**Stanislavsky’s Quest for the Ideal Actor: the System as Socratic Encounter**

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This paper proposes that Stanislavsky’s creation of a fictional training journal addressed – and to some extent transcended - the problem of writing about practice, by presenting to the reader an accomplished dramatic narrative out of the Socratic tradition. Research comprising detailed analysis of the action outlined in the text has uncovered complex formal patterning of events evidencing underlying conceptual constructs. These are combined to say the unsayable. The paper outlines these concepts and strategies, exploring the patterns, sequences, and narrative devices embedded in the text to reveal a complex but integrated and coherent structure underlying the System and Stanislavsky’s articulation of it.

The analysis raises questions about the implicit in training, whether in writing or in person. The text is neither record nor template, but evokes the implicit, communicating experience and embodied practice on the page through structural and narrative devices. In this reading, it is not the verbal exchanges but the dramatic action – including the mistakes - that actually comprises the essence of the Socratic dialogue: a quest to reveal the Truth in the form of the Ideal Actor through a gradual process of elimination, rooted in a Socratic philosophy of mutual exploration and discovery of essential truths.

**Keywords:** Stanislavsky, system, actor training, truth, Socratic dialogue.

This article is based on a detailed analysis of *An Actor Prepares* (Stanislavski 2008a), translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, and Jean Benedetti’s more recent version *An Actor’s Work Part I* (Stanislavski 2008c).

Why would an article in a special issue addressing the question of writing about performance and performance training take as its subject a text that was first published in 1936, contains exercises that are frequently archaic in content as well as inconsistent, unscientific and unverifiable explanations about acting, and is widely regarded by academics from Carnicke (1998) onwards as essentially problematic? What could such a text possibly have to say about writing about training today?

This article argues that certain aspects of the form of this particular text are significant to its meaning and that they are more important than the superficial flaws and survive the problems with language. These characteristics are present almost identically in both translations. It is suggested that the structure of the work allows the writer, Russian actor, director and teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) to communicate implicit content via indirect means, privileging the reader as vicariously participating in the practice on the page. Furthermore, once these properties of the text are recognised, it is possible to draw parallels between Stanislavsky’s work and the Ancient Greek form of the Socratic dialogue, a comparison that reframes the entire premise of the work, providing a clear rationale for some of the peculiarities of the text and resituating its purpose. These observations and insights may have relevance for writing about performance training today, because as well as providing an example of how to structure work on the page, they suggest that the inclusion of problems in written accounts of training can make a major contribution to the reader’s understanding of implicit content, showing how content can be addressed through form.

**Given circumstances I: background**

Stanislavsky spent his entire professional life investigating and reflecting upon the process of acting, and was the first practitioner whose all encompassing and systematic approach to acting and actor training was widely disseminated. His work remains highly influential, as Carnicke (1998, p.3) points out: ‘To this day, theatre professionals tend to position themselves in relationship to him.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Originally published in 1936 in America, and retranslated by Jean Benedetti in 2008 as *An Actor’s Work* (of which it comprises *Part I)*, *An Actor Prepares* was Stanislavsky’s most famous and successful book. The text is a fictionalised account of an actor-training course teaching Stanislavsky’s seminal System of acting.[[2]](#footnote-2) Sharon Marie Carnicke gives a clear and authoritative account of the complicated publication history in her book *Stanislavsky in Focus* (1998, 2009).

Given that we now know, thanks to Carnicke, that the original was some extent mistranslated, and despite idiosyncrasies of language and style,[[3]](#footnote-3) it is interesting that this text has remained popular. In fact, a book such as this – successful, enduring, influential – might be expected to have addressed and even transcended at least some of the inherent problems of writing about practice. The way it does so, using form and structure, is therefore of some interest.

The book takes the form of a fictional account, written by a student (Kostya), of the first year of an actor-training course. He and his fellow students are taught mostly by the director (Tortsov).[[4]](#footnote-4) The narrative is divided into 16 chapters that typically contain a series of lessons on a particular subject.

I must confess a personal bias. This book was chosen for my research not just because of its importance but because it had a profound effect on me personally. The effect was specific. When I read the book for the first time, over 25 tears ago, Stanislavsky seemed to be speaking directly to me, at an experiential level, drawing my attention to aspects of myself of which I had been previously unaware. It was as though he introduced me to my unconscious. In terms of my acting, he showed me how I did the things that I did well and therefore enabled me to do them deliberately and more consistently.

There were certainly passages in the book that were difficult, but as a young actor I was not interested in these at times opaque explanations or justifications. The part of the book that engaged me was the story; I was interested in what happened. By the end, I almost felt I had gone through the course alongside the other students. It occurred to me that the text might be more than it appeared; that there might be hidden content that had affected me as a reader. I also knew that I could not assume that my response was typical.

When I eventually came to examine the text in an academic capacity, therefore, I had to find a way to put my reaction and subsequent assumptions to one side. I could certainly explore the aspects of the text that most interested me and had originally affected me: the exercises in the text and what the students actually did, but the methodology had to provide empirical evidence and a critical distance from the text. The present article is based on the resulting research project, in which a close analysis of Stanislavsky’s book in the English translations was carried out.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The investigation was based on the premise that there might be a hidden aspect of the work that comprises part of the meaning of the text. It was supposed that this would be something that was not subject to linguistic misinterpretation or mistranslation, and theorised that it would be found in the content of the exercises: in what the students were required to do.

The findings turned out to be much more complex, for the hidden content was unexpectedly found not in the content per se, but in the organisation of that content, in the form of structural consistencies and underlying patterns that ordered the work and, significantly, in the fictional students’ response to it. These patterns appear to distribute complex information about process to the reader in an orderly fashion. Thus, content was found concealed in the form. Furthermore, once this was explored in depth, it was recognised as having similarities with another form that explores abstract concepts within a dramatised framework: Plato’s Socratic dialogues.

This article outlines what has been discovered about the sequencing and organisation of Stanislavsky’s work, and suggests what might be derived from it. It shows how the text evidences his approach to some of the difficulties of writing about training, discusses how his strategies might be construed as Socratic and considers what implications that might have for writing about practice today.

**Objective: experiencing**

In the first two chapters of *An Actor’s Work* Stanislavsky identifies the goal of the System: truthful acting, achieved by ‘living a part’ (2008a, p.31) or ‘…the art of experiencing… creation of the life of the human spirit of a role in a play’ (2008c, pp.35-36). Everything Kostya learns in the rest of the book relates to this goal.

Experiencing, or living a part, comes from the Russian *Perezhivanie.* Senelik (2014, Preface) explains: ‘This is straightforward Russian for ‘experience’ although the word breaks down etymologically to suggest ‘reliving’ or ‘living through’ an experience.’ Carnicke (2009, p.129) devotes a whole chapter of her book *Stanislavsky in Focus* to the investigation of *Perezhivanie,* calling it ‘…crucial to Stanislavsky… the *sine qua non* of the System.’ *Perezhivanie*, she points out, is what the System is *for*. Arguably, Stanislavsky needed the whole of the System – and the whole of his actor training - to communicate *Perezhivanie*.

**Obstacle: experiencing**

The main obstacle to writing about experiencing is the nature of embodied experience. Complex, multi-valent, inexplicable, inherently subjective in that it can only be experienced by the experiencing subject, arguably human experience is the subject of the expressive arts *because* we cannot speak it.[[6]](#footnote-6) In writing, when the communicating body of the human being is removed, this becomes even harder. Since this inherently subjective experience is Stanislavsky’s very subject, the obstacle is immense.

Nonetheless, the success of the book implies that Stanislavsky has written about experiencing in a way that actually affects and influences the reader. Aspects of meaning must somehow persist despite the limitations of language. Benedetti (1998, p.ix) points the way as he cites Tortsov’s riposte to a student: ‘…provided he understands the *nature of the activity* [my italics] he is engaged in, it doesn’t matter what name he gives it.’ It seems self-evident that where practice is the subject, meaning inheres in the practice itself: in the ‘*nature of the activity’*. The examples of experience that Stanislavsky writes into the story are, therefore, the first place to look for an understanding of the forms and functions of *An Actor Prepares.*

**Action: methodology**

The investigation therefore focused exclusively on the exercises that comprised the ‘acting course’ in which the students in the text took part. Hapgood (2008a: translator's note) states unequivocally that although Stanislavsky makes ‘…statements of general principles of art… [the] great task…’ was really in the ‘…embodiment of those principles in the simplest working examples’. My intention was to reverse engineer those working examples and discover what lay beneath.

In order not to impose assumptions on the text, the methodology began with a detailed analysis of the structure and content of the book. Further modes of analysis and approach were then developed in response to discoveries. In this way, the form of the methodology evolved from the content of Stanislavsky’s text, as well as its own evolving body of knowledge. Research consisted of repeated sweeps of the text at increasing levels of detail. These resulted in a series of tables with a progressive analytical focus. An example is given in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Detailed analysis table.

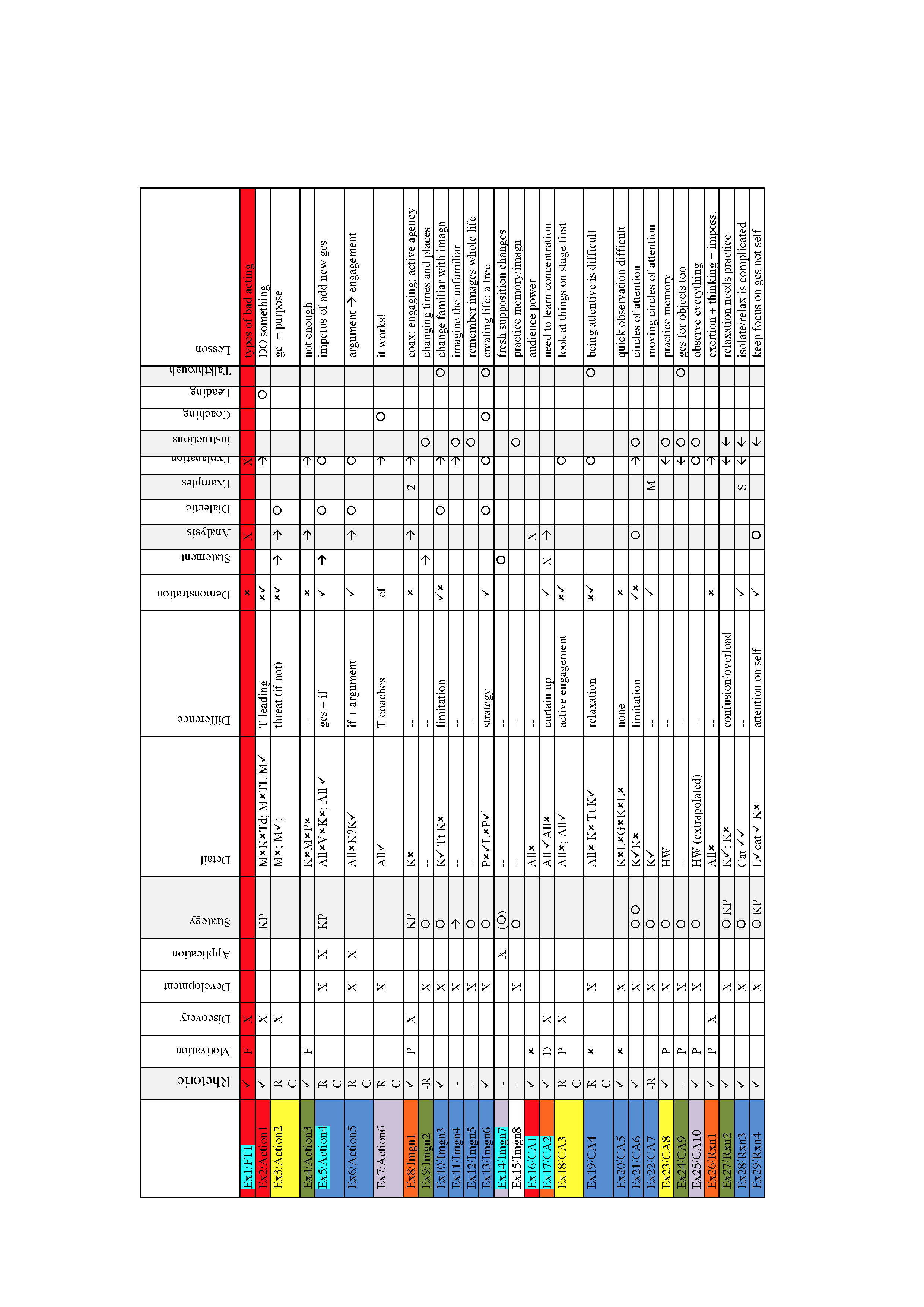
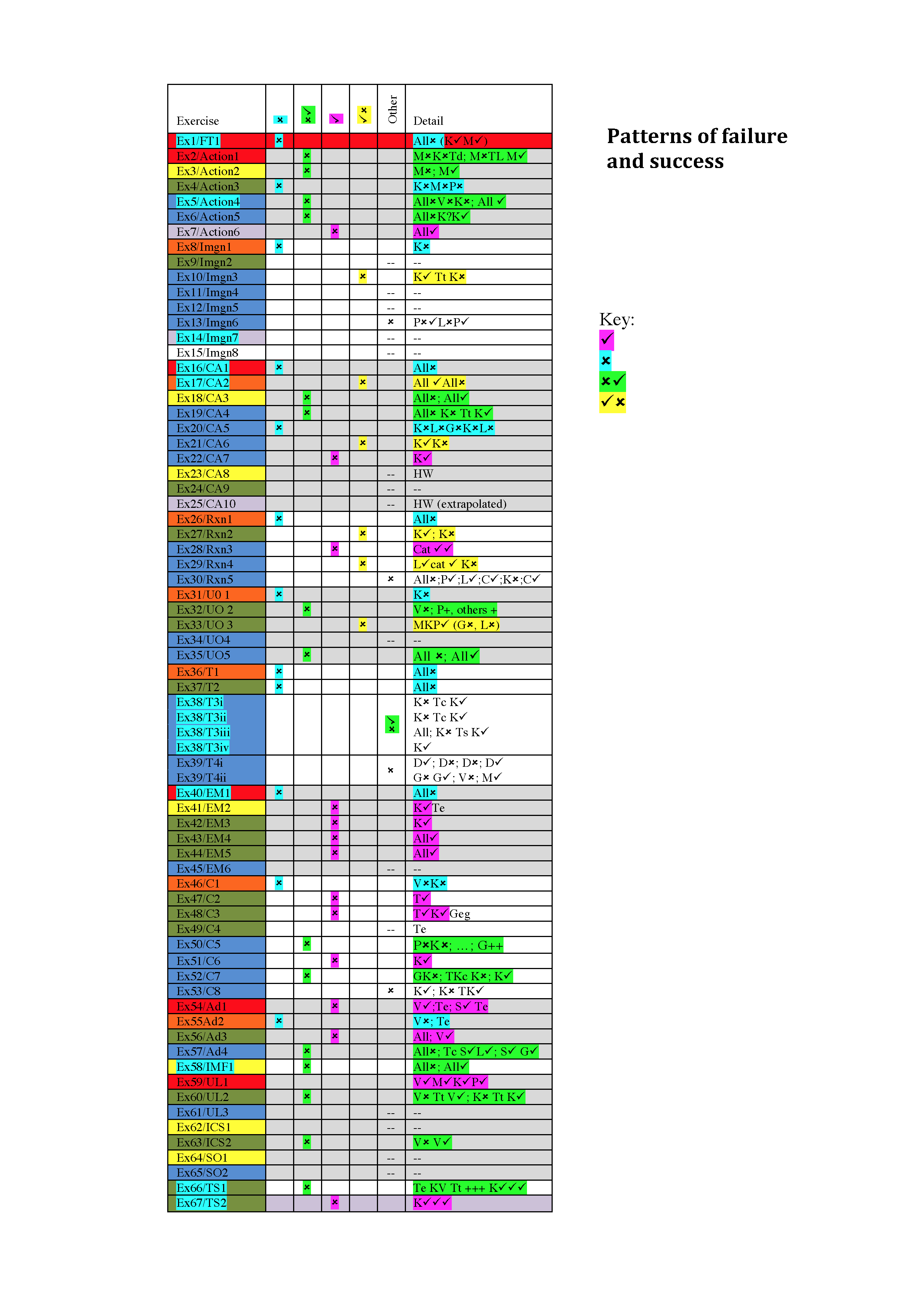


Figure 2: Patterns of failure and success.



Consistencies could thus be visualised. A repetitive narrative structure and distinct accumulation of knowledge and progression through the text became evident. It seemed significant that a great many mistakes and problems were encountered and addressed in the text, which together with eventual successes, formed a recurrent pattern of exercise results (see Figure 2).

This led to the realisation that the responses of the students in the text provided a range of choices among which the actor’s choices could be situated: a field of possibilities that articulated a model of human experiencing. The mistakes are essential to the model, because without them this catalogue of alternatives could not be evoked.

The training course outlined in *An Actor Prepares* thus gradually reveals the organising principles of subjective experience to the fictional students and the reader alike. Stanislavsky achieves this by using a diary form incorporating multiple perspectives and a contrived (rather than naturally occurring) group of representative students, a careful and regular distribution of types of exercise performing specific functions during the narrative of each lesson, and the use of mistakes to evoke a wider context of human experience in which the practice of acting can then be situated.

**The life of the part: The diary form**

Perhaps the most obvious feature of *An Actor Prepares* is that it is a (fictional) diary. However, just like its subject, this ‘diary’ is more complex than at first appears. The form gives Stanislavsky the opportunity to perform certain functions not available in a third person account or a ‘true’ diary. First, he can design the narrative himself, and is not constrained by real events and their limitations. It is important to factor this into any analysis: the choices are deliberate. Second, he is not limited to Kostya’s opinion because he is not Kostya, and this is not his diary. He can therefore provide the kind of overview that a real diary cannot offer because he is writing knowingly about the process through which Kostya-the-student is learning, which a real diarist cannot do. Third, the work can be more than a workbook, or an account of practice, although it can include aspects of both.

Crucially, he can provide this wider perspective in a literal way through characterisation of different points of view and by switching between them. As Kostya-the-narrator, he can recount context, the basic narrative, the content of exercises, and what happens as a result, including what the other students do. As Kostya-the-student, he can write vivid first person accounts - such as dividing up his journey home (Stanislavski 2008a, pp.113-115) sharing with the reader his experience of different aspects of the System. He can do this in a variety of ways, such as his experience of making mistakes himself, witnessing others making mistakes, his rationale and thought processes as learning progresses, and eventually, what it is like to do something in the right way.

Kostya’s perspective is particularly interesting in the light of the subject matter of the book. If *Perezhivanie* is inherently subjective, it seems appropriate to read about it from an individualised, subjective viewpoint, that we might be able to share. Is the reader intended to identify with Kostya? If this were the case, the reader would theoretically experience learning the System alongside him, living through the exercises and his developing understanding as he articulates it directly and indirectly. Benedetti (1989, p.xi) points out that: ‘The texts of Stanislavski which we possess are a guide to the System and the process of learning to be an actor, and an invitation to *experience it directly*, personally and creatively’ (emphasis added).

If Benedetti is right, then while Stanislavsky cannot give the reader the lived, embodied understanding which is the goal of the real life training, he can do the next best thing, using the very principles that underlie the System itself, the principles of experiencing. The reader experiences the System in action by identifying with Kostya: the reader experiences his experiencing. If the very subject of the System is ‘living through’, it is here exemplified. To that end, Kostya may not always succeed, but he always succeeds in the end, because the reader needs to be taken through the process successfully by having the experience of reading through success from the inside. The reader needs to know what successful experiencing, or living through, is like, because that is the goal of the System.

Kostya’s success thus functions as a narrative tool that will serve as a reference point for future practice, and provide terms for comparison. Here is Kostya ‘living through’ or ‘experiencing’ the classes and exercises. Here is Kostya ‘living through’ failing in various ways. Here is Kostya ‘experiencing’ or witnessing other students’ failures. Here is Kostya ‘experiencing’ success. Here too, therefore, is the reader, vicariously sharing his experience.

Another narrative tool is the ‘talk-through’. Much of the text is in the form of dialogue, and long sections consist of Tortsov speaking, as he instructs, explains, or justifies what he requires the students to do. This is at its most evident when Tortsov ‘talks through’ exercises - imagining being an oak tree in Chapter IV, for example (Stanislavski 2008a, pp.65-69) - in verbatim speeches of direct instruction. Within the narrative, these ‘talk-throughs’ appear to be intended to lead the students into a state of experiencing, through a visualisation process. They are almost hypnotic inductions. Is it possible that Kostya-as-mouthpiece-of-Tortsov is deliberately speaking directly to the reader for the same purpose?

**Through line of action: sequences**

Stanislavsky had a great deal of experience of acting, teaching and directing, but recounting how he did that on the page was more problematic. He found it extremely difficult to organise the work into an order that satisfied him. Carnicke cites his concern in a quotation from a letter written in 1930: ‘ “*I can not arrange my enormous amount of material and I’m drowning in it.”* ’ (SSIX 1999, pp.437-41, cited Carnicke 2009, p.78), and once the complexities of the text are appreciated, his intense concern with the *arrangement* of the material is understandable.

*An Actor Prepares* begins and ends with parallel exercises in which Kostya gives us his own detailed inner awareness of his initial failure (Chapters I and II) and eventual success at the task of acting truthfully, or experiencing (Chapter XVI). There is a central group of chapters in which most of the exercises take place (Chapters III – XI) and the System is outlined, and subsequent chapters in which overviews are taken on how to manage and use what has been learned (Chapters XII – XVI). Within the section of the book that outlines the System, progress is well ordered and mostly consistent.[[7]](#footnote-7)

At first glance, the most distinctive aspects of the narrative are that Kostya is inevitably successful and keen to tell the reader about his success, that he is always let down at the beginning of a lesson, which is often unexpected and does not fit established patterns, that Grisha always complains at certain points, and that other students always fail in multiple ways and ‘need’ Tortsov’s intervention at the same juncture in the lesson.

Kamotskaia and Stevenson (2014, p.269) suggest that Tortsov’s methods ‘… follow the pattern: instruction, attempt, failure, lecture.’ I have found them to be more complex. Exercises are distributed within chapters according to narrative function, and in a particular order (see Figure 3).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Figure 3: Chapter III according to narrative function.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Order** | **Chapter III: Action** | **Exercises** | **Deductive** | **Inductive** | **Abductive** | **Accumulative** | **Comparitive** | **Subtractive** | **Character function** |
| **Exordium** | **1** | Onstage/purpose | 2/Action 1 |  | X |  | X | X | X | M-K-Td |
| **Narration** | **2** | T leads |  |  | X |  | X | X |  | M-Tl M+ |
| **Division** | **3** | M/brooch/forgot | 3/Action 2 |  | X |  | X | X | X | M-+ A- |
| **Confirmation** | **4** | Sit/mood | 4/Action 3 |  | X |  | X | X |  | K-M-P- |
| **Refutation** | **5** | E: Reversal – act!  + if, + gcs | 5/Action 4  6/Action5 | X  X  X |  |  | X |  | X | Tt K-A-  A+  All🗶K✓ |
| **Conclusion** | **6** | Application | 7/Action 6 |  |  |  |  |  |  | A+ |
| **Other** |  | Learning when not to laugh |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Stanislavsky opens a class with an exercise that the students cannot do, and closes with one that they can: they both experience and witness failure and success (Figure 3). Exercises at the start of a lesson both engage students by surprising them and getting their attention, and help the students discover a principle for themselves by implication - or in the case of the straightforward execution of a human faculty, such as imagination - to discover what it is like to apply it to themselves. Early exercises motivate students in several ways: by helping them to see how much work they must do, showing them a glimpse of what is possible and moving them forward in relation to what they have already achieved by incorporating it.

Progress is then made to the development of the specific skill or aspect of the System, and success begins to occur as the students progress through the exercises on a particular topic. Strategies may be given in this middle section of a lesson, and techniques are usually applied to students themselves first, so they explore the nature of their own experience before applying the principles they have learned to different circumstances. When students begin to think they know what they are doing, they are given an exercise that starts successfully and ends in failure, arousing their curiosity about what they have done wrong.

As a general rule, a single exercise performs a single narrative purpose, but the section where difficulties are typically encountered has the most exercises (the Refutation in the rhetorical structure, see footnote 8). Here, all problems and difficulties are potential triggers for learning something, even if it is that something is impossible. By the end of a lesson the students are allowed to be successful and Kostya has recognised how an aspect of the System works. Sometimes, learning is applied in an Etude, providing the opportunity both to compare past and present results and to deal with the actor’s problem of repetition in practice.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Problems and mistakes – not just general problems but specific mistakes encountered in practice – thus comprise a substantial part of the narrative structure. A given mistake triggers feedback and resulting adjustment, and contributes to a continual sequence that builds an accumulation of possibilities and the choices that must be made from those possiblities.

**Counter-actions: the importance of mistakes**

Success, in the form of truthful acting, is a small part of Kostya’s experience. Stanislavsky also evokes the difficulties and problems that students might have in learning the System and then shows how to eliminate them. He does this systematically, not only telling us about Kostya’s practice but using the other students as mouthpieces for problems, doubts and questions. They can make mistakes and failures that are different from Kostya’s. This gives the work the quality of a dramatic narrative, with different students behaving in different ways that we eventually come to know as typical.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Each of the other students in the text makes a certain type of mistake, represents a different attitude and personality type, and is relatively consistent in their response to the work. Each student therefore represents a specific category of potential difficulty.[[11]](#footnote-11) Benedetti points out that Stanislavsky had originally given the students Russian names that identified their characteristics: ‘ The student keeping the diary is Nazvanov, meaning the chosen one. ... Other students are called Brainy, Fatty, Prettyface, Big-mouth, Youngster, Happy, Showy.’ (2008, p.xxi). However, despite the fact that this nominative determinism does not translate into English, the students behave in individually identifiable ways. Hobgood (1991a, p.227) disparages Stanislavsky’s device as a superficial means of highlighting Tortsov’s (and by implication Stanislavsky’s) expertise:

The *dramatis personae* of the acting class need to be vain, proud, selfish, ingenuous, and even temporarily dense to set off Tortsov and his sophisticated knowledge more emphatically.

It can be argued, however, that their function is in fact much more carefully considered and crucial to Stanislavsky’s purpose.

This repertoire of potential difficulties arising from student characteristics means that Stanislavsky’s pedagogical responses can arise systematically and cover a range of possibilities: they can be strategic. A principle can be applied too much (Kostya’s counting units for example – Stanislavski 2008a, pp.113-115) or not enough. Understanding can occur immediately (Vanya’s adaptation - pp.223-224), slowly (Maria’s action at the start - pp.37-40) or not at all (Leo’s imagination - pp.65-67). Awareness and success can build slowly or quickly; more examples can be specifically necessitated by virtue of Vanya’s confusion, or Paul’s close but not complete understanding, or Maria’s emphasis on how she is feeling. Students show what happens when they (and by implication, the readers) tend to a particular behavioural pattern, for example Paul, whose analytical tendency is found in his summarising (p.15), conceptualising (p.42), and analysing (pp.132, 180), or Maria, who has a tendency to privilege feeling: she loses her purse (p.127) and her key (p. 132), gets flustered easily when being watched (p.33) and would ‘…try to feel…’ a good part (p.252). Readers discover what happens if and when someone overacts (Grisha) or shows off (Sonya). Grisha, explicitly characterised in the text as belligerent, can disagree with anything until it has been fully dealt with, thus allowing Stanislavsky-the-writer to explain it in full.

The scope of these students’ typical mistakes establishes a range of possibilities that delineate the human experience. From this range the actor-reader must eventually learn to make the most appropriate choices for the purpose of acting. Stanislavsky’s acting students, and his readers, start from the general and progress gradually, discovering more and more detail as they progress. At each point they first explore a principle in their own experience, situating it within a wider context of what is possible (through subjective and objective experience including mistakes) before applying it to fictional contexts. The aspects of the System are incrementally revealed, each building on the previous one, in Chapters III – XI (after which attention shifts to management of the System).

After establishing that truthful acting in the form of experiencing or living through is the goal of the System (Chapters I and II), the course begins by showing students that what is going on ‘inside’ is evidenced ‘outside’ – that they are *leaking information* about inner process - and that only certain types of ‘inside’ activities read as ‘truthful’ or count as *Perezhivanie* (Chapter III).[[12]](#footnote-12) Students progress via learning about the constituents of this ‘inner’ experience, including cause-effect relationships between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ experience that establish a direct link between experiencing and embodiment. By the end of the course they have learned how to assemble schemas of given circumstances in imagined time and space and deliberately enter into specific conceptual relationships with them for the purpose of rehearsal and performance, so that they leak the right information on stage.

Readers are given enough information about the given circumstances of the training to encounter the exercises vicariously, subjectively or objectively depending on narrative strategy, borrowing the action and elucidating their own experience. Since the exercises provide an encounter with subjective experience, reflective attention is also instinctively paid to the reader’s own subjective experience, provoking access to requisite information about process. Furthermore, if it is possible to subjectively experience these texts, then we do not need Russian to know what Stanislavsky means when he describes an aspect of human nature, because we can recognize it in our own experience. Although English readers of Stanislavsky may not speak Russian, we do have a language in common, for we do speak ‘living through’: via our individual bodies we all share the experience of living through life itself. Experience is both essential and plural.

**The objective achieved: the reader’s experience**

The complexity of the concept of experience is exemplified in the process of reading this particular text about experience. The individual subjective experience of the reader, living through and virtually participating in the actions described, facilitates understanding of concepts such as *Perezhivanie* whose verbal designation might appear opaque. In a circular and self-reflexive process, the experiencing reader identifies with Kostya’s experience as he learns about experience in general and how to manipulate it for performance, thereby learning – through vicarious experience – about both… and about their own experience. No wonder it is difficult to articulate explicitly.

Imagined constructive participation is therefore an essential part of understanding *An Actor Prepares* and comprehension of the concepts described is dependent upon it. Stanislavsky has managed to turn the idiosyncracies of subjective experience to his advantage. The readers simply need to bring to their reading of the System their own human life of the spirit.

These internal consistencies also serve to remind us that the work is fiction, and has been composed for the benefit of the reader. It is not a workbook, a teaching template for real-life training or an account of true events. Kostya, Tortsov, and the other students do not exist and never did. We are therefore freed from the need to judge Tortsov’s pedagogical strategies and the students’ mistakes as though they took place in real life, for they did not, and the fact that certain results are achieved at certain points during certain exercises *in the text* is indicative only of their narrative function. The pedagogy and the narrative strategies in the fiction should be assessed on these terms, for while they could be considered in terms of their real-life functionality, and perhaps even actually used, this is not their primary purpose. This is an intricately structured dramatic narrative with a cast of characters and evoked through a variety of perspectives, designed for the benefit and the dynamic experience of the reader.

**Analogous: Socratic dialogue**

Stanislavsky may not have considered himself to be a writer, but his desire to systematise acting in the first place combined with his lifelong persistence following this through indicates a fascination with structure and form. There were other influences in Stanislavsky’s life that might have contributed to this abiding interest. First, he attended the *gymnasia* briefly at the age of 12, and while he found classical languages themselves difficult and uninteresting (Benedetti 1999, p.13) he might well have been exposed to aspects of classical form such as rhetoric and Socratic dialogue in this environment. Second, in the manufacturing context of his family business, there was a growing trend for systemising such as Taylorism and the work of Gastev. Pitches explores this link and concludes that just as Taylor and Ford, in America, and Gastev, in Russia, were striving for the most efficient and systematic, task-based approach in industry, Stanislavsky was proposing an ‘…organised system for the actor based on the same foundations’ (Pitches, 2006, p.29).

Superficially, the text contains multiple examples of dialogue in the form of conversation interrogating theory and practice, as pointed out by Carnicke (2010, p.6) as she characterises the central relationship between Tortsov and the students: ‘In endless Socratic dialogue, they explore the mysteries of acting, they argue their various points of view and they sometimes break through to clear understandings of their intractable art.’ (2010, p.6) However, these verbal exchanges are not the only way in which this text manifests the Socratic method.

A Socratic dialogue is a mutual exploration of an abstract concept, or a directly inexpressible truth, or Ideal, which is only discovered through the investigation of all possible answers, some of which are discovered to be other-than-true or Ideal. (Kraut, 2015; Nails, 2014). The term originates from the original Socratic dialogues, which were not written by Socrates,[[13]](#footnote-13) but by Plato.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Plato wrote dialogues rather than formal philosophical treatises. His Socratic dialogues are based on his knowledge of the strategies employed by Socrates during his lifetime. Their key features were the dialogue form, the setting, and the characters. The key principles are explorations of abstract concepts or principles that take place in dramatized conversations between Socrates and various interlocutors, each of whom is clearly characterized and embodies different opinions or responses, during which Socrates puts sequences of questions that facilitate answers that when followed through, reveal their own falsity, and can therefore be eliminated. ‘…Socrates was no transmitter of information that others were passively to receive… Rather, he helped others recognize on their own what is real, true, and good’ (Nails, 2014). Through a gradual process of elimination, the truth or Ideal is eventually revealed, not through exposition but in practice, by actively working through ideas. This appears to bear similarities with Stanislavsky’s own narrative strategies.

Because the subject matter of the text, subjective experience, is interrogated and revealed to the participants (and readers) through exercises and practice as well as through discussion and dialogue, the physical action of the exercises and practice can be considered to be a part of the dialogic exchange. Ruffini in Barba and Savarese (1995, p.66) makes the point that the form of Stanislavsky’s text is essential to his argument:

…it is necessary to stipulate that the novel form… is also (and significantly) developed by means of dialogues between the master and the students. The tensions that animate these dialogues, as well as the rhythm and modulation present, bring Plato’s *Dialogues* immediately to mind. …one must ask oneself whether this form only frames the content or whether it is an integral part of the content… it is not the form within which the treatise arguments are developed: it is an argument of the treatise, and perhaps its principal argument.

While Ruffini is not specific about what aspects of the form exactly comprise this ‘integral part of the content’, their view is consonant with the proposal in this paper that the way the text is organised contributes substantially to its meaning. If the Socratic method is an organised way of interrogating a point of view, and using ‘…the maieutic power of the dialogue…’ (Ruffini 1995, p.66) to eliminate the ‘not true’ and reveal (or give birth to) the truth or Ideal, the organisational principles are an essential part of the message.

Like Plato, Stanislavsky characterises his interlocutors, giving them idiosyncrasies and different points of view. Like Plato, Tortsov/Stanislavsky assists Kostya and the other students to examine their subject, express and reject practices that do not work (the subtractive model) and thereby incrementally uncover the ‘truth’. Like Plato, Stanislavsky utilises and manipulates the Socratic method in order to make his own points. For despite the fact that they both disavowed the concept of expert knowledge, and attempt to ‘discover’ the truth through a mutual investigation, because they both manage to refute unsound arguments and know the ‘right’ questions to ask, they both in the end appear to be the arbiter of truth, and win every argument.[[15]](#footnote-15)

It can now be suggested that the text as a whole could be seen as an extended Socratic dialogue between Kostya the student and seeker-after-knowledge and Tortsov, the guide who assists him in his endeavour. In this reading, exercises perform part of the function of investigating the ‘truth’ as they provide the vehicle through which incorrect attempts, or ‘not truths’ can be identified. The questions are not asked in words, but by the exercises. The answers are not spoken, but behavioural: embodied in the student responses, which implicitly articulate non-verbal aspects of practice and find themselves to be truthful acting or not-truthful acting. The exercises-as-questions and the responses-as-answers comprise the Socratic dialogue.

**The objective revisited: truthful acting as Socratic Ideal**

Furthermore, it could be argued that at the heart of the Socratic encounter is the situating of the ‘truth’ in the wider context of ‘not-truth’; of the ‘Ideal’ in the context of ‘not-Ideal’. The Ideal only emerges when the dialogue between teacher and pupil jointly follows through all the possibilities until the pupil has discovered everything that does not work and eliminated it. Not just the correct answer but the whole field of possibilities is thus laid bare, and the not-truths expand the pupil’s awareness just as much as the truths, because the truth is contextualized among the non-truths.

The contextualization of the truth within a wider context appears to be essential to Stanislavsky’s endeavor. This applies in three ways. First, the students’ failures serve to contextualize what works in the context of what does not. Second, the System specifically evokes the students’ unconscious or inner experience. Only once the students are aware of this potential experiential context can they situate within that context the specific choices that apply to truthful acting. They must know, for example, that imagination can take different forms and perspectives, and that only the subjective, active, situated context can be used as given circumstances and allow the right information to leak. Students must therefore discover what human experience is – in all its variety - in order to be able to make the correct choices. The ideal must be situated in relation to the not-ideal, the truth in relation to the not-truth.

Third, and more subtly, if the student becomes aware of the whole range of human experience they will come to situate not just the correct acting choices but their own tendencies within that range, introducing the possibility that they can overcome their own limitations, learn to access that wider range of possibilities, and increase their repertoire as actors (and perhaps in life). Rather than learning who they are, they can (theoretically at least) learn to be all that they could be, not just as individuals, but as humans being.

Perhaps it is worth observing that this is applicable in real life performance training too. A dialogue that builds knowledge through a process of elimination – by discovering what does not work – makes it possible, experientially, to define the undefineable. Allowing students to make mistakes permits them to learn more effectively about the ineffable processes and experiences that comprise acting practice. Failure creates context: it automatically enlarges the frame of reference, allowing students to situate what they do within a wider range of options - a map of what is possible, within which they develop a sense of what does and does not work. The Socratic encounter is an excellent argument for short-term failure in the interests of long-term success.

On this evidence, Stanislavsky appears to have been a master of the indirect. *An Actor Prepares* is an ingenious example of how to arrange the unconscious aspects of training into a purposeful and coherent form in which they are gradually introduced and subtly inferred, and how to retain the inherent qualities and characteristics of embodied experience on the page by implicitly evoking them in the experience of the reader.

**Conclusion: the Super-objective**

What, then, can be extrapolated from this sample of Stanislavsky’s writing that might contribute towards our own writing about training?

Stanislavsky’s writing, flawed as it is, exemplifies an indirect approach. It shows how form can be used to communicate content. Something that cannot be defined, spoken about or taught directly, such as human experience or process, can be addressed in other ways.

Stanislavsky had a great deal of experience of working with actors and might easily have written it up in the form of a true diary, account of practice, or workbook. But he chose not to. Both the difficulties he encountered in arranging his material and the benefits the reader enjoys come directly out of the fictionality of his text. This permits Stanislavsky to design the narrative himself, and points to the importance of purpose.

The strategies identified in this study - the variety of perspectives and tools such as ‘talk-throughs’; the cast of characters representing different types; the distribution of exercises performing specific narrative functions in a specific order -– appear to indicate an intention on Stanislavsky’s part to teach his readers by eliciting their own subjective experience as they experience the course of training as quasi classmates alongside Kostya. Moreover, the use of failure to precipitate learning as a Socratic dialogue of mistakes and responses that evoke human experience in all its complexity and situate the correct choices for the actor within that range ultimately implies that the text can be interpreted as a search for the truth or (Socratic) ‘Ideal’ actor. If the narrative strategies are Socratic, perhaps it might be concluded that their purpose is Socratic too.

As well as suggesting that Stanislavsky’s text has a specific purpose, this comparison also serves as a reminder that it is important to qualify all writing about practice according to purpose. Purpose must dictate the form. The strategies employed by Stanislavsky may be interesting in and of themselves, but are only useful as exemplars if we have the same super-objective: if we too want to teach the reader via our writing.[[16]](#footnote-16) The question of whether this limited and problematic text has something to offer as an example of writing about practice today is very much an issue of intention.

As a reader, an actor and a researcher, I hope that my personal relationship with the text has been superseded by the methods and results of my academic research. What has been found indicates that Stanislavsky’s exploration of *Perezhivanie* on the page is intended to provoke experiential affect. In my case it was very successful.

Stanislavsky has arrived at what is effectively a dramaturgical strategy, in which readers are treated as if they are other actors, who must act in the given circumstances and read the text as if they are living through or experiencing it. If we share Stanislavsky’s implied intention - to teach the reader via the medium of the text and situate choices within a range of alternatives - then we might usefully employ similar strategies, fictionalise our work on the page, or even consider our exercises as questions and their results as answers, in a Socratic search for the truth via a process of elimination.

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1. For influence in the UK, see Dacre et al, ‘Teaching Stanislavski: an investigation into how Stanislavski is taught to students in the UK’, (2010) which explores teaching in schools, universities and conservatoires. As for his native Russia, quoted in this report is Anatoly Smeliansky, principal of the Moscow Art Theatre School: ‘There isn’t any serious theatre school in Russia that isn’t using it in one way or another. It is our main methodology of actor training’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *An Actor Prepares* was the first part of a proposed series, the second part being *Building a Character* (from notes, published posthumously in 1949). Capitalisation is used to differentiate Stanislavsky’s System from the simple noun. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The original 1936 translation has been heavily criticised for these difficulties. Benedetti’s newer version is framed by the publishers as an alternative to what was originally ‘…inaccurate, misleading and difficult-to-read…’ (2008c, frontispiece). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kostya can be seen as Stanislavsky-the-ignorant-and-innocent, and Tortsov as Stanislavsky-the knowing-and-experienced. Hobgood (1991, pp.219-28) explores the persona of Tortsov in his article ‘Stanislavsky’s Preface to “An Actor Prepares” and the Persona of Tortsov’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The original research examined both parts of both translations in tandem. However, only the first part is the subject of this article because the second partwas not structured in detail by Stanislavsky himself but only drafted. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Apocryphally, Isadora Duncan remarked that if she could say it she wouldn’t have to dance it, and in the introductory to her autobiography (1927) she says: ‘To write of what one has actually experienced in words, is to find that they become most evasive.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is evidenced in the investigation of exercise distribution according to type, functions and results of exercises, and specific narrative or pedagogical methodologies. (Clare 2014). Although Lyubov Gureivich, Stanislavsky’s friend and mentor, was closely involved with helping him organise his work, and may well have been responsible for some of the sequencing strategies employed in the text, it was Stanislavsky who decided whether or not they served his underlying purpose. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. During the research, a similarity was noticed between the narrative organization here and the disposition of classical rhetoric, used for the investigation of an argument. This was developed by Cicero (1988) and Quintillian (2006) from the original two parts (statement and proof) required by Aristotle. It has six parts: Exordium (engage the interest); Narration (identify the problem); Division (reveal the solution); Confirmation (elaborate on the solution); Refutation (encountering difficulties); Conclusion (proof). This led to the recognition that types of exercise consistently occurred at the same juncture in each lesson. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Etudes can be used at any point in the lesson, as they can serve any of the narrative functions. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is at this point that the first hint that there might be similarities with the Socratic dialogue occurs. Setting and characters are essential to the dialogues, according to Nails (2014). ‘Kostya’s diaries’ contain a great deal of verbal dialogue, frequent setting and clear mis-en-scene, and clear characterisations. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This information was collated in a table of student participation (Clare 2014, Appendix III). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In the equivalent chapter in *Building a Character* (Chapter 2: Dressing a Character), students learn that the causal link runs the other way too: physical changes and work with external action affects the inner experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Socrates (469 – 399) B.C.E. was born in Athens. Instead of philosophising directly, he was known for asking questions of his interlocutors, thereby helping them to discover for themselves the answers they sought. No original writings exist, and he is therefore known only by repute, through the historical accounts and work of Aristophanes, Xenophon, and Plato. Plato wrote Socratic dialogues evoking him and his work, based on his reputation, and it is on these that contemporary characterisations, and the term Socratic, are based. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Plato (429? – 347) B.C.E. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This is known as Socratic irony. ‘In his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with constant reference to Socrates* Kierkegaard argued that the historical Socrates used his irony in order to facilitate the birth of subjectivity in his interlocutors’ McDonald (2014). This seems particularly pertinent to Stanislavsky’s subject of (subjective) experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Whether or not Stanislavsky’s texts are broadly effective in this respect is outside the scope of this article and would require further research. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)