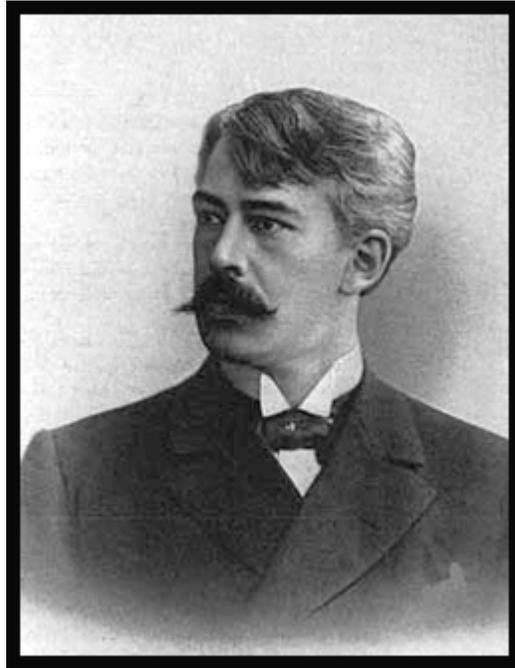


# *Building a Character*



*by* **CONSTANTIN  
STANISLAVSKI**  
*(1863-1938)*

Stanislavski's first book, *An Actor Prepares* concentrates on the inner imaginative process. The next book in the series, *Building a Character*, deals with *the physical realization of character on the stage - expressions, movement, speech etc.* It was originally intended to be published as part of the same book, but the decision was taken to publish separately due to the length of 'AAP'.

What follows is a very brief summary of each chapter in *Building a Character*.

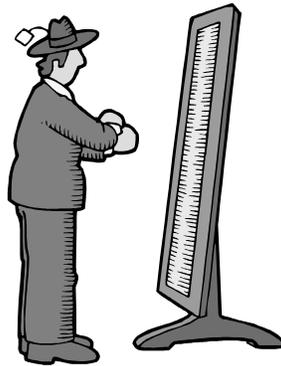
## 1. TOWARDS A PHYSICAL CHARACTERISATION

"Each person evolves an external characterization out of himself according to his intuition and his observation of himself and others."



Tortsov demonstrates 'external disguises' to his students. Eg. He pulls his mouth into different positions (which alters the way he speaks), walks as if he is lame, walks with a humped shoulder, turns his feet out, etc. Each time, his character is transformed. Tortsov also comments how as he takes on these external disguises, his internal faculties are stimulated. **"His inner faculties responded to the external image he (Tortsov) created"**

## 2. DRESSING A CHARACTER



In this chapter, as part of a dressing up exercise, Kostya creates a character, which he names, "the Critic". His makeup, shoes, costume, physical characterization etc transform him, but he comments, "...while I was playing the part of 'The Critic' I still did not lose the sense of being myself.... I derived him from my own nature. I divided myself, as it were, into two personalities. One continued as an actor, the other was an observer.

### 3. CHARACTERS AND TYPES



This chapter explores the difference between stereotypical (or vague) characterization and the creation of individuality. It describes the physical creation of old age by examining the given circumstances of old age (the hardening of muscles, the stiffening of joints, the inability to bend the knees more than 90 degrees, ect).

#### 4. MAKING THE BODY EXPRESSIVE



Advocates the use of gymnastics and ballet to develop and **control** the use of the body. The director claims that a body with physical defects distracts from the impression he creates. He stresses the importance of exercise for the body as well as the mind. For example, he links acrobatics and tumbling with an actor 'jumping' into a difficult moment on stage. Thorough rehearsal and training is vital to ensure that the 'jumps' become second nature.

**"When you have developed will-power into your bodily movements and actions, it will be easier for you to carry it over into living your role and you will learn how, without thinking, to surrender yourself instantly and utterly into the power of intuition and inspiration."**

## 5. PLASTICITY OF MOTION

We need **"simple, expressive actions with an inner content"**

**"External plasticity is based on our inner sense of the movement of energy."**

The director claims that motion has to become part of your being. **"Energy, heated by emotion, charged with will, directed by the intellect"** stirs you to external activity.

Every actor must be aware of individual muscles and joints. We have to learn to walk.

The director encourages students to imagine the fluid passage of a ball of mercury through the muscular system, in order to imagine and then create fluency in movement. He links this fluency to the **unbroken line**. He states that energy must travel along an unbroken line to create fluency and plasticity of movement.

Tempo-rhythm is essential to plasticity.

**"The inner line of movement... is the basis of plasticity"**

**"At the foundation of plasticity of movement one must establish an inner flow of energy"**. This must be coordinated with **"the measured beat of tempo and rhythm"**.

**"External plasticity is based on our inner sense of the movement of energy"**.

## 6. RESTRAINT AND CONTROL



**"An actor must rid himself of all superfluous gestures."**  
Tortsov likens a performance which is cluttered with unnecessary gestures to a piece of paper covered with blotches. The paper must be clear before someone can create a sketch.

**"An excessive use of gesture dilutes a part"**

**"Unrestrained movements make his performance unclear."**

Art begins with the slightest of touches:

**"We need only the slightest touch or two to make a role come to life, to reach its finished form. Without those slightest of touches it will lack the brilliance of a perfect finish."**

## 7. DICTION AND SINGING



This chapter analyses the qualities of vowels and consonants, and demonstrates the use of singing to explore and expand the vocal range.

The director states that every actor must be in possession of excellent diction and pronunciation. He compares an audience listening to an actor with poor speech to trying to read bad handwriting.

**"Pronunciation on the stage is as difficult an act as singing, it requires training and a technique bordering on virtuosity."**

It important for an actor to study every letter of the alphabet - to **"acquire the feel of vowels and consonants... get inside them."**

**"Every actor must be in possession of excellent diction and pronunciation. He must feel not only phrases and words but also each syllable, each letter."**

For Stanislavski, actors must acquire an "unbroken line of sound"

## 8. INTONATION AND PAUSES

Stanislavski warns against mechanical speech; **“the thoughtless, parrot-like pronunciation of lines learned by heart without any regard for their inner essence”**

Key to this chapter is the importance of subtext in the delivery of lines; **“it is the subtext that makes us say the words we do in a play”**. The inner images provide the path to subtext. The director claims that what we call the through-line as related to action has its equivalent in the subtext, as related to speech.

Stan explains that to a foreigner, the word 'love' is an empty assortment of letters, but coloured with thoughts, feelings and imagination, 'I love' acquires the power to fire a man with passion and change the course of his whole life. Similarly, the word 'onward' when inwardly coloured by patriotic emotion is capable of leading regiments to sure death.

"There should never be any soulless or feelingless words used on the stage."

"To hear is to see what is spoken of, to speak is to draw visual images."

The printed play is not finished until performed and brought to life - the same as a musical score, which is not a symphony until it is executed by the orchestra. It is up to the actor to compose the music of his feelings to the text of his part and learn how to sing those feelings in words.

"To an actor a word is not just a sound, it is the evocation of images. So when you are on stage you speak not so much to the ear as to the eye."

The importance of making the other characters see the pictures made by one's words. How the first actor must adapt to the second actor's reactions.

"To speak is to act."

"Concentrate on the meanings behind the words. Forget entirely about the feelings and put all your attention on the inner images."

"Logical pauses unite words into groups and they divide the groups from one another."

"Actors must be familiar with all phonetic patterns."

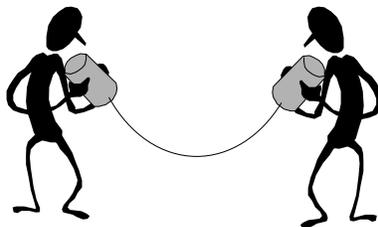
**"There are logical pauses (semantic) and psychological pauses."**

"The psychological pauses will boldly step in at places where a logical or grammatical pause seems impossible."

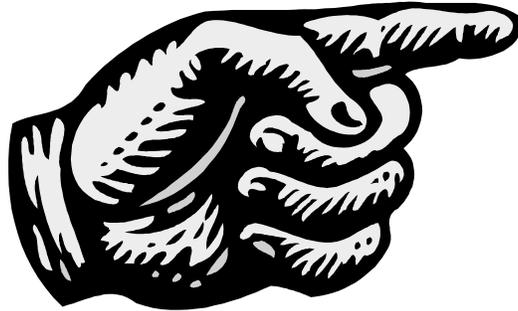
The logical pause adds intelligibility; the psychological pause adds life to the thoughts, phrases and measures. It helps to convey the subtext. The psychological pause is an **"eloquent silence"** BUT **"do not drag them out for no good reason"**.

"Intonations and pauses in themselves possess the power to produce a powerful emotional effect on the listener."

"Loudness is not power, it is only loudness."



## 9. ACCENTUATION: THE EXPRESSIVE WORD



"A stress misplaced distorts a word or lames a phrase."

"The accent is a pointing finger. It singles out the key word in a phrase. In the word thus underscored we shall find the soul. The inner essence, the high point of the subtext."

"Do not speak to the ear but to the eye of your partner on stage."

"Before you learn how to add accents (stresses) you must learn how to diminish them."

"Have a vivid inner vision of the thing you are talking about."

"Accent can be combined with intonation and the latter will colour a word with varied shades of feeling."

"The great goal of our art is to create the life of a human spirit in a role or a play."

## 10. PERSPECTIVE IN CHARACTER BUILDING

"An actor is split into two parts when he is acting."

Monotony is to blame for a descending scale of impressions gathered from a good play, well acted and produced.

"The word 'perspective' means: The calculated harmonious inter-relationship and distribution of the parts in a whole play or role."

"Hamlet, as a figure in a play, has no idea of perspective. He knows nothing about of what the future has in store for him,

whereas the actor who plays the part must bear this constantly in mind, he is obliged to keep in perspective."

"You must have the depth, the perspective, the far away beckoning goal in mind."

"Everything happens for the sake of two elements: perspective and the through line of action."

## 11. TEMPO-RHYTHM IN MOVEMENT



"Tempo is the slowness or fastness. It hastens or draws out the action, hastens or slows up speech."

The varying speeds and timings of the actions and speech on stage coincide to produce a rhythm.

"You must get accustomed to disentangling and searching out your own rhythm from the general organized chaos of speed and slowness going on around you on the stage."

"We do use tempo-rhythm but not the same one for all participating in a scene on stage."

"We make combinations of all sorts of different speeds and measures."

"You cannot get along with just one tempo-rhythm. You must combine several of them."

"The overall tempo-rhythm of a dramatic production usually creates itself accidentally, of its own accord."

12. SPEECH TEMPO-RHYTHM



"A measured, resonant, well blended speech possesses many qualities akin to those of music and singing."

"Our feelings are directly worked upon by tempo-rhythm."

13. STAGE CHARM

"Art lends beauty and nobility, and whatever is beautiful and noble has the power to attract."



#### 14. TOWARD AN ETHIC FOR THE THEATRE

The atmosphere surrounding an actor on the stage and the atmosphere in the auditorium contribute to a creative dramatic style.

An actor has to work at a fixed hour and to do so needs order, discipline and a code of ethics.

**"Love art in yourself and not yourself in art."**

"Never come into the theatre with mud on your feet. Leave your dust and dirt outside."

"In spite of my great admiration for individual splendid talents I do not accept the star system. Collective creative effort is the root of our kind of art. That requires ensemble acting."

**"The rehearsal merely clarifies the problems that an actor needs to work on at home."**

**"Every actor is obliged to develop his own creative will and technique."**



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***Recommended additional work:***

- Read *Building a Character* and expand on the above notes.
- Read *My Life in Art* and *Creating a Role* and make notes.
- Read *An Actor Prepares*.
- Read biographies and studies of Stanislavski.

