Introduction

A LITTLE HISTORY

The soul desires to dwell with the body because without the members of the body it can neither act nor feel.
—Leonardo da Vinci, quoted by Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor, on the Technique of Acting*

Four hundred years ago, Hamlet expressed his consternation at the art of acting:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit; and all for nothing!
[2.2. 507–13]

And ever since, performers and audiences have argued about how it is that actors manage this feat. At the core of the argument lie two related questions. The first is, Must actors really *feel* the emotions they *portray*? And the second is, Do they achieve their portrayal by controlling the *external expression* of emotion or by inducing the *internal experience*? In 1773 the French critic Denis Diderot put the problem this way:

> The actor who has nothing but reason and calculation is frigid. The one who has nothing but excitement and emotionalism is silly. What makes the human being of supreme excellence is a kind of balance between calculation and warmth. [quoted in Strasberg, p. 34]

Fifty years later, the acting teacher François Delsarte concluded that the reason French actors had lost touch with real human feelings was because they had become entirely dependent upon declamation and rhetoric unconnected with physical gesture. "Gesture," he proclaimed, "is the direct agent of the heart. . . . In a word, it is the spirit of which speech is merely the letter" [Delsarte, pp. 446–47]. So saying, he set out to create an acting system that depended not on mental action but on physical gesture, declaring, "A perfect reproduction of the outer manifestation of some passion, the giving of the outer sign, will cause a reflex within" [quoted in Stebbins, p. 63].

The problem with Delsarte's method was that it tried to prescribe a fixed vocabulary of movements for each human emotion, as if emotional expression could be codified in a gestural dictionary. And although Delsarte's system worked for some (notably the American actor Steele MacKay), it led others into stereotyped and melodramatic gesticulation, devoid of the very "heart" that Delsarte had sought to restore.

It was just such empty, "external" acting that Konstantin Stanislavski witnessed as a young man on the Russian stage, and that he himself adopted when he began acting. But after seeing performances by the great Italian actors Tommaso Salvini and Eleanora Duse, Stanislavski realized that these great performers did not just "portray" their roles externally; they seemed to actually "live" on stage. Inspired by these performances, Stanislavski set out to discover a method by which he could make his own acting "logical, coherent, and real," not just on occasion, by accident or inspiration, but in a dependable, repeatable fashion [Stanislavski, 1936, p. 43].

The problem, Stanislavski felt, was that "mechanical" actors depended entirely on *external* means, "showing your teeth and rolling the whites of your eyes when you are jealous, or covering up the eyes and face with the hands instead of weeping; [and] tearing your hair when in despair" [Stanislavski, 1936, p. 24]. In reaction against this error, he searched for a method that would depend on *inner*, psychological practices. The French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot (1839–1916) "provided Stanislavski with a key to unlock the actor's unconscious. According to his theories, the nervous system bears the traces of all previous experiences. They are recorded in the mind, although not always available. An immediate stimulus—a touch, a sound, a smell—can trigger off the memory" [Benedetti, 1982, p. 31].

Armed with this key, Stanislavski developed the sense-memory and "affective memory" exercises that became the mainstay of his early work. It was these "internal" techniques that Stanislavski's students Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya brought from Russia to New York in 1923. And it was this work that they taught at their American Laboratory Theater where Harold Clurman, Stella Adler, and Lee Strasberg came to study. "The aim of affective memory," Strasberg recalled later, "is not really to feel or see or touch something—that is hallucination—but to remember the mood when doing that" [Strasberg, p. 69].

From this work Strasberg developed what he called the "emotional-memory" exercise:

> In the emotional-memory exercise, the actor is asked to recreate an experience from the past that affected him strongly. The experience should have happened at least seven years prior to the time that the exercise is attempted. I ask the student to pick the strongest thing that ever happened to him, whether it aroused anger, fear, or excitement. [Strasberg, p. 149]

Thus over the years, what Stanislavski began as a method of stimulating memory by means of sensory recall was transformed into a method of stimulating emotion by means of personal memory.

But while Strasberg was creating this "American Method" technique based on Stanislavski's early work, Stanislavski himself had begun to reconsider his emphasis on these internal "psycho-techniques." He realized that by concentrating so completely on the actor's mind, he had ignored the actor's body. In his later years Stanislavski developed a system of what he called "physical actions." In his book *Creating a Role*, which was not published in English until 1961, Stanislavski writes: "In every *physical action*, unless it is purely mechanical, there is concealed some *inner action*, some feelings" [Stanislavski, 1961, p. 228][1]

The actor Vasily Toporkov, who worked with Stanislavski during the 1930s, describes his late work this way:

> Konstantin Stanislavski directed our attention to what is the most tangible, the most concrete in each human action; its physical aspect. Especially in his last years, he gave the greatest importance to this aspect of the life of the role, beginning his work on a character with it. Diverting the attention of the actor from "feelings," from psychology, he directed it toward the carrying out of purely physical actions. In this way the actor could penetrate in a natural way into the sphere of feelings. [Toporkov, p. 216]

During the 1930s, Michael Chekhov, who had been a member of Stanislavski's First Studio, brought his own version of

1. In the same book Stanislavski also writes: "With faith in your physical actions you will feel emotions, akin to the external life of your part, which possess a logical bond with your soul.... Your body is biddable; feelings are capricious. Therefore if you cannot create a human spirit in your part of its own accord, create the physical being of your role" [p. 154].

Stanislavski's physically based techniques to New York. Chekhov (nephew of the author Anton) had worked closely with Stanislavski's protégé Eugene Vakhtangov and developed an approach to acting based on what he called the "psychological gesture." Also at that time, Sonia Moore, who had studied with Stanislavski during his last years, reported that Stanislavski was teaching actors to access their emotions by means of muscular choices. But in spite of these developments the influence of Strasberg and the "American Method" remained pervasive in drama schools through the 1980s, and the reputation of Stanislavski as a teacher of inward, mental techniques continued to be promulgated.

During the past twenty years, however, even some of Strasberg's own students have rediscovered the physical counterpart of emotional life. In 1988 acting teacher Warren Robertson said:

> I often have an actor do an Affective Memory Exercise on his feet instead of sitting in a chair. And at moments I'll have him try to integrate feelings into his body. I'll have him lift his hand and wave goodbye, and he will remember, without even trying, who he is waving goodbye to. The body is a means of finding a specific feeling. [Mekler, p. 113]

Thus, although Stanislavski had rejected "external" approaches to acting early in his life, he (and many of his followers) later rediscovered the basic insight that François Delsarte had made one hundred years before—that the body can indeed provide a direct route to the emotions.[2]

Grotowski picked up the investigation where Stanislavski had left off. Jennifer Kumiega, who chronicles Grotowski's the-

2. This controversy between the "internal" and "external" theories of acting parallels a similar dispute between "mental" and "physiological" theories of psychology, with Ribot and Freud as exponents of the mental school and William James and Wilhelm Reich the physiological one.

ater work in her book *The Theatre of Grotowski* [Methuen, 1985], puts his conception this way:

> We do not *possess* memory, our entire body *is* memory, and it is by means of the "body-memory" that the impulses are released. [Kumiega, p. 120]

A corollary of this axiom is that an actor who has learned to "listen" to his body will find that character "actions," "intentions," and "objectives" arise organically within the work itself, without the actor needing to sit down and do "table work" to figure them out.

In fact, the physical approach to acting is not an abandonment of "internal" technique but an extension of it. Therefore, as you progress through this book, you may find that many of the physical acting exercises it contains connect directly with methods of training you have studied elsewhere. The "image" work we study may seem similar to the "sense memory" techniques of Lee Strasberg. The "listening" work may remind you of Sanford Meisner's exercises. And the "physical character" work may resemble the teachings of Uta Hagen.

There are many connections between Stanislavski's and Grotowski's approaches to acting, but ultimately the correspondences between the two lie not in the details of the techniques but in their outlook on art, and work and life:

- Both approaches have the same aim: To free the actor from those blocks that prevent him or her from embodying emotional truth and creativity.
- Both are based on the conviction that great acting is not simply a "career," or a "profession" or a "craft." It is also a way of being in the world, an art that requires openness and generosity to the work and to one's coworkers.
- And both demand that actors ask themselves the most basic questions about their art: Why am I an actor? What is "true" in theater? What is theater for?

EXPERIMENTAL THEATER

> *Actor training is a heuristic activity, which means that although you know the methods by which to proceed, you do not know what the outcome will be until you achieve it. It is like climbing a mountain in a fog; you know you must try to keep moving upward, but you do not know what the peak looks like until you get there.*
>
> —Richard Hornby, *The End of Acting*

> *There is nothing like trial and error. There is no better method in the world.*
>
> —John Strasberg, in Mekler, *The New Generation of Acting Teachers*

The work this book describes has been called *experimental theater*. But when people say "experimental theater," they often seem to think the word *experimental* means "new" or "nonrealistic" or "weird." But in fact, what makes experimental theater experimental is exactly the same thing that makes experimental physics experimental—that it proceeds by means of *experiments*, by people trying things out to see what works, rather than by holding to a belief in a system, or by dedicating themselves to one or another theory or aesthetic.

In Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*, Mozart's nemesis, Salieri, perceives that Mozart has a direct connection with the heavenly source of music. "What was evident," he says, "was that Mozart was simply transcribing music completely finished in his head." But most of us are not Mozart. We are rarely blessed with such divine inspiration. To find our way in the wilderness of artistic creativity, we must stumble around, "experimenting" with different solutions before we are satisfied with the answers we find. The central idea of experimental theater is that this process of "stumbling around" is, in fact, an excellent way to proceed. It can lead us to discoveries we might never have

made if we had confined our explorations to those pathways for which we had maps, and it instills in us a willingness to enter each new project with an open mind and with the (supremely important) courage to make mistakes.

The processes described in this book are not well-marked, limited-access highways for you to follow; they are simply pathways into the vast playgrounds of your own creativity. Because each artist is unique, each will find some of these pathways more useful than others. To find out which ones serve *you* best you must experiment, trying each exercise not with any expectation of results but with an expectancy of discovery. If you do so, you will find

- Encouragement for the basic activity of searching for those pathways that inspire you.
- Methods of engaging whatever difficulties you may encounter along the way: bridge-building skills you can use when you run across chasms, and swimming skills you can use when the water gets too deep for wading.
- Moral companionship. The knowledge that although you must find your own path, you are not alone in your solitude. The solitude you feel is one that others also experience, and the path you walk runs parallel to tracks that others have walked before.

The external forms this book teaches include the *plastique* and the *corporel* exercises of Jerzy Grotowski. But as you study these forms it is important to remember that the exercises themselves are not a "method"; they are merely provocations, hints, ways of posing questions that can serve as trailheads into the wilderness of your personal process. **The essential "technique" of experimental theater does not lie in the exercise forms or even in the particular answers you may find while using those forms. It lies in the centrality of the act of questioning itself.**

THE *VIA NEGATIVA*

The actor must discover those resistances and obstacles which hinder him in his creative task. . . . By a personal adaptation of the exercises, a solution must be found for the elimination of these obstacles which vary for each individual actor. . . . This is what I mean by ***via negativa:*** *a process of elimination.*

—Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*

What we usually call "developing one's talent" is often nothing more than freeing *it from the influences that hamper, occlude and frequently destroy it entirely.*

—Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor*

When we were very young, our emotions were as sudden and as dramatic as summer thunderstorms . . . and they passed as quickly. We could run laughing and shouting with joy, fall down, cry wildly for a few moments, and then get up and laugh again. If we were denied something we wanted, we could scream with rage, and then a moment later, we could drop our rage when something else distracted us. And each emotion we encountered would course through our whole body and our full voice with no holding back. As acting teacher Richard Hornby writes, "We should recall that in the infant, the emotions *always* involve strong physical manifestation. We are not born repressed, but howl or shudder or laugh lustily" [Hornby, p. 127].

But as we grew older, most of us learned how to suppress our emotions. We learned that some emotions were to be expressed only under certain circumstances, that many were to be hidden from the outside world at all costs, and a few were to be hidden even from ourselves. Some of us learned never to cry, "like a baby." Some of us learned never to show our anger. And some

to hide our fear, or our need for love. Exactly which emotional displays we learned to hide depended on the particular family and environment in which we grew up. Some of us were punished for noise and violence, others for being sissies. Some may not have been punished; we just noticed that our parents and our friends never cried in public or showed their deepest feelings, and we slowly accommodated ourselves to their repressed style. But almost all of us learned to hide at least a few of our emotions—just as surely as we learned to cover our bodies with clothes. To clothe our emotional lives, we constricted our voices and armored our bodies with muscular tensions. At first, perhaps, we simply held back our screams by clenching our jaws, and our tears by closing our eyes. But when these primary defenses became too obvious, we moved the disguises one layer deeper, stifling our screams with a tightened larynx and covering our tears with false smiles.[3]

For most people in our society, it is a strictly personal matter whether or not they are satisfied to live with these emotional restrictions. But for actors, emotional expression is essential to our craft, so learning to become an actor necessitates overcoming whatever emotional blocks we may have accumulated along the way.

The amazing thing is that even after years of hiding our emotions from the world (and from ourselves), our abilities to experience and to express our passions are not dead; they are merely hibernating within us. The process of freeing these imprisoned abilities is what Grotowski terms the *via negativa*, the "road backward." By this he means that acting training is not so much a process of learning new skills as it is a process of uncovering old abilities that we still carry deep within.

Of course, not all of acting training is a "road backward." There are also "positive" skills to be learned, skills like character work, for instance. These skills are like putting on new clothing, on purpose. But before we can put this new clothing on, we must first remove the old clothes we've been carrying around for years. Therefore the work in this book begins with the *via negativa*—the task of *un*doing—and only later does it move on to the tasks of *doing*, those that necessitate *precision* and *choice*. Thus

- **In the body work**, we learn to activate all the parts of our bodies and to move fully and freely . . . before we study precision gesture or working with props.
- **In the voice work**, we learn to free our breathing and to open every resonator before we try to employ text.
- **In our emotional training**, we learn how to let strong emotion pour through us and how to receive an impulse from another actor before we study how to choose acting beats, or to play a character.

Note: *Some actors find it easier to enter strong emotional work* after *creating character. In his book,* The End of Acting, *Richard Hornby writes: "For such actors, mask work, dialects, animal studies, experiments with makeup, and working with period costumes and properties, are essential right from the beginning"* [*Hornby, p. 251*]. *If you suspect this may be true for you, you may want to experiment with character (see the chapter entitled "Character Work") even while you explore the physical and emotional exercises that appear in the early chapters of this book.*

3. In his book, *The Function of the Orgasm*, Wilhelm Reich suggests that the process of emotional suppression begins as a conscious act and only later becomes unconscious and automatic. See also *The Drama of the Gifted Child* by Alice Miller and *The Betrayal of the Body* by Alexander Lowen.