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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8dk6v530>

Journal

Stanislavski Studies, 5(1)

ISSN

2056-7790

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Publication Date

2017-01-02

DOI

10.1080/20567790.2017.1293890

Peer reviewed

‘There’s something about the “S” word...’: Acting on our impulses and analysing our actions

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It was November 2014 when Dr Paul Fryer and I sat down in his office at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance to brainstorm a possible collaboration with my own institution, the University of California, Riverside. As someone who identifies as an actor rather than a scholar, I was certain that, whatever the nature of the collaboration, it should focus on practice and performance as much as theory and history. And Paul was in total agreement. Our conversation went along the lines of (me), ‘It would be great to get to the bottom of why Stanislavsky’s legacy endures, despite all the revolutions in theatre and actor training and cognitive science over the last eighty years’. ‘Yes,’ says Paul, ‘there’s something about the “S” word that we can’t get away from.’ ‘That’s it,’ says I, ‘The S Word! That’s what we should call it.’ We envisioned a modest symposium – maybe thirty-five people and a pot of coffee. Little did we anticipate that our brainstorm and subsequent call for papers would lead to a wealth of high-calibre proposals.

Our primary impulse was to encourage lively debate. Maybe some of it would be hot, maybe some of it would even invoke a paradigm shift in how we consider actor training in the light of new knowledge surrounding human cognition and emotion. Therefore, the call for papers was formulated around a series of provocations. The first (contextualising) section – *Theory, History,*

Criticism – featured three provocations: (1) ‘What do our students know about Stanislavsky, and does it make any difference to their work?’ (2) ‘Was it really Stanislavsky’s system anyway?’ and (3) ‘Shouldn’t we move on now that we know so much more than Stanislavsky did about how the brain works?’ Obviously our intention with these provocations was to invite discourse around the relevance to our students of knowledge concerning Stanislavsky: What are the myths, the methods and the madnesses – and does it matter anyway? These provocations were also to raise debate around the influence of other practitioners on the evolution of Stanislavsky’s ideas, including Knebel, Demidov, and Michael Chekhov, and to question the degree to which his theories may have now become obsolete (not least in the realm of how emotion and memory ‘work’).

The second section – *Actor-Training* – raised the provocations: (1) ‘How are we using Stanislavsky (or not) to train our students for the 21st-century industry?’; (2) ‘Who says Stanislavsky has all the answers? (What about Strasberg, Meisner, Vakhtangov, *et al.*?); and (3) ‘Do we really need to teach our students about dead Russians? Aren’t there new and better training models?’ The main imperative here was to invite discourse about the nature of actor training across a broad spectrum, demonstrating perhaps hybrid forms that participants might have adopted to weave Stanislavsky’s system together with other methodologies. It also invited the real provocateur to step forth and say, ‘Stanislavsky’s system is no longer of relevance to me in my practice and/or teaching’. (Though, in the event, so strong a perspective was – perhaps encouragingly – not forthcoming.)

The third section – *Rehearsal Processes* – invited discussion around (1) ‘Do actors and directors even use Stanislavsky in the rehearsal room?; (2) ‘How do we use terminology in the rehearsal room – and who cares anyway?; and (3) ‘How can we possibly use Stanislavsky’s system for rehearsing postmodern and postdramatic pieces?’ Here we encouraged new insights into practical rehearsal practices, and what kinds of methods can effectively be used within the necessities of getting a show on its feet given our current playtexts and narratives.

The final section – *Performance Practices* – asked (1) ‘Does Stanislavsky’s system have any relevance to contemporary film and TV?; (2) ‘What relevance does Stanislavsky have to theatrical or performative forms not based on psychological realism, including dance, ballet, opera, drama theatre?; and (3) ‘How does what we now know about our brains influence the choices we make in performance – or does it make any difference?’ Our intention here was to address the wide range of acting environments in which we work as professionals or for which we are training our students. It also provided space for those exploring cognitive science, embodied knowledge, and enactivism, for example. In wording all of these provocations, Paul and I were taking playful sideswipes at our own scholarship, teaching and practice, as well as inviting our peers to enter their actors’ and students’ minds.

Perhaps it was the mischief laced through these provocations that garnered the large number of intriguing proposals – from practitioners, eminent scholars and learned historians, as well as animated high school teachers and their students. Unable to accept all the proposals – even those from some

valued friends and esteemed colleagues – we fashioned the symposium (which by now had grown to the size of an international conference rather than our imagined thirty-five people and a pot of coffee) into three strands. The first strand allowed for more traditional papers, including ‘Theory/History/Context’, ‘Actor Training’, ‘Heavyweights and global perspectives’, ‘Terminology’ and ‘Stanislavsky in the Classroom’. The second strand catered for practical presentations and mini workshops essentially around the themes of ‘Actor Training’ and ‘Devising/Rehearsing/Performing’. The third strand crossed borders between papers and panel presentations involving some of the themes of the practical sessions. We trusted that – although papers were limited to twenty minutes and practical workshops to 45-60 minutes – we were accommodating a range of presentation styles, which might in different ways share participants’ thinking and practice.

Furthermore, we recruited three symposium ‘witnesses’ – Niamh Dowling (Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance), Andy Jordan (University of Lincoln), Adrian Guirgea (Colgate University). Each was assigned to a particular room where they would attend the bulk of the presentations therein. Their charge was to note recurring themes and motifs, which would then be shared collectively during a plenary session at the end of the symposium. Paul and I were less concerned at this stage with constructing a narrative overview of the symposium, and more interested in harvesting the insights and impressions gleaned by our witnesses over their two-day experience.

Honouring our desire to focus on performance as much as analysis, my personal contribution to the symposium comprised my one-woman play, *Nell*

Gwynne: A Dramatick Essaye in Acting and Prostitution (a fact-based drama created for the Hollywood Fringe Festival in June 2015 and directed by Miles Anderson). The potential hubris of choosing to perform in front of an audience of Stanislavsky experts – amplified by their awareness of my own professed ‘expertise’ on acting as expounded through three books on Stanislavsky – mercifully only dawned on me twenty-four hours before the performance. Earlier thoughts about the reality of the situation (given the very recent publication of my highly autobiographical *Facing the Fear: An Actor’s Guide to Overcoming Stage Fright*) might have led to cancellation!

Emerging through the weekend was a strong thread of interest in Stanislavsky’s final legacy, Active Analysis. There were six contributions that focused on this aspect of Stanislavsky’s work, an aspect that up until a few years ago was not common currency in actor training in English-speaking programmes. Indeed, I was present at a Performance/Process symposium at Rose Bruford College in 1999, during which Jean Benedetti himself stated that there was no difference between the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis, a statement that would now be heavily disputed. As it turned out, ‘The S Word Symposium’ was more or less bookended by investigations into Active Analysis, beginning with Professor Sharon M. Carnicke’s impressive Stanislavski Centre/Routledge Annual Lecture – “‘Be Flexible’: Stanislavski’s and Knebel’s Legacy for Today’s Actors’ – and ending with an extract from a documentary that I’ve been working on: *Active Analysis: A Documentary Learning Resource*. (This resource has been created in collaboration with – and was presented at the symposium by – Associate Professor Root Park and undergraduate student

Andrew Golden, both from the Department of Theatre, Film and Digital Production at UCR). During the two days in between these bookends, there were various practical presentations involving Active Analysis, as well as papers that touched upon it, including David Jackson's 'Stanislavski, Emotion and the future of the UK conservatoire', and Julia Listengarten and Lyubov Weidner's 'From Active Analysis to "Ludic Structures": Acting Methodology of Anatoly Vasiliev'. That Active Analysis should feature so prominently in the symposium is noteworthy in and of itself. That there should be subtle and potentially conflicting uses of its principles is doubly provocative. Certainly, it raises questions as to how fixed a system or a practice should or shouldn't be. Indeed, the various interpretations of Active Analysis were, for me, the most provocative aspect of 'The S Word Symposium'. As I was logistically unable to attend all the Active Analysis-based contributions, I focus here on those presentations that I was able to observe.

In her fascinating keynote lecture, "'Be flexible": Active Analysis for the 21st-Century Actor', Carnicke emphasised the ways in which Active Analysis enables actors to be fluid enough to work across media and styles, applying the fundamental principles to film acting as much as to stage acting.

This lecture highlighted that, for Carnicke, the heart of those principles is the Action/Counter-action/Event sequence: in other words, the implicit struggle between the protagonist's action and the antagonist's counteraction, and the event that it invokes, is the most important aspect of the process. In fact, during her lecture I noted that my own implementation of Active Analysis (as learned in Moscow during the 1990s, with master teachers Albert Filozov, Katya

Kamotskaya and Vladimir Ananyev) was somewhat different. When I'm directing, I focus more explicitly on the four repeating steps of (1) read the scene; (2) discuss the scene; (3) improvise the scene; and (4) discuss the improvisation. While the discussion of (inciting) action and (resisting) counteraction is an intrinsic part of the process, it is not (for me) the point of departure. (Indeed, as I listened to Carnicke's lecture, I quizzed myself, "Am I actually doing Active Analysis right?" These were the very provocations that I had hoped the symposium would arouse.)

As a sidebar, Carnicke's work on film acting is perhaps less well known than her Russian scholarship among the Stanislavsky fraternity, so it was a pleasure to understand in this lecture her linking of film and theatre work. Indeed, she equated acting to the modulations of the pianist who hits the keys harder in order to be louder. So when transitioning between screen acting and stage acting, the instrument of the actor doesn't change, but rather the psychophysical modulations of 'hitting the notes harder or softer' does change. ('Harder' obviously being for stage work and 'softer' being for television or film.) This analogy was very helpful, as my experience of working with young actors in California (not far from the film capital of the world) has revealed that, for them, 'quiet equals true' and 'loud equals feeling untrue'. I often find myself in gentle competition with their desire to be heartfelt, yet utterly inaudible - though curiously this tends to occur more when they're speaking text rather than when they are improvising.

Improvisation (perhaps considered the most 'revolutionary' aspect of Active Analysis in Stanislavsky's time) featured prominently in the practical

presentations during 'The S Word Symposium'. Here again, the evolutions in twenty-first-century practice became evident. During my early years of regional repertory theatre in the UK, it was rare for any kind of off-text improvisations or games to be used in rehearsal. The restrictions of tight production schedules were partly the reason, along with the idea that any work not directly linked to learning the lines and 'blocking' the play was probably going to be a waste of time. Practices have changed, and the inclusion of improvisation in accessing the inner resonances of a text is both welcome and common today. This was particularly clear in the three practical presentations that I attended, which drew upon aspects of Active Analysis. Two of them, interestingly enough, focused on the improvisatory application of Active Analysis to classical texts.

Jay Paul Skelton's 'Rehearsing the Unexpected: Creating an Integrated Rehearsal Methodology for Classical Playtexts Using Active Analysis', provided a means of easing young actors into Shakespeare's complex language through their bodies and the bravery of making big, physical choices. Certainly, the foregrounding of Ann Bogart's Viewpoints demonstrated the facility of his two young actors in accessing their whole instruments through space. As Skelton reminded us, Viewpoints are 'points of awareness', and since the improvisatory nature of Active Analysis is to sharpen playfulness and presence, Bogart's methodology and Stanislavsky's rehearsal practice seemed to make for happy playfellows. Using a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, Skelton articulated the ways in which the improvisational quality of Active Analysis combines with the specifics of Viewpoints to dynamise a classical text for a contemporary actor. As the young actors (Naomi and John) worked the scene, their focus was placed on

the 'outside' rather than the 'inside' – the 'outside' being, for example, the spatial relationship between them or the physical architecture of the room. Such Viewpoints provided 'an exquisite pressure' (in Skelton's words), gently compelling the actors to respond to each other instantly with their intuition, and to 'live through the hot mess' created by each improvisation. I witnessed Naomi and John interweaving their exploration of Romeo and Juliet in the stage fiction with the actual given circumstances of the theatre space, including some playful interactions with the audience. (At the time of writing, I am acting with Tina Packer's Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Massachusetts, where the performance training and production work are renowned for their direct, impulsive-driven interactivity with the audience. So Skelton's encouragement of actor-audience connection was particularly pleasurable for me, as my current practice-led research is correlating S&Co's aesthetic with Stanislavsky's toolkit.) The physicality of the exercises – with an emphasis on 'expressive gesture' – was a means, as Skelton described it, of ensuring that 'thought is action', as it 'makes the actors put the action verbs straight into their bodies'. Naomi and John indeed were courageous and committed in all their moment-by-moment choices.

The second classically orientated presentation was John Gillett's 'Is Active Analysis relevant to Shakespeare? – a workshop with actors on a piece of Shakespeare's text' (again of particular interest given my current research). Certainly Stanislavsky was working on Shakespeare's texts throughout the course of his life, and my own training in Active Analysis in Moscow kicked off with scenes from *The Tempest*. So I was already sympathetic to Gillett's

proposition. In this workshop, Gillett applied the aspects of Active Analysis that he was interested in investigating to Act III, Scene i of *Hamlet* (in which Ophelia returns letters to Hamlet under the secret surveillance of her father). Gillett described his desire to unite the components of intuition, imagination, observation and the actors' personal experience within the exercises. Drawing upon Knebel's emphasis on the inseparability of speech from tasks and actions, he introduced us to his integration of the given circumstances of the text with verbal and physical actions. With some hints of Meisner in the mix (as I intuited it), Gillett set up a brief exercise where the two students sat opposite each other, scripts in hand, and (1) looked at their line of text; (2) made imaginative sense of it; (3) looked at their scene partner; and (4) spoke the line, taking the energy from the scene partner rather than trying to give a studied delivery of the text. Thereafter, he led his actors through a series of improvisations – which were very close to the lines and structure of Shakespeare's text, but were delivered in the actors' own words. Each time that the scene was improvised, Gillett gave them a different provocation, such as reminding them of the given circumstances of the scene (e.g. it's a public place, both characters know it's a set-up, etc.) in order to test how that information might increase the temperature of the encounter. Sometimes he added an obstacle (the details of which would subtly shift the actors from self to character). Again, the two young students were committed and adept, and they responded fluidly to each other's shifts.

The third practical presentation that I was able to attend (in part) was 'Reading Stanislavsky backwards: ARTEL's collective creation processes as a

way to understand Active Analysis'. Here the raw material was the story of Red Riding Hood. At the root of ARTEL's devising and training practices are what the two company founders, Olya Petrakova and Bryan Brown, call Bodystorming and Playstorming (as opposed to brainstorming). As they knead material for a potential project into creative dough, they saturate participants in the devising process by playing freely with the material. They described how, as creators, they like to work with fairy tales. The innate emphasis on archetypes rather than psychology with fairy tales liberates the actors to work from the impulses of those archetypes, rather than fretting over intricate, psychological motivations. In this workshop presentation, Brown and Petrakova set up a group improvisation, involving the interaction of a number of different Red Riding Hoods, wolves and woodcutters. Accompanied by Brown's reading of the fairy story, the studio became alive with actors responding to each other vibrantly, imaginatively and boldly. Given their heritage in theatre practices from Russia, Eastern Europe and America, there were reminiscences of the ensemble improvisations that I had experienced in Moscow and which were influenced by Grotowski's work in Poland. Although unable to witness the entire workshop, I sensed in ARTEL's methodology the great pleasure of playfulness (or as Stanislavsky might put it, 'a constant state of inner improvisation'), which lies at the heart of Active Analysis.

It's always a source of excited curiosity to share peers' practice with them. I also appreciate that the time limitations imposed within any symposium or conference lead to presentations comprising quick and incomplete snapshots of complex processes. Therefore, it was with gratitude that I was able to witness

the generous presentations of Skelton, Gillett, Brown and Petrakova. That said, I would be failing my own remit if I had not been provoked by the experience. To which end, my particular provocation – arising in active response to the impulses of ‘The S Word Symposium’ – would be: What exactly *is* Active Analysis? Is there a ‘true’ process that must be followed? And how do we know? Carnicke’s *Stanislavsky in Focus* (first published in 1998, with a Second Edition by Routledge in 2008) and Irina and Igor Lewin’s *The Stanislavsky Secret: Not a System Not a Method but a Way of Thinking* (Meriwether, 2002) are compelling and invaluable insights into Active Analysis. My account of Active Analysis as learned in Moscow was published fifteen years ago as *Beyond Stanislavsky: A Psycho-Physical Approach to Actor Training* (Nick Hern Books, 2001). Soon the market will be abuzz with more material. James Thomas’s *A Director’s Guide to Stanislavsky’s Active Analysis: Including the Formative Essay on Active Analysis by Maria Knebel* was published by Bloomsbury in September 2016. An English translation of Maria Knebel’s seminal *Active Analysis* is set for October 2016 (Routledge). This will be followed by David Chambers’ *From Stanislavsky to Today: Active Analysis for Actors and Directors* in early 2017 (Routledge). My aforementioned documentary, *Active Analysis: A Documentary Learning Resource* is scheduled for imminent digital release. In a matter of months, the debate about Active Analysis – what is it, how should it be implemented in the rehearsal room, what are its benefits and what are the precedents? – will likely be hot.

I found myself both deeply inspired and appropriately provoked by the contributions during ‘The S Word Symposium’. And I found myself asking how

much of what we're calling Active Analysis really *is* Active Analysis. To what extent might some of us be using improvisatory practices that have been around since Keith Johnstone and before to dress afresh our rehearsal-room methodology as 'Active Analysis'? And are we okay with that? And does it matter anyway? If at the end of the day we're adopting and adapting methods to ensure that acting evolves as a vibrant and necessary art form, does it really matter what we call it? In my heart, I think the answer is yes. We should be clear that Active Analysis is a precise rehearsal process – arguably foregrounding Action/Counter-action/Event, arguably following a repeatable sequence of Read, Discuss, Improvise, Discuss the Improvisation. Yet, to quiz this issue further and potentially reach some anchored conclusions, the intention is to hold a sister event – 'The S Word: A Practical Research Laboratory' – at the University of California, Riverside in March 2018. The remit will be to ask ourselves exactly what and how Active Analysis is, has been, and might be incorporated into actor training and theatre-making processes in the future. To uphold the tenets of Active Analysis (as I understand them), I intend the Practical Research Laboratory to remain playful, inquisitive and collaborative. I hope that we shall put our impulses under the microscope and analyse our actions to see how we might take this vibrant way of accessing a text (or indeed creating one?) into the twenty-first century. Watch this space.