words be Stanislavsky’s last, for his magnificent legacy of freedom, of the free, creative human being-actor on the stage *and* in the streets – not just a subject but a generator and *agent* of action – will continue to give hope and will not expire, providing the globe survives.

Notes

1. This was my keynote address at the international symposium The S Word: Stanislavsky’s Last Words, held at The Theatre Faculty (DAMU) in Prague 11–13 November 2022. All translations are mine M.S.
2. Stanislavsky was persistently unhappy with the term “system,” which he frequently wrote in citation marks to indicate that he was quoting his colleagues. The latter had started to use the word ironically and largely critically in the mid-1900s, when Stanislavsky began his experimental explorations in acting with the Moscow Art Theatre. My *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* explains the fraught situation confronting Stanislavsky as well as my use of the term with a capital “S” for the sake of convenience. I fully acknowledge Stanislavsky’s dissatisfaction with “system” and his qualms over using it, given that he saw acting and theatre making as a perpetual process of change. See especially Chapter Three “Actor” in *Rediscovering Stanislavsky*, 99–104, 109–20, and 123 for his statement that “the ‘system’ did not exist,” since “there was only nature,” to which I have added my explanatory “from which the creativity in all human beings springs.” The words “Stanislavsky’s thought” in this address and in the above book are a way of “correcting” the mechanistic overtones of “system” and mechanistic approaches to Stanislavsky’s practice.
3. The quotation in the title of this essay comes from “The Bolshoy Theatre Opera Studio” in Stanislavsky, *Moya zhizn v iskusstve*, 387, and appears here intentionally to accentuate the continuity but difference and developmental shifts between the Bolshoy Studio and the Opera-Dramatic Studio.
4. Kristi, *Rabota Syanislavskogo v Opernom Teatre*, 220.

5. Novitskaya, *Uroki vdokhnoveniya*, 54.
6. *Ibid.*, 54–61.
7. See note 4 above.
8. Novitskaya, *Uroki vdokhnoveniya*, 123.
9. *Ibid.*, 133.
10. *Ibid.*, 65. See re kneading dough and other actions with imaginary objects, 66–74; also the document K.S. 21147 in the archives the Moscow Art Theatre Museum.
11. Novitskaya, *Uroki vdokhnoveniya*, 102–3.
12. Shevtsova, *Rediscovering Stanislavsky*, 121–4.
13. Novitskaya, *Uroki vdokhnoveniya*, 75.
14. *Ibid.*, 35.
15. For a comprehensive map of the Studios and their respective activities, see Shevtsova, *Rediscovering Stanislavsky*, 129–79.
16. Stanislavsky, *Rezhissersky Plan Otello*, 231.
17. *Ibid.*, 226.
18. *Ibid.*, 321.
19. Novitskaya, *Uroki vdokhnoveniya*, 150.
20. I.N. Vinogradskaya asserts that there are forty-eight transcripts whereas my count is thirty-eight. See her *Stanislavsky repetiruyet*, 441. The COVID-19 pandemic and now the Russian-Ukrainian war have made it impossible for me to pursue my research any further in the Moscow Art Theatre Museum archives to clear up this discrepancy.
21. Novitskaya, *Uroki vdokhnoveniya*, 55.
22. Kedrov continued to run the Opera-Dramatic Studio from 1938 to 1948 but more like a repertory theatre than a laboratory, thus counter to Stanislavsky's intentions and wishes for the Studio. He was artistic director of the Moscow Academic Art Theatre (MXAT) from 1946 to 1955.
23. Novitskaya, *Uroki vdokhnoveniya*, 142.
24. *Ibid.*, 143.
25. Vinogradskaya, *Stanislavsky repetiruyet*, 500.
26. Novitskaya, *Uroki vdokhnoveniya*, 179.
27. *Ibid.*, 172.
28. *Ibid.*, 177.
29. *Ibid.*, 179.
30. K.S. 21162 (Moscow Art Theatre Museum archives as above) documents how on 27 April 1937, in the earlier stages of work on *Romeo and Juliet*, Stanislavsky has Novitskaya orally run through the principles of actions and their connective links with feelings, after which he refers to the part that “emotional memory” plays in this process. He interlaces this binding process with wanting (desire) as well as the “inner elements” which Stanislavsky otherwise calls “the living inner material,” that pertain to the human-being actor playing a given role.
31. Kristi, *Rabota Syanislavskogo v Opernom Teatre*, 245.
32. *Ibid.*, 225–6.
33. Knebel, *Vsya zhizn*, 279. For what is tantamount to an homage to Stanislavsky, see Knebel's preface and opening chapter on directing in Knebel, *O Deystvennom analize pyesi i roli*, 19–39. Note that Knebel refers to Stanislavsky's “method of physical action” as his “new working device – the method of active analysis of the play and the role” (19) and uses this adjusted formulation for the title of her book. She thereby indicates the source of her inspiration in Stanislavsky's work at the Opera-Dramatic Studio, without here naming the Studio as such.
34. Kristi, *Rabota Syanislavskogo v Opernom Teatre*, 236.
35. Shevtsova, *Rediscovering Stanislavsky*, 104–9. The book shows as well that the persistently mistranslated “*zadacha*” as “problem” or “objective” needs to be eradicated. “*Zadacha*” simply means “task.”

36. Kristi, *Rabota Syanislavskogo v Opernom Teatre*, 236.
37. Ibid., 236–7.
38. “Vstrechy c K.S. Stanislavskim,” 444–91.

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Notes on contributor

Maria Shevtsova (Goldsmiths University of London) is renowned internationally for her teaching, research and scholarship on Russian theatre, past and present, contemporary European theatre directors and companies, and the interdisciplinary theories and methodologies of the sociology of the theatre, which she has founded and which underpins her entire work. Her more recent books notably include *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (2020), *Robert Wilson* (second, updated edition 2019), *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing* (2013, co-authored), *Directors/Directing: Conversations on Theatre* (2009), *Sociology of Theatre and Performance* (2009), *Fifty Key Theatre Directors* (2005, co-ed), and *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre: Process to Performance* (2004). She is the author of over 150 chapters in collected volumes and articles in refereed journals. Her books and prominent book chapters and journal articles have been translated into fifteen languages. Apart from keynote and other contributions to university conferences, Research Centres and Cultural Institutes in Europe, and acting schools and conservatoires (in English, Russian, French and Italian), Shevtsova gives public lectures at major international theatre festivals across the world, leads post-performance public discussions as well as conversations with theatre actors and directors, serves on the juries of festivals (also as president of the jury of the Belgrade International Festival of Theatre, BITEF) and undertakes other outreach and multimedia activities that include online talks and radio and television broadcasts in the UK and abroad. She is the editor of *New Theatre Quarterly* and on the editorial teams of *Stanislavsky Studies* and *Critical Stages*, the online journal of the International Association of Theatre Critics. She is a member of the Board of the Stanislavsky Research Centre.

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