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Konstantin Stanislavski and Michael Chekhov: *Tracing the Two Practitioners' 'Lures' for Emotional Activation*

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ABSTRACT

Konstantin Stanislavski points out that emotions are like wild animals that can only be lured rather than approached directly; he urges his students not to try to force emotions to arrive, as feelings are independent of the will and cannot be manipulated. Like a whisperer, the actor should *lure* emotions, gently invite them in, approach them *indirectly*, instead of 'going after' them and scaring them away. During his extensive and revolutionary research on the actor's craft, the Russian pioneer discovered various such indirect 'lures' for emotional activation. This article reviews the tangible points of entry to the unruly feelings as identified by Stanislavski, as well as those explored by his pupil, Michael Chekhov. The two practitioners' approach to emotion is examined here, with emphasis on two key publications respectively: Stanislavski's *An Actor's Work* and Chekhov's *To the Actor*. The article discusses the lures of concentration, imagination, 'well-founded, apt and productive' actions, emotion memory, tempo-rhythm, empathy (fellow-feeling), external stimuli such as lighting and props, and the actor's focus on that which is specific, tangible, and detailed. The review of Stanislavski's lures is followed by a discussion of Michael Chekhov's insights on artistically-induced emotion and the pathways he identified for stirring the performer's inner life, emphasising the exploration of qualities of movement, objective atmospheres, and the actor's embodied imagination.

KEYWORDS: Stanislavski; Michael Chekhov; emotion; actor training; psychophysical; acting; *experiencing*

The performance of emotion poses a great challenge to the actor. As Stanislavski observed, “our artistic emotions are, at first, as shy as wild animals and they hide in the depths of our souls. If they do not come to the surface spontaneously you cannot go after them and find them.”¹ Like a whisperer, the actor should gently open ways for emotion to come, rather than going after it, forcing it, and therefore scaring it away. The process is delicate and—as Stanislavski points out—the difference between a “stock-in-trade”² and a truthfully experienced artistically-induced emotion “can be both subtle and crucial.”³ Following the Russian pioneer, this article argues that acted emotion should be accessed *indirectly*, or as Michael Chekhov puts it, it should be “coaxed by some indirect technical means.”⁴ Such indirect means for emotional activation have been used, knowingly or unknowingly, by a plethora of acting teachers and theatre practitioners throughout the years, with Stanislavski being the first to articulate this through the use of the metaphor of the wild animal which should be *lured* in, rather than forced to appear. This article focuses on Stanislavski and his pupil, Michael Chekhov, and aims to identify and discuss the specific strategies they used to encourage the actor’s emotional activation.

Although, it is not within the scope of this article to thoroughly discuss the differences between various terms relating to the affective experience, such as emotion, affect, feeling, moods (sustained background feelings), and bodily drives such as thirst and hunger, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss choices of terminology and thus meaning. According to leading neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, emotion is the physiological arousal, which is visible to an observer, while feeling is the inner, ‘hidden,’ subjective experience that accompanies it.⁵ Although I occasionally refer to the terms emotion and feeling interchangeably, following the studied practitioners’ vocabulary, it is important to note that I refer to emotion or feeling as an *embodied* state, which involves both a physiological reaction and an inner experience, unless otherwise specified.

It is acknowledged, that there are important differences between the various affective states. However, there are also strong links between them; on a biological level, this can be explained by the interconnections between the various mechanisms responsible for activating affective responses. On their most basic form, such mechanisms ensure survival by encouraging the organism to search for food through the drives, or avoid harmful encounters through the withdrawal/approach behaviour which is related to pain and pleasure. On the higher levels, one can find more elaborate behaviours, such as pursuing happiness or integration within a community, for which emotions and feelings are necessary. As Damasio explains in his book *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*, each of the different regulatory reactions responsible for the various affective states “is not a radically different process, built from scratch for a specific purpose. Rather, each reaction consists of tinkered rearrangements of bits and parts of the simpler processes.”⁶ In other words, the more elaborate mechanisms, which are activated during emotional arousal, have been built on the more basic, evolutionary speaking mechanisms, which ensure the organism’s survival. The various affective states are therefore strongly interlinked.

The double meaning of the word ‘feel’ in English, which points to the connection between feelings and sensations, should therefore not come as a surprise. The link has been studied extensively by theatre practitioners through the exploration of sense memory as a prerequisite for accessing emotion memory, most notably so by Lee Strasberg.⁷ As Martin Welton, author of *Feeling Theatre*, points out:

In idiomatic English, ‘feel’, as both verb (‘to feel...’) and noun (‘the feel of...’), describes a sensory-affective continuum whose terms range from the particularity of various emotional states to sensations at the tips of the fingers. In considering feeling as it occurs in, and is concerned with, theatre, it is important to give discussion to experiences on either side of its participatory divide. This is so, less in order to differentiate between differing orders of

experience or expression along the continuum between affect and sensation,
than it is a means of drawing attention to the difficulty of doing so.⁸

Based on the above, this article proposes an understanding of emotion as an all-encompassing term which incorporates bodily sensations, subjective ‘inner’ experience (Damasio’s *feeling*), and physiological arousal (e.g. changes in breathing or heart rate).

Konstantin Stanislavski

Throughout his life, the Russian pioneer was looking for ways to activate the actor’s “creative subconscious by indirect, conscious means,”⁹ so that the actor could reach the state of *experiencing*, during which they are “completely taken over by the play [...] and everything comes out spontaneously.”¹⁰ Benedetti warns us that *experiencing* does not just mean emotional involvement, as the term is often mistakenly translated into English.¹¹ He instead defines it as “the process by which an actor engages actively with the situation in each and every performance.”¹² Yet, this active engagement often involves emotion; when an actor is *experiencing*, emotions are also present, and vice versa. Quoting the Italian actor Tommaso Salvini, Stanislavski’s alter ego, Tortsov, stresses that “every great actor should feel, really feel what he is portraying.”¹³

It should be noted however that Stanislavski’s desire for the actor to access the subjective experience (feeling), which corresponds to the portrayed emotion, does not refer to an emotional involvement that relies on the actor’s inspiration. The emotional involvement should be the result of the actor’s on-going attempts to establish appropriate entry points to emotion through training and rehearsals. As Peta Tait, author of *Performing Emotions*, points out, Stanislavski’s “systematic” or “scientific” naturalism functions in opposition to “inspired naturalism” which overly relies on the actor’s inspiration.¹⁴ Through consistent work and technique, the Stanislavskian actor learns how to “consciously manage” their inspiration

instead; the actor is therefore no longer dependent on the unreliable and fleeting inspiration. This approach found perhaps utmost clarity with Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions, which allows for the actor to fulfil a "simple, concrete, purposeful physical action which stirs the psychological side."¹⁵ Stanislavski discovered many such indirect lures to emotion through his systematic experimentations on the craft of the actor. These will be thoroughly discussed in the following pages.

Emotion is Relational: The Actor-Audience Relationship

To better understand Stanislavski's emphasis on the importance of *experiencing*, it is useful to consider the actor-audience relationship pursued by the Russian pioneer, as the actor's emotional involvement is not an end in itself, but rather a means to activate the feelings of the audience. Although it is not necessary for the actor to be emotionally involved for the audience to experience emotions,¹⁶ Stanislavski argues that the actor's genuine *experiencing* on stage would result in the audience being "surrendered totally to what is happening, [...] stunned and fired by the same common emotion."¹⁷ Witnessing the actor *experiencing* can move the audience and create a shared experience for actors and spectators alike, during which "a thousand hearts are beating in unison with the actor's heart" and therefore "a wonderful resonant acoustic is created."¹⁸

This link between the feelings of the performer and the feelings of the spectator can now be further understood through the discovery of mirror neurons, the neurons that fire both when we perform and observe an action. More to the point, mirror neurons are also activated both when we experience and when we observe someone experiencing an emotion, and are therefore believed to be the neural mechanism responsible for empathy.¹⁹ The discovery of mirror neurons strongly suggests that "audiences quasi-experience the same emotions as the

actors that they see onscreen” or on stage, as William Brown—author of “Is Acting a Form of Simulation or Being”—puts it.²⁰ Brown argues:

If mirror neurons suggest that an audience can in fact feel the same emotion as the performer, then it would logically follow that the more genuine emotion the performer allows into his/her performance, the more genuine will be the audience’s emotional response (provided that this is the goal of the performer and/or his/her director).²¹

However, for Stanislavski, the actor-audience relationship is far from a one-way relationship where the actor acts while the spectator passively observes and ‘quasi experiences.’ On the contrary, the connection between audience and actor is bidirectional, because as Erin Hurley, author of *Theatre & Feeling*, puts it, emotion is *relational*.²²

The American psychologist William James revolutionised emotion theory when he claimed that upon seeing a bear, we don’t run because we are afraid, but instead, we are afraid because we run; we feel sad because we cry, afraid because we tremble, and angry because we strike.²³ Although it would seem logical that an emotional stimulus triggers the subjective experience (feeling), which in turn activates the physiological arousal known to accompany it (e.g. tears or increased heart rate), James argues that it is in fact the reverse that is true: the stimulus activates directly the physiological arousal, and the subjective ‘inner’ experience follows. Hurley takes James’ example of the bear and the trembling human one step further; she claims that emotion happens *in between* the person and the bear: emotion is *relational*.²⁴ The same principle applies to theatre where emotion happens between the actor and the audience. As Hurley puts it:

If emotion is made in the relationship between stage and audience (the stimulus and the receiver, if you will), it cannot simply be projected by actors and caught as the same emotion by the audience. The theatre’s emotional labour, then is, in part, a negotiation. [...] Emotions in this view act as a bridge

between body and mind, between sensation and evaluation and indeed,
between individual and group.²⁵

Stanislavski also observes the audience's important contribution to theatre's 'emotional labour.' He maintains that acting without an audience is like "singing in a room filled with carpets and soft furnishings, that [deaden] the acoustic."²⁶ This is because when spectators are present, the actor's emotions are channelled to the audience, only to be magnified and returned back to the actor: an "invisible current" is created as the emotionally stimulated audience "creates the performance with us [the actors]."²⁷ The fourth wall and public solitude can thus be seen under a very different light: the audience is not to be blocked out and ignored. As Carnicke points out, the belief that Stanislavski taught actors to ignore the audience is a "widespread misconception in the US" that needs to be corrected.²⁸ On the contrary, Stanislavski's actor is conscious of the fact that they are creating an experience *for* and *with* the audience.

This is in agreement with recent discussions which problematise the perception of the audience as passive. Martin Welton explains:

Even in sitting still whilst looking and listening, the audience are still bound up or engaged with a practice of attention which takes work. [...] Such experiences of attending-to are dynamic—which is to say affective—in their engagement of 'a resonant tactile-kinesthetic body' [...] with the events or activities it perceives.²⁹

Despite what the etymology of the words audience (from the Latin *audire*, to hear) and spectator (from the Latin *spectare*, to gaze at, to observe) indicates—disregarding the spectators' "resonant tactile-kinesthetic body"³⁰—the audience does much more than listening and observing; the spectators are engaged in a dynamic (rather than passive) process, themselves also creating the performance and its 'wonderful resonant acoustic' (to return to Stanislavski's thinking) with the actors. This resonance vibrates within the whole

space, as the affective experience created through the audience's and actors' interaction fills the whole theatre. Emotion is relational and shared; it therefore exists not only 'within' actors and spectators, but also outside of them, filling the whole theatrical (or performative) space. As Martin Welton puts it, "emotions are both *in us* and *in the world* at the same time. They are, in fact, one of the most pervasive ways that we are continually in touch with our environment."³¹ In emotions existing in this way, they are an important ingredient of most, albeit not all, theatre. Let us now return to the discussion of the identified 'lures' or strategies that the actor can rely on in order to repeatedly and safely achieve *experiencing* on stage.

The 'Lures' for Emotional Activation: 'Well-founded, Apt and Productive' Actions

Stanislavski emphasised that all elements of the System are interrelated. One could perhaps conclude that emotion should therefore not be studied separately. However, during his long search for organic, truthful, and connected acting, the Russian pioneer identified some elements of the System as triggers for emotional activation. The first 'lures' or 'decoys' for emotion revealed in *An Actor's Work* are the actor's full commitment to the given circumstances and the focus on specific "well-founded, apt and productive" actions.³² A well-known example of an incident where emotional activation is brought about through the lures of action and given circumstances is the *brooch improvisation*. Stanislavski instructs Marya, one of his students, to search for a brooch pinned on a curtain. In the context of the improvisation, finding the brooch would mean that Marya can continue studying at the drama school by using the valuable brooch to pay for her fees; failing to find it would result in her being expelled.

On her first encounter with the exercise, Marya is preoccupied with *showing* that she is in an emotional state, instead of truly looking for the brooch. Stanislavski comments on her insincere performance, pointing out that the student is *representing* rather than *experiencing*

emotion: her hands are “conclusively clutched against her breast, which, evidently, was meant to express the tragic aspect of the situation.”³³ He adds that those watching “could scarcely contain” their laughter.³⁴

Following this unsuccessful attempt, Tortsov reminds the student that if she fails to find the brooch, she will be “done for, [...] thrown out.”³⁵ At that moment, the student’s sense of belief is triggered, which results in the activation of her imagination and a full commitment to the given circumstances. The student is no longer demonstrating; she genuinely starts looking for the brooch as if her future depends on finding it. The combination of high stakes (fear of being expelled), being in action (looking for the brooch), and the full commitment to the given circumstances, triggers a strong emotion. Her performance this time is condensed and quiet, yet much more powerful:

Marya’s face turned grave. She fixed her eyes upon the curtain and began to examine every fold of the material attentively, systematically. This time the search proceeded in a different incomparably slower tempo, and we could all believe that Marya was not wasting a moment, that she was sincerely worried and anxious. [...] We watched her with bated breath.³⁶

Stanislavski selects a set of given circumstances very close to Marya’s own for this improvisation. One might then wonder: does the student truly believe she will be expelled? This could not be the case, as the inability to pay the school and the existence of the brooch are imaginary circumstances that do not correspond to Marya’s situation. The actress is still functioning on a double consciousness: she fully commits to her actions ‘as if’ she is under the danger of being expelled. However, Stanislavski’s selection of given circumstances so close to Marya’s own is probably not made at random. By making this small leap into believing that she has no money to pay for the school at this early stage of the training, the student-actor can later make bigger leaps into more complicated and distant given circumstances.

Concentration, Imagination, and the Tangible

Another lure identified by Stanislavski is concentration. In a different exercise, Kostya, the fictional student narrating *An Actor's Work*, is asked to focus his attention on a light bulb. Stanislavski explains that in order to maintain concentration for a longer period, the student-actor often has to be stimulated so that the task becomes more engaging. In this instance, Stanislavski uses the aid of imagination to keep the student engaged: Kostya is asked to act 'as if' the light bulb was a monster's eye. The thought of the monster, actively stimulating the student's imagination, helps Kostya focus and eventually deeply concentrate on his task. Soon after, emotion appears. Focusing on something specific, no matter how small, "involves not merely the object; it sets the whole of an actor's creative apparatus to work."³⁷ Concentrating on an action (psychological or physical), a fellow actor, an object, an image, or any other focal point which is specific and tangible, encourages the awakening of inner life. It might be worth noting that a psychological action also always has an external focus: to persuade, to seduce somebody, to reassure the partner, to open or hide oneself.

Stanislavski emphasises the need for a concrete and tangible point of entry to emotion again while discussing the stimulus of visualisation:

the things we see are more freely, more deeply engraved on our visual memory and are resurrected anew in our representations of them. [...] So let the more accessible, the more amenable mental images help us revive and pin down the less accessible, the less stable, innermost feelings.³⁸

Stanislavski points out that since visual memory is more concrete than emotion memory, one can rely on the former to access the latter. However, the images he refers to are not only remembered but also imagined. He points out that even our dreams "despite their illusory character" are more "material" than the intangible feelings.³⁹ The focus on the specific, detailed, and tangible should not be overlooked in favour of an interpretation disproportionately highlighting the use of visual memory as a mere point of access to

emotion memory. After all, it is stressed that visual memory is more accessible and therefore useful, because it relies on remembering or imagining something concrete and ‘material.’

Emotion Memory

The notion of *affective or emotion memory*, borrowed from the French psychologist Théodule Ribot, was thoroughly explored during the early experimentations at the First Studio, as Stanislavski was looking for practical applications of Ribot’s theory: ways to help the actor have access to concrete (embodied) rather than abstract (intellectual) recollections of emotion. During these attempts to practically utilise Ribot’s theory, the Russian pioneer experimented with emotion recall exercises. Such exploration of the actors’ personal memories was heavily criticised by others, and was later discarded by Stanislavski himself. As Sonia Moore puts it: “Stanislavski’s early experiments in emotional memory [...] brought the actors to the point of hysteria and affected their nervous systems. This stage of Stanislavski’s work has been recognized in Russia as one of the most dangerous periods in the history of the Moscow Art Theatre.”⁴⁰

Emotion recall is, however, only one, and a very limited, way to understand how emotion memory could be used as a tool for the actor. As Stanislavski points out, the actor “naturally evokes memories of things he has experienced in life;”⁴¹ whenever actors truthfully experience an emotion on stage, they bring with them memories of previous relevant experiences. These recollections of emotions are now distilled and crystallised as Stanislavski puts it;⁴² thus the actor maintains a safe artistic distance to the events that caused similar experiences in real life:

all these traces of similar experiences and feelings are distilled into a single, wider, deeper memory. [...] Time is a wonderful filter, a powerful purifier of memories, of feelings one has had. Moreover, time is a great artist. It not only purifies, it lends poetry to memory.⁴³

This transition from real life experience to ‘poetry’ is further explained by Kostya. The student describes how seeing a tragic accident—a homeless man being killed by a trolley bus—makes him feel terrified at first and indignant a couple of days later; finally, a week after the incident, he can already remember this horrible accident in a poetic way. The tragic event transforms from a real-life experience into material for artistic creation. A similar process of crystallisation and beautification occurs when one is experiencing artistically-induced emotions. If it were otherwise, artistic creations engaging with the so-called negative emotions, situations, or characters would be repulsive.

Utilising Fellow-feeling and Learning to Surrender to the Decoys

Stanislavski also suggests empathy as a tool as he emphasises that actor-students do not have to necessarily look for inspiration in their personal experiences; they can draw material from the lives of others. He calls this feeling of empathy ‘fellow-feeling;’ this does gradually, with time and rehearsals, transform into feeling.⁴⁴ The actor, he stresses, must search for inspiration everywhere, not only in personal experiences. No potential decoy to emotion is invalid; anything could be used as a trigger, and “actors must learn to surrender [...] without reserve” to such lures.⁴⁵ Actor-students must practice and experiment with various decoys, so that emotion memories eventually become more accessible to them. They also have to discover which of these decoys are the most effective for them personally: “you have to be the gardener, so to speak, of your own heart, one who knows what grows from which seeds. You must not reject any subject, any stimulus to your Emotion Memory.”⁴⁶

Tempo-rhythm

Stanislavski later identifies a lure even stronger than emotion memory — the trigger of *tempo-rhythm*:

There is an indissoluble link between Tempo-rhythm and feeling, and conversely between feeling and Tempo-rhythm, they are interconnected, interdependent and interactive. [...] We are talking about the immediate, frequently automatic effect Tempo-rhythm has on wilful, arbitrary, disobedient and apprehensive feelings, which won't take orders, which shy away at the least hint of being forced and hide away where they can't be got at.⁴⁷

Although all elements discussed above are indeed powerful decoys for emotion, Stanislavski concluded that tempo-rhythm is the most powerful one: it "is our closest friend and companion because it is frequently the direct, immediate [...] almost automatic stimulus to Emotion Memory and, consequently to inner experiencing."⁴⁸ The emphasis Stanislavski places on tempo-rhythm as the strongest entry point to emotion is of high importance. This has not been stressed sufficiently, as attention has been often focused on emotion memory.⁴⁹ Stanislavski demonstrates the effect of tempo-rhythm on the students' emotional state by simply asking them to clap in slow tempo. Gradually increasing the tempo and the complexity of the rhythmical structure, the students transition from boredom to excitement. Stanislavski then points out:

I can not only control your muscles but your feelings, your mood as well. I can first lull you to sleep and then whip you up into a frenzy and make you sweat buckets. [...] But I am not a wizard. It's Tempo-Rhythm that has the magic and affects your inner mood.⁵⁰

The Russian experimented with the lure of tempo-rhythm in various ways: from asking his students to do certain tasks following one or more metronomes, to asking them to perform actions in different rhythms this time not by using a metronome, but by changing the given circumstances. A well-known example of this is the *train station exercise*, during which the student-actors improvise arriving at a station to catch a train that leaves in one, five or fifteen minutes, with the expected differences in urgency and therefore emotional experience of the students.⁵¹ Stanislavski also stresses the difference between inner and outer tempo: for

example, a walk in the forest and a funeral procession might have the same outer tempo-rhythm, however the inner tempo is completely different.⁵² The actor must thus also explore contrasting inner and outer tempi.

External Stimuli

Stanislavski finally acknowledges the importance of external stimuli, such as the lights, sound effects, and the details on the set. These are not used only to “dazzle the audience,”⁵³ but also to help the actors: “the production team must help us with everything they have at their disposal. Their skills are hidden stimuli for our Emotion Memory and recurrent feelings.”⁵⁴ In the Introduction to *An Actor’s Work*, Donnellan mentions that Stanislavski’s obsession with details and sound effects eventually irritated Anton Chekhov, who threatened to “begin his next play with the line ‘Isn’t it incredible, such a hot summer and you can’t hear a cicada anywhere!’”⁵⁵ Although the emphasis on such details can be associated with the style of psychological realism, such choices did not serve purely aesthetic purposes; they were rather used as another decoy for the actor’s emotional activation.

‘Spur-of-the-moment’ and Recurrent Feelings

In addition to identifying potential lures for inner awakening, Stanislavski offers wisdom on the nature of acted emotion. He differentiates between ‘spur-of-the-moment’ and recurrent feelings. He admits that the former are highly desirable and proclaims: “may they visit us more often and intensify the truth of our emotions, which we prize more than anything in our performance.”⁵⁶ However, these ‘spur-of-the-moment’ strong emotions are not easily accessible and should not be forced to (re)appear. The actor should instead aim for what Stanislavski calls ‘recurrent feelings’ which are weaker but more accessible. Emotions should never be “faked, or replaced by something else, some convoluted actor’s trick.”⁵⁷ One should instead accept what is happening in that moment “no matter if it [the emotion] is weaker than

yesterday's. The good thing is that it is today's."⁵⁸ Stanislavski urges his students not to try to bring back an emotion that "has gone forever."⁵⁹ He stresses that one should focus on the *process* rather than the outcome: "Not think about the feeling itself but think about what made it grow, the conditions which led to the experience [...] Never start with the result. It will not come of itself."⁶⁰ One needs to focus on the lures and trust that they will encourage the appearance of emotion, rather than forcibly attempting to revive what was experienced previously, whether in real life or in rehearsal.

Thus, working on emotion memory is not necessarily about remembering a specific emotion that has been experienced in the past and trying to relive it; that would be like trying to revive a dead flower rather than planting new seeds. Working with emotion memory is about diving into a pool of countless crystallised memories and bringing some of that material back into the acting process—not as they were once lived, but as experienced in the present moment.

The following section will discuss the work of Michael Chekhov, who, as Simon Callow puts it, "swallowed" Stanislavski's "ideas whole and then spat them out again in radically different form."⁶¹ Chekhov's approach to emotion is simultaneously similar and radically different as the following discussion will reveal.

Michael Chekhov

Chekhov's book, *To the Actor*, begins with the observation that some actors experience feelings in rehearsal or on stage but fail to communicate them to the audience. He believes this is because of a lack of 'transparency' that would allow the actor's inner life to be seen and felt by others: these "wonderful thoughts and emotions are somehow trapped within their underdeveloped bodies."⁶² He therefore suggests that the actor's first and foremost concern should be to train her/his body in a way that will eventually turn it into a "sensitive

membrane, a kind of receiver and conveyor of the subtlest images, feelings, emotions and will impulses.”⁶³

In order to overcome the challenge of the resisting body that has not reached a state of transparency yet, the actor has to undertake a special kind of physical training. Chekhov acknowledges that gymnastics, fencing, dancing, and acrobatics are undoubtedly useful to the actor, but what is even more useful and essential for the craft is a physical training that awakens the actor’s inner life: a “special kind of development in accordance with the particular requirements” of the actor’s work.⁶⁴ These requirements are a “sensitivity of the body to the psychophysical creative impulses,” the “richness of the psychology itself,” and the “complete obedience of the body and psychology to the actor.”⁶⁵ Every element of Chekhov’s method could be argued to serve this purpose. The purpose of the training is not only to turn the body into a transparent membrane that will allow the inner life to be seen. The actor’s body will also become increasingly sensitive to impulses and sensations through the training, which will, in turn, encourage the awakening of a strong and rich inner life. Chekhov’s requirement for the student-actor to develop a sensitivity to the psychophysical impulses links to the above discussion on responsiveness. As discussed previously, Stanislavski also acknowledges the need for the actor to develop responsiveness to various stimuli through the training and encourages student-actors to become the ‘gardeners’ of their own souls. The key difference is that Chekhov places the focus specifically on the connection between the actor’s body and their inner experience. Working on the tangible body will allow the intangible inner life to grow stronger and become easily accessible.

Although Chekhov’s focus on the tangible body also echoes Stanislavski’s emphasis on the need for the actor to find conscious, tangible ways to access the subconscious, the emphasis on the physicality and its link to the actor’s inner life is much more pronounced in Chekhov’s methodology than in his teacher’s System. Yet, the Stanislavskian influences are

clear. Stanislavski was among the first theatre practitioners to identify and explore the psychophysical nature of actor training.⁶⁶ He understood that body and psyche are strongly interrelated, that they can't be studied separately, and that what happens to one greatly influences the other. Chekhov's important contribution is that he shifts the focus from the correlation between the two to the causation: a certain posture, gesture or movement can have a strong impact on the actor's inner life. The identification of the actor's body as a tangible and direct point of entry to the unruly feelings is of great importance. Chekhov's psychophysical approach finds utmost clarity in Psychological Gesture: the actor's psychology is distilled in one gesture that is capable of stirring their inner life, and helps them embody the character. Chekhov explains:

But is there such a key to our will power? Yes, and we find it in the *movement* (action, gesture). [...] The *strength* of the movement stirs our will power in general; the *kind* of movement awakens in us a definite corresponding *desire*, and the quality of the same movement conjures up our *feelings*.⁶⁷

The Psychological Gesture physicalises the super-objective (the character's desire/want/drive) and gives the actor a tangible point of entry to the character and their inner life: the line between 'inner' and 'outer' is not just blurred but completely removed. Chekhov "demonstrates that the body (simply and enigmatically) is the soul itself."⁶⁸

Qualities of Movement

Based on the above, the actor's body is both the point of entry to inner life, and the means by which emotions can, once awakened, be shared with the audience: the actor's body should become 'sensitive' and 'transparent.' The question, however, remains: how exactly can the actor access emotions safely, consistently, and with ease? Like Stanislavski, Chekhov warns us that artistic feelings cannot be ordered to come; they should instead be "coaxed by some technical means."⁶⁹ The most important and perhaps most direct pathway Chekhov has

discovered is the work with qualities. A physical action performed with a certain quality awakens sensations that in turn bring forth feelings. Chekhov explains:

Lift your arm. Lower it. What have you done? You have fulfilled a simple physical *action*. You have made a gesture. And you have made it without any difficulty. Why? Because, like every *action*, it is completely within your will. Now make the same gesture, but this time colour it with a certain *quality*. Let this quality be *caution*. You will make your gesture, your movement *cautiously*. Have you not done it with the same ease? Do it again and again and see what happens. Your movement, made cautiously, is no longer a mere physical action; now it has acquired a certain *psychological* nuance.⁷⁰

Chekhov points out that unlike emotional experiencing that is independent of the actor's will, moving with a certain quality is completely under their control. The actor must be careful not to try to force their emotions; they must trust that qualities awaken feelings 'easily and by themselves:' "sensation is [...] a kind of magnet which draws to it feelings and emotions akin to whatever quality you have chosen for your movement."⁷¹ The work on the actor's body mentioned above, allowing the inner to be experienced and seen through the outer, is preparing the student-actors for this moment. Their bodies are now very responsive to the stimuli, impulses, and sensations awakened by the qualities and the physical actions.

However, there is one more element that needs to be added to this process, in order for it to be successful: the element of repetition. Chekhov stresses this with almost every exercise described in *To the Actor*: the more time one devotes to an exercise, the more responsive to it and therefore more receptive to its benefits one becomes. The body becomes increasingly transparent; the feelings become stronger and more nuanced.⁷²

The link between sensations and feelings discussed earlier can provide a possible explanation for the efficacy of Chekhov's exploration of qualities of movement: the mechanisms triggering emotions are built on other mechanisms responsible for various regulatory reactions which ensure our survival, including the experience of sensations.⁷³

Activating (psycho)physical sensations is therefore the same as encouraging the appearance of emotions; sensation acts like a magnet which draws feelings to it, as Chekhov puts it. Rather than exploring the link between sensations and feelings through sense and emotion memory, like Strasberg and early Stanislavski, Chekhov focuses on the sensations that arise through moving in a certain way. Rather than attempting to activate feelings through revisiting memories of the actor's own emotionally loaded experiences, Chekhov simply suggests the exploration of qualities of movement. Artistic feelings are therefore accessed through the actor's body rather than their personal memories, which Chekhov rejects as a material for artistic creation, as they are deemed to be too personal, narrow and adulterated.⁷⁴

The question arises: how does an actor choose the appropriate quality? Chekhov simply suggests trial and error: one can try different qualities one after the other, or simultaneously. When working with more than one qualities simultaneously, the qualities explored merge into one sensation "like a dominant chord in music."⁷⁵ Chekhov adds that once the actor's feelings have been awakened, the actor is carried away, and their "exercise, rehearsal, or performance [finds] true inspiration."⁷⁶ He seems to suggest that once the actor's emotions are stimulated, everything else falls into place.

Objective Atmospheres

As previously discussed, emotions serve a very important purpose for Stanislavski: they are the strong if invisible link between the actor and the audience. For Chekhov, it is Objective Atmospheres that serve this purpose. There is a strong link between atmospheres and individual feelings; however, Chekhov emphasises that these are not one and the same. Although individual feelings often contribute to the atmosphere of a scene, atmospheres are not comprised of solely emotions. Every place, event, or phenomenon has its own objective atmosphere: the well-known example that Chekhov gives is the atmosphere of a road where a

fatal accident just took place. Each member of the crowd present feels the “strong, depressing, tortuous, frightening atmosphere of the scene.”⁷⁷ However, according to their individual personalities (compassionate, distant, cynical) and circumstances (relative, doctor, passer-by), they have different subjective feelings. As Chamberlain puts it:

We don't see atmospheres any more than we see the air or the wind, but we feel them and they affect how we behave. We can notice the ways in which people are moved by specific atmospheres in the way that we can see leaves moved in the breeze and, as no two objects are affected in the same way by a gust of wind but respond according to their own natures, so different people are affected differently by the same atmosphere.⁷⁸

If the director and the actors with the assistance of the members of the production team succeed in creating the right atmosphere, “the spectator will not be able to remain aloof from it.”⁷⁹ However, if the atmosphere is incorrect or lacking altogether, the audience fails to connect with the actors and to immerse in the world of the play; they therefore only acquire a dry, limited understanding of the play.⁸⁰ Atmospheres can therefore turn the cerebral into the visceral and, as a result, the audience that previously engaged only intellectually will begin to breathe and live together with the characters onstage once the right atmosphere has been created.

Atmospheres also affect the actor's inner life; they create a powerful field of energy that penetrates the actor and activates their individual feelings:

atmosphere exerts an extremely strong influence upon your acting. Have you ever noticed how, unwittingly, you change your movements, speech, behaviour, thoughts and feelings as soon as you create a strong, contagious atmosphere, and how it increases its influence upon you if you accept it and succumb to it willingly?⁸¹

The need for the actor to learn to surrender, also discussed in the previous section, is stressed again here: the more one succumbs to the atmosphere, the stronger its effect. Chekhov once

again echoes his teacher, urging the reader to forget the “clichés of yesterday’s acting” and surrender to the power of the atmosphere that will bring forth new emotions;⁸² these will in turn encourage “self-sprung new details and nuances.”⁸³ This state of creativity brings pleasure to the actor who takes great “delight” in observing their own creation.⁸⁴ This is a reference to the performer’s double consciousness: the actor can ‘suffer’ with the character, while simultaneously ‘taking great delight’ observing their own artistic creation.

Imagination, Visualisation, and the Emergence of ‘Purified Feelings’

Chekhov suggests that visualisation can also be used to awaken feelings: the actor imagines having a conversation with the character, asking them how they would perform a certain action, or how they would interact with another character. The performer watches the character’s ‘reply’ in their imagination.⁸⁵ This approach differs radically from Stanislavski’s; the character and actor are kept separate during the questioning process, until the actor is ready to step into the character’s shoes. The actor is creating an image of the other (the character) in full and then steps into it, whereas with Stanislavski, the actor gradually transforms themselves into the character. Chekhov believes that this method of questioning is effective, as by seeing the character in action, the actor is not only able to see the external, but also the inner life of their character. These images will gradually have a strong influence on the actor and the fellow-feeling will turn into feeling as with Stanislavski. Imagination can thus give the actor much richer material for inspiration than their personal lives. Chekhov points out that Shakespeare’s life was not at all as exciting as that of the characters he created. He expects a similar level of creativity from the actor: to keep exploring and asking questions until they are satisfied with the outcome.⁸⁶ This is when emotions are activated:

The image changes under your questioning gaze, transforms itself again and again until gradually (or suddenly) you feel satisfied with it. Thereupon you will find your emotions aroused, and the desire to act flares up in you! [...]

The time may come [...] when your image will become so powerful that you will be unable to resist the desire to incorporate it, to act it.⁸⁷

Chekhov maintains that the characters created through the use of the imagination are more interesting than those created by dry reasoning, or those created by actors that tend to impose their own “personal and unvarying mannerisms”⁸⁸ on their characters. The same stands for emotions. He proclaims that the source of inspiration for artistically-induced emotions should not be our personal experiences unaltered. This would have been a “dangerous” and “inartistic” mistake that some actors make leading to “unhealthy, hysterical phenomena.”⁸⁹

The absolute rejection of personal memories as a point of entry to acted emotion is a key difference between the two practitioners. According to Stanislavski, the actor could use personal memories, as long as an “artistic distance between the actor and the event portrayed” is maintained.⁹⁰ However, Chekhov rejects the use of personal emotions altogether. He maintains that since actors share their feelings with the audience; it is their duty to share “significant” and “artistically true” feelings,⁹¹ those emanating from the higher self rather than the insignificant and potentially egotistical emotions emanating from the everyday self. The actor should “arrive on stage as a greater, inwardly more significant being—both spiritually and morally.”⁹² Going one step further from Stanislavski’s concept of distilled and crystallised emotions, Chekhov talks about purified feelings:

The usual, everyday feelings are adulterated, permeated with egotism, narrowed to personal needs, inhibited, insignificant and often even anaesthetic and spoiled by untruths. They should not be used in art. Creative individuality rejects them. It has at its disposal another kind of feelings—those completely impersonal, purified, freed from egotism and therefore aesthetic, significant, and artistically true.⁹³

These purified artistic feelings are both real (the actor is deeply affected by them) and unreal: the actor is not traumatised by negative emotions experienced on stage, as they would have been if these same emotions were experienced in life.⁹⁴ As Lendley Black puts it, these

artistic emotions “come and go with creative inspiration.”⁹⁵ Another characteristic of these emotions is their compassionate nature. Chekhov explains that while performing, the actor is able to observe their creation (the character) and empathise with them: “the true artist in you is able to suffer for Hamlet, cry with Juliet, laugh about the mischief-making of Falstaff.”⁹⁶ Emotion no longer lies within the actor but in between the actor and the character. The actor is therefore deeply affected by the emotion while maintaining a safe artistic distance.

Love in Our Theatre: ‘Artistic Feelings’ Must be Infused with Love

Like his teacher, Michael Chekhov offers wisdom on the nature of acted emotion, in addition to identifying pathways to access it. He stresses that artistic feelings are different in nature to those experienced in daily life: “a closer inspection [...] will reveal that human feelings fall into two categories: those known to everybody and those known only to artists in moments of creative inspiration.”⁹⁷ Chekhov partly attributes this to the involvement of the higher creative self that purifies our personal emotions and turns them into art. As Chamberlain points out, “put simply, what Chekhov calls our higher ego is our ability to detach from our habitual self-centeredness and to see ourselves and the world in a more objective manner.”⁹⁸ Artistic emotions are also different because they always emanate from feelings of human love. Chekhov understands this love to be pure and “devoid of erotic elements; it is a love between one human being and another.”⁹⁹ These feelings of love also emanate from the higher self: “for it is from no other source but the higher self within us that our artistic, creative love derives.”¹⁰⁰

In one of his published lectures, entitled “Love in Our Theatre: Art or Profession?,” Chekhov stresses that the actor should approach hatred or any other so-called negative emotion with love.¹⁰¹ If that were not the case, he argues, the actor would not enjoy playing villains or experiencing on stage any of the so-called negative emotions, such as anger, fear

and sadness. Furthermore, the audience would not enjoy watching the actors portraying a negative character or experiencing a negative emotion if the whole creation was not based upon love:

Without this love, the hatred of the character would become so realistic, so ugly and repulsive, that we could not write or perform him in proper perspective. [...] And what would happen when the curtain went down? We and the audience would continue hating. Whom? Nobody in particular, not even the character that saturated us with this hatred. Nevertheless, the hatred would remain and infiltrate our workday lives [...]. That way lies failure for us as artists and irrationality as social beings.¹⁰²

While lack of human love leads to artistic failure, learning to approach all emotions, characters, and collaborators with love is extremely rewarding. Chekhov argues that “the small egos of our life” only bring contraction; on the contrary, artistic emotions infused with human love expand us: the actor’s talent flourishes the more they allow love to permeate their performance.¹⁰³ By depersonalising, infusing with love, and therefore purifying our emotions, we move from the personal to the universal, from life to poetry, and from everyday experience to art.

Conclusion

Summing up the above discussion, one of the key discoveries from reviewing the two practitioners’ approach to emotion is that emotions should not be sought directly as this can result in pushed, inauthentic feelings, *demonstrated* rather than *experienced*, as the brooch improvisation reveals; the actor should instead approach emotion *indirectly*, using lures or decoys such as tempo-rhythm, qualities of movement, objective atmospheres, and actions. The above discussion also reveals that the actor’s body can be a highly efficient entry point to inner awakening, as emotion is not at all a purely ‘inner’ experience, but rather, a psychophysical event. Another key discovery about the nature of acted emotion is that the emotions

experienced on stage are different to the ones experienced in life. Artistic emotions are infused with love; they are distilled and purified; they “come and go with creative inspiration,”¹⁰⁴ allowing the actor to maintain a safe artistic distance from the experienced state.

Although identifying the particular lures explored by Stanislavski and Chekhov is useful, what is perhaps more important is the realisation that emotion should be approached indirectly and that each theatre practitioner can discover new entry points to it. As Stanislavski explains, student-actors must focus on the process rather than the result: they must identify what allows emotion to grow and try to recreate similar conditions in the hope that it will re-appear, rather than trying to revive the emotion experienced in a previous performance or rehearsal, which would have been a futile attempt. Actors should not try to re-experience ‘yesterday’s emotion’ which has ‘gone forever,’ they should instead create the right conditions for a new emotion to appear *today*. These ‘right conditions’ can be achieved through the lures.

These insights shape not only my understanding of emotion in theatre and in life, but also my practice. Following Stanislavski, I searched for my own lures for emotional activation, which I thoroughly discuss in a PhD thesis entitled “Awakening the Actor’s Emotional Expressivity: A Psychophysical Approach.”¹⁰⁵ Emotion has been a key element of my practice, as has been the case for many other theatre practitioners. I argue that this is because, as Stanislavski observed: “if emotion immediately responds to the call [...] [t]hen everything falls into place spontaneously, in a natural way.”¹⁰⁶ Chekhov made a similar observation: when feelings are awakened, the explored “exercise, rehearsal, or performance [finds] true inspiration.”¹⁰⁷ The two practitioners are not interested in emotional involvement as an end in itself; they are in search of emotion because they have observed that outstanding acting is often the result of such emotional activation. What they are after is a strong, inspired performance. Both Stanislavski and Chekhov seem to believe that this comes with emotion.

Notes

1. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 191. Hapgood's translation has been used on this occasion, although I quote from Benedetti's translation on all other occasions. This is because Benedetti's translation refers to 'woodfowl' instead of 'wild animals' and it could be argued that Hapgood's 'wild animal' metaphor is more usable, even if only for its sheer simplicity.
2. Term used by Stanislavski to describe the highly technical actor that does not experience the life of the character but only demonstrates skilful representation. The term was used to differentiate this form of acting from Stanislavski's search for "the stage as art" acting, synonymous to *experiencing*. For a discussion on 'stock-in-trade' acting see Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 28–36.
3. Declan Donnellan, "Introduction", in Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, p. x.
4. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 58.
5. Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 28.
6. *Ibid.*, 38.
7. See for example the discussion on emotion memory in Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion*, 149: The actor "is not to worry about feelings or emotions, only the sensory objects—what he sees, hears, touches, tastes, smells, and what his is experiencing kinetically."
8. Welton, *Feeling Theatre*, 8–9
9. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 17.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Jean Benedetti, "Translator's Foreword" in Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, xxi.
12. *Ibid.*, xviii.
13. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 19.
14. See Tait, *Performing Emotions*, 90.
15. Sonia Moore as quoted by Peta Tait in Tait, *Performing Emotions*, 92.
16. Since Diderot and his *Paradox*, theatre practitioners and theorists have questioned the need for the actor's genuine emotional involvement to move an audience. See Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*.
17. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 16.
18. *Ibid.*, 294.
19. For other such neural mechanisms responsible for empathy, see Bernhardt and Singer, "The Neural Basis of Empathy," 1–23.
20. Brown, "Is Acting a Form of Simulation or Being," 107.
21. *Ibid.*, 114.
22. Hurley, *Theatre & Feeling*, 20.
23. James, "What is an Emotion?," 188–205.
24. Hurley, *Theatre & Feeling*, 20.
25. *Ibid.*

26. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 16.
27. Ibid.
28. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 157.
29. Welton, *Feeling Theatre*, 141–142.
30. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone as quoted by Welton in Welton, *Feeling Theatre*, 141.
31. Original emphasis. Welton, *Feeling Theatre*, 9.
32. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 42.
33. Ibid., 41.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 41–42.
37. Ibid., 111. It is important to note here that Stanislavski refers to a 'transformed object': a light bulb imagined to be a monster's eye.
38. Ibid., 76.
39. Ibid.
40. Sonia Moore as quoted by Susana Bloch in Bloch, "Alba Emoting: A Psychophysiological Technique to Help Actors Create and Control Real Emotions," 136.
41. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 279.
42. Ibid., 206: "the process of crystallization that takes place in our emotion memory."
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 224.
45. Ibid., 213.
46. Ibid., 226.
47. Ibid., 502.
48. Ibid.
49. For example, the Stanislavski scholar Sharon Marie Carnicke refers to tempo-rhythm in passing in her two chapters on Emotion in *Stanislavsky in Focus*: "through the varying tempos and rhythms of such physical motions the emotional content of performances can emerge." Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 151.
50. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 468.
51. See *ibid.*, 472.
52. Ibid., 473.
53. Ibid., 216.
54. Ibid., 213.
55. Declan Donnellan, "Introduction" in Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, xi.
56. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 208.
57. Ibid., 209.

58. Ibid., 207.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 218.
61. The other two members of this group were Meyerhold and Vakhtangov. Simon Callow, 'Foreword' in Chekhov, *To the Actor*, xvi.
62. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 2.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., 2–5.
66. Stanislavski might not have been the first to use the word psychophysical in the context of actor training as Jessica Beck points out, but he was arguably the one to make it popular. In her PhD thesis "Directing Emotion: A Practice-led Investigation into the Challenge of Emotion in Western Performance," Beck explains that the term psychophysical first appeared in print in a book written by the Delsartean actress Genevieve Stebbins in 1892. In Beck, "Directing Emotion," 61.
67. Original emphasis. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 63–64.
68. Liisa Byckling quoting from Chekhov, *Literaturnoye nasledye v dvukh tomakh*. 1, [Literary Legacy in Two Volumes] in Byckling, "Stanislavsky and Michael Chekhov," 48.
69. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 58.
70. Original emphasis. Ibid., 58–59.
71. Ibid., 59.
72. Ibid., 69.
73. Although Damasio does not specifically discuss sensations as being one of these mechanisms, pain and pleasure behaviours as well as certain basic reflexes, drives, and motivations can be argued to be strongly interlinked with the experience of physical sensations. For a more detailed discussion on the links between the various mechanisms that ensure homeostasis, please see Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 27–57.
74. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 89.
75. Ibid., 60.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., 51.
78. Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, 53.
79. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 48.
80. Ibid., 48–49.
81. Ibid., 49.
82. Ibid., 50.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.

85. For a discussion on Chekhov's use of visualisation and embodied imagination, see Jerri Daboo, "Michael Chekhov and the Embodied Imagination: Higher Self and Non-Self," *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 27, no. 3 (2007): 261–73.
86. "Ask the same question as many times as you have to, until your image shows you what you want to 'see.'" Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 29.
87. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 24; 31.
88. *Ibid.*, 27.
89. *Ibid.*, 90.
90. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 159.
91. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 89.
92. Malaev-Babel, "Michael Chekhov and Yevgeny Vakhtangov: A Creative Dialogue," 188.
93. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 89.
94. *Ibid.*, 90.
95. Black, *Mikhail Chekhov as Actor, Director, and Teacher*, 68.
96. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 90.
97. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 88.
98. Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, 52.
99. Chekhov, "Love in Our Theatre," 19.
100. *Ibid.*, 26.
101. *Ibid.*, 14–26.
102. *Ibid.*, 23.
103. *Ibid.*, 23–25.
104. Black, *Mikhail Chekhov as Actor, Director, and Teacher*, 68.
105. Evangelatou, "Awakening the Actor's Emotional Expressivity."
106. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 280.
107. Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 60.

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Disclosure statement

I hereby declare that no interest or benefit has arisen from the direct applications of my research.

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