

STANISLAVSKIJ: METHODOLOGY VERSUS METHOD

by

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Konstantin Sergeevic Stanislavskij is the name that, in the first half of the twentieth century, undoubtedly figures as the most notable in the realm of the performing arts. Above all, it is important to caution that this appreciation is made, not based on his aesthetic work, of which we cannot contemporaneously make a judgment, but on his techno-operative contribution. In Eastern and Central Europe he contributed decisively towards the eruption of a line of professionals who still today are distinguished by their technical and creative skills. In the west, he stimulated the definition of a “method” which, independently of the amends we can make nowadays, contributes towards the disciplining of a profession whose technical and artistic references present themselves frequently as confused and obscure. Notwithstanding this, we can verify above all that the Stanislavskij who made such a deep impression on the professional mentality in our part of the world is not the same who, at least in the last ten years of his life, concentrated on what he defined as **methodology of physical actions**, a proposition which distances itself from the commonly known references of the previous work about the character and its construction, which in life, revealed as worthy of such attention. The spread of Stanislavskij’s methodological experiments reached nowadays mainly through America, with editions that were not compiled by the author and whose translations we have some reasons to doubt. Through these works, “the method” can be conceived as an oversimplified construction which isolates the necessary subjectivity of the creative process, peculiar to the positive character presiding over the American civilization. It is within this rigid conception of “method” that, from our point of view, lays a misunderstanding of Stanislavskij’s work, reaching us in such an immediate and superficial manner. Instead, the development of his work defines a set of references and fundamental principles of creative performance in the dramatic arts, which indicate a methodology, i.e. an inter-subjectively operative structure that, nevertheless, takes into account the necessary achievement and the subjectivity inherent to the individual artistic process. This position has been founded mainly on the reading of **V. O. Toporkov**, an actor at Moscow’s Art Theatre who, in his book **Stanislavskij in Rehearsals***, describes his experience working with Konstantin Sergeevic during the last ten years of his life. We also resorted to the testimony of those who, especially in Eastern and Central Europe, continued and founded the group of concepts that Stanislavskij named **Methodology of the Physical Actions**.

Vasilij Osipovic Toporkov was a renowned artist of his time and in his artistic-cultural context when he became part of the cast at Moscow’s Art Theatre. Stanislavskij invited him to be part of a small group that, within the Art Theatre structure, would remain in the rehearsal room for years, in a work that justified the deserved laboratory reputation the institution was known for. Stanislavskij justified: “Our art is still dilettante, since we don’t

have a true theory; we don't know its laws, we don't even know the elements that compose it... we don't have any studies or exercises, we don't know what we should be training or developing. What is most surprising is that this doesn't bother many of us.”** It was about working on one or various creations that might never be shown to the public, but could function as the sediment of the Company's widespread experimental work, as well as for the structuring of Stanislavkij's technical-methodological conceptions. Stanislavkij, himself explained this to that group of actors: “...Do you understand the task you are faced with? I'll repeat once more – don't think: Show, think only: training, training, training...”** In this work, Stanislavkij starts from radically innovative principles (at least regarding the knowledge gained from American editions), organizing his life experience as an actor and director, now obviously based on a methodological perspective, a coherent and well-considered structuring in which the factors, being rooted in the actor's subjectivity, are not objective data but inter-subjective relational structures, elements of reference for creative and artistic practice. He explains: “When I leave this life I want to leave the basis of this technique with you. It is impossible to explain it through words; it should be assimilated through practice”. ** It is therefore, a practical, experimental and inter-subjective methodology. Its presuppositions: We cannot remember feelings nor fix them. We can only remember physical behaviour. Stanislavskij: “Start with the most simple physical actions and make them completely authentic (...) This way you'll believe in yourselves and in your actions. Take into consideration everything regarding your actions, especially the rhythm (...) If you can make your actions simple, according to the given circumstances, such actions will become psycho-physical actions.” ** The scheme of physical actions is the framework on which all the essence that constitutes human character is built. It reflects in an extremely expressive and convincing way, every feeling, every emotional experiences the character has gone through. Stanislavskij assumes the work on the methodology of physical actions as the final synthesis of a career in research. The reason why his structuring was sometimes labelled as being purely “mechanistic” is because this innovative methodology was only understood by very few people and is not yet completely clear for the rest. What is the essence of this methodology? Stanislavskij used to say that when we say “physical actions” we are not being true to the actor. They are psycho-physical actions, “but we call them physical actions to avoid going into useless philosophies”. The precision of the action, its accomplishment in a certain act of a performance, it's the basis of our art. By knowing exactly the actions and their logic, they then become a partition. How to carry out the action according to the partition, here, facing this audience, that's creativity.

Notes: * Toporkov, Vasilij Osipovic - Stanislavskij alle prove, Ubulibri, Milano, 1991

** Op. Cit. Our translation.

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