

KONSTANTIN SERGEYEVICH STANISLAVSKI

By Franco Ruffini

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski (1863-1938) was the founder of the Moscow Art Theatre which, apart from being a model, is also an essential point of reference for twentieth century theatre. He was one of the inventors of theatre direction and also the greatest scientist within the actor's art. His discoveries, handed on under the name of the "system", have changed the way acting can be approached, not only by those who practice it, but also by those who study it. He was a theatre master.

Stanislavski can also be considered a *master of thought*, independently of theatre. For two reasons. The first is the way in which he resolved the problem of the *transmission of experience* through the written word. The second is the practical and systematic work which he conducted on the borderline *between body and soul*, regardless of its utilization in a performance. He built, *as a program*, a system for the actor's work, while his thought built *objectively* a kind of yoga for work on oneself.

Unlike what occurred for other 20th century masters, Stanislavski's theatre thinking developed as a reflection - hidden or explicit - which took its starting point from the events of his life. This is why it is possible to expound Stanislavski's thinking following the thread of his biography.

Stanislavski was born in Moscow on 5th January 1863, the second son of a group of ten in a family of rich and enlightened entrepreneurs, the Alexeyevs. He changed his name to Stanislavski in 1884, when he entered the professional theatre. His passion for the stage stayed with him for his entire life. In 1877 he opened a small theatre in Liubimovka, his family's country house. The "Alexeyev circle" was born, in which the whole family devoted itself to acting in various roles. In 1888, with Alexander Fedotov, a well known actor and man of the theatre, he started the "Society of Art and Literature". This is the beginning of his professional period with his first attempts at directing and his experiments as an actor through every form of imitation. His most significant experience in this period was *Othello*, in 1896, in which Stanislavski learnt at his own expense that one cannot force emotion.

A decisive turning point was in 1897. In a memorable encounter with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, the well known theatre critic and established playwright, the project of the Moscow Art Theatre took shape. The opening came a year later, with *Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich*. Among the many productions of the first seasons, were *The Seagull* by Chekhov (1898), which is the symbolic baptism of the

Art Theatre, *The Lower Depths* by Gorki (1902) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). The Chekhovian productions remained in the repertoire during the following decades, thus fixing a model for the staging of the texts of the greatest theatre poet of the age. Stanislavski's image as a director in these years is characterised by a style based on melancholic tones, accurate realism and vivid crowd scenes.

In 1905 Stanislavski created a Studio with Meyerhold to put the innovations of Symbolism to the test. These are the first attempts at a different relationship with the text. But Meyerhold's path had starting points too far away from Stanislavski's and the Studio closed the same year. In January 1906 the Art Theatre company left for its first tour abroad. In Berlin they were received triumphantly. In particular Stanislavski's interpretation of Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* by Ibsen was highly acclaimed. It was the character he had successfully played for more than five years in Russia. On his return from the tour, Stanislavski allowed himself a brief holiday in Finland. It was there that thinking about his interpretation, and disappointed by it, Stanislavski conceived the first embryo of his "system".

This is how Stanislavski remembers Dr. Stockmann: "After having read the play, I understood it immediately. I relived it and acted the part already at the first rehearsal... The body and soul of Stockmann and Stanislavski merged organically, one with the other." But in Finland, rethinking his work, Stanislavski realised that the organic fusion was no longer there: only the body remained. Every evening the character's gestures and attitude presented themselves unchanged, but this happened just because of "muscular memory". The memories and the live emotions that justified those actions had been lost.

"How can I preserve the role from this gradual spiritual death?" Stanislavski asked himself. The difference – or rather the opposition – between the "actor's condition" and the "creative condition" became clear. It was necessary to feel the scenic truth *as if* it was the real truth in order to reach and maintain the creative condition. From now on Stanislavski would dedicate his research on the "system" to making that *as if* function technically, trying to induce "the soul to believe". Later he would realise that "if the body doesn't begin to live, the soul doesn't believe". And this will be, after his qualms in Finland, the other revolution in Stanislavski's life in art.

From 1906, his productions are above all stages in the gradual growth of the "system". Stanislavski definitively realised that the external action must always be associated with a corresponding inner action. In 1911 *Hamlet* opened, directed by

Gordon Craig. A great event, typical of that farsighted egoism that characterised Stanislavski's generosity.

The true testing ground of the "system" was the First Studio, inaugurated in 1912. Stanislavski called his friend Leopold Sulerzhitski to direct it. "The good Suler", as he was called, had little experience of theatre but a profound insight into human beings. The First Studio was made famous by *The Cricket on the Hearth*, an adaptation from Charles Dickens which opened on 24th November 1914. But success was followed by an irreversible crisis. After the First Studio, a Second Studio, the Checkhov Studio (led by the actor Michael Checkhov, nephew of the great playwright) and then the Vachtangov Studio were created. All these Studios were enlivened by a theatre vision that distanced itself from the performance as an immediate product and favoured instead the process of growth, merely considering the performance as a far off goal.

On 11th January 1916, the Art Theatre started rehearsing *The Village of Stepanchikovo* by Dostoyevski. Stanislavski had just played *Mozart and Salieri* by Pushkin. This performance had shown him that it's not enough that "the soul believes". He sensed the decisive importance of music or of something equivalent with a similar function. *The Village of Stepanchikovo* was the dramatic turning point between a way of working totally based on reliving (*perezhivanie*) and a new way, in which it was above all the "body that lives" which induces the soul to believe. Stanislavski immersed himself fully in the "given circumstances" to let them trigger the action for each tiny section of his part. He worked for a whole year in this way, but without success. After a disastrous dress rehearsal on 28th March 1917, Nemirovich-Danchenko took his part away and gave it to another actor. To be faithful to his research, Stanislavski paid the most humiliating price for an actor with his experience and fame.

From 1918 to 1922 he worked at the Bolshoi theatre, creating an Opera Studio where, amongst other things, he concentrated on the research on tempo-rhythm as a direct physical way towards feeling.

From 1922 to 1924 the great Euro-American tour took place. Already famous, the tour consolidated the consecration of Stanislavski to the point of transforming him into an icon. It was abroad that he started to write his first book, *My Life in Art* in 1924. In Russia, in its definitive and much more articulated version, *My Life in Art* was published in 1926.

After the return from America, the commitment to stage productions became less intense than in the past. The teaching activity, on the other hand, grew.

In 1926 the Opera Studio became the Stanislavski Studio. Besides the staging of operas, the research involving the “physical way” of the actor’s work continued. From 1930, preparation started for the printing of *An Actor’s Work on Himself*. The collaboration with Elizabeth Reynolds - who was responsible for the American edition - is at the root of many misunderstandings of Stanislavski’s thinking.

In 1935, Stanislavski established his final Studio, the Opera-Dramatic Studio. Meanwhile, in the secret of his own home, he went about revolutionising the “system”. At the end of his life, without denying or contradicting it, he considered it as a starting point to advance his research. In 1938, notwithstanding the concrete danger that this act of solidarity could bring about, he welcomed into his Studio his great rival, Meyerhold, whose theatre had been closed by Stalin.

He died in Moscow on 7th August 1938. *Tartuffe*, which was the last activity of his Studio, opened on 4th December 1939.

Stanislavski’s life stretched from the reign of the Tsars to Stalinism, passing through the 1917 October Revolution. In the small world of theatre, this meant: from the amateurism and patronage of the rich to the nationalisation of theatres and state funding. In this arc of extreme opposites, Stanislavski remained faithful to a theatre vision as a practice of ethical dignity. In the Moscow Art Theatre he created a place where the actor could be free from the slavery of the tour, the roles and the market, but assuming full responsibility for these liberties. He completed the transition from actor manager to director, rejecting from the very beginning its more authoritarian aspects. He conceived the director as the actors’ more expert companion and “first spectator”. He substituted the “actor’s condition” in which s/he simulates feelings that are not his/her own for what he called the “creative condition”. In this particular state the actor relives emotions making them evident in such a way that the spectator cannot avoid sharing them.

Translation: John Dean
