
Stanislavski's Preface to "An Actor Prepares"

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Stanislavski's Preface to *An Actor Prepares*

Burnet M. Hobgood, translator

These three items from the preface to the
1938 Soviet edition of *An Actor Prepares*
are translated by permission of the Stanislavski estate.
—B.M.H.

Dedicatory Inscription by Stanislavski to his Wife

I dedicate my work to my best pupil, favorite actress and unstintingly
devoted helper in all my theatrical quests: Maria Petrovna Lilina

Preface

I have planned a large undertaking in many volumes about the mastery of acting (the so-called "Stanislavski system").

The already published book, *My Life in Art*, is the *first* volume, appearing as the introduction to this undertaking.

The current book, concerning "*work on the self*" in the creative process of "*experiencing*," is the *second* volume.

In the near future I am starting the composition of a *third* volume, which will discuss "*work on the self*" in the creative process of "*embodying*."

The *fourth* volume I will devote to "*work on the role*."

Simultaneously with this book I should put out a supplement, a sort of exercise book with a whole series of recommended exercises ("Training and drill").

I am not doing this now, so as not to be diverted from the main line of my large undertaking, which I consider more important and urgent.

As soon as the chief fundamentals of the "system" have been expressed, I will start work on the composition of the auxiliary exercise book.

2

Both this book and those to follow do not have pretensions of a scholarly kind. Their aim is exclusively practical. They try to convey what I've been taught by long experience as an actor, director, and teacher.

3

The terminology which I use in this book was not invented by me, but is taken from practice, from students themselves and from beginning performers. In the midst of

their work they defined their creative feelings with words. Their terminology is valuable, since it is familiar and understandable to beginners.

Don't try to find scholarly roots in it. We have our own theatrical lexicon and our own actors' jargon, which life itself has created. To be sure, we do make use of scholarly words—for example, "the subconscious" and "intuition"—but they are used by us not in a philosophical, but rather in the simplest workaday meaning. It's not our fault the domain of stage art is disdained by scholars, that it has remained unexplored and that we have not been given the words for practical work. We had to do what we could, so to speak, with home-made means.

4

One of the chief problems pursued by the "system" is the natural arousal of creativity of an organic nature with its subconscious.

This is discussed in the last chapter of the book (Chapter 16). *This part should be considered with exceptional attention, because it contains the essence of creativity and of the whole "system."*

5

One should speak and write about art simply and clearly. Abstruse words intimidate the student. They are exciting to the brain, but not to the heart. The consequence is that, at the creative moment, the human intellect crushes the artistic emotion with its subconscious, which has had a considerable role in our approach to art.

But it is difficult to speak and write "simply" about the complex creative process. Words are too concrete or crude for conveying elusive, subconscious sensations.

These conditions compelled me to seek for this book a special form, which will help the reader to feel what is stated in printed words. I attempt to achieve this by the use of graphic examples and by descriptions of students' school work on exercises and etudes.

If my device succeeds, the printed words of the book will be brought to life by the feelings of the readers themselves. Then it will be possible for me to explain to them the essence of our creative work and the basis of psycho-technique.

6

The dramatic school, about which I speak in the book, and the people active in it, do not exist in reality.

Work on the so-called "Stanislavski system" began long ago. At first I wrote down my notes not for publication, but for myself, to aid the investigations I was conducting in the area of our art and its psycho-technique. The people, expressions, and examples that I needed for illustrations were taken from that distant time, the pre-war period (1907–1914).

And so imperceptibly, from year to year, a lot of material accumulated on the "system." Now a book has been created out of this material.

It would take a long time and it would be difficult to change its cast of characters. It would be even more difficult to combine examples and specific expressions taken from the past with the life style and the characteristics of the new Soviet people. One would have to change the examples and look for other expressions. This would be even longer and more difficult.

But what I am writing about in my book belongs not to a specific era and its people, but rather to the organic nature of all peoples of an artistic nature, of all nationalities and of all eras.

Frequent repetition of the same ideas, which I consider important, is done deliberately.

Let the readers forgive me for this reiteration.

7

In conclusion I consider it my pleasant obligation to thank those persons who in one way or another helped me in the work of this book by their advice, suggestions, materials, etc.

In the book *My Life in Art* I spoke about the role played in my artistic life by my first teachers, G. N. and A. F. Fedotov, N. M. Medvedeva, F. P. Kommisarshevski, all of whom first taught me to approach art; and, as well, my comrades in the M. A. T., chiefly V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, all of whom in our common work taught me very many, extraordinarily important things. Always, and especially now in putting out this book, I have thought and think of them with heartfelt gratitude.

Turning to those persons who helped me in putting into practice the so-called "system," in the creation and production of this book, I first of all address my constant companions and faithful helpers in my theatrical activities. With them I began my artistic work in early youth, with them I continue to serve my profession even now, in old age. I am speaking of Honored Artists of the Republic Z. S. Sokolova and V. S. Alekseyev, who have helped me put into practice the so-called "system."

I cherish the memory of my late friend L. A. Sulerzhitski with great gratitude and love. He was the first to recognize my initial experiments toward a "system," he helped me work it out in the early stages and put it into practice, and he encouraged me in moments of doubt and failing strength.

The director and teacher of the Opera Theater named after me, N. V. Demidov, rendered great help to me in putting the "system" into practice and in the creation of this book. He gave me valuable advice, materials, examples; he told me his opinions of the book, and uncovered mistakes I had made. For this assistance it pleases me now to express my sincere thanks to him.

Heartfelt thanks for help in putting the "system" into practice, and for suggestions and criticisms in looking over the manuscript of this book, to Honored Artist of the Republic and M.A.T. actor M. N. Kedrov.

I offer also my sincere gratitude to Honored Artist of the Republic and M.A.T. actor N. A. Podgornyi, who gave me suggestions when checking the manuscript of the book.

I express my deepest gratitude to E. N. Semianovskaia, who took on the big job of editing this book and carried out her important work with superb knowledgeability and talent.

C. Stanislavski

Introductory Note

.. . . . February, 19 — , in the city of X, where I worked, my friend and I (he too was a stenographer) were asked to record a public lecture by the famous artist, director, and teacher, Arkadi Nikolaevich Tortsov. This lecture determined my subsequent fate. There was born in me an unconquerable attraction for the stage, and at the present time I have been accepted in the theater school, and soon will begin studies with Arkadi Nikolaevich Tortsov himself, and with his assistant Ivan Platonovich Rakhmanov.

I am infinitely happy that I have finished with the old life and am setting out on a new course.

However, something from the past will be useful to me. For example, my shorthand.

What if I were to write down systematically all the lessons, so far as possible, in shorthand? You know, in this way a complete primer could be put together! It would help to review what has been covered. Later, when I have become an actor, these notes would serve me as a compass in difficult moments of work.

It is decided: I will keep notes in the form of a diary.