

On one of the first trips of the Moscow Art Theater (MAT) to St. Petersburg, Konstantin Sergeyeovich Alekseyev “Stanislavsky” (1863–1938) reports that his cast was honored as follows by the speech of a local citizen:

A theater is among us. Albeit to our total surprise there is not a single actor or a single actress in it. Here I am not seeing that actor’s rounded mouth, strongly curly hair, burned by the tweezers because of the daily curling, nor hearing the storming voices. I do not read that thirst for praise on any of their faces. Here there is no acted gait, theatrical gestures, false pathetic, that waving of arms, the forced actor’s temperament [...]. There are no actors or actresses in the company. There are only people, people of profound sensibility. (1989, p. 325)

More than a simple compliment, the speech captured the germ of an artistic *ethos* that not only initially motivated MAT's revolutionary creation project, but also became the foundation of all the creative and pedagogical phases subsequently undertaken by the most famous creator of the Theater. In the thirties, this ethical dimension would be synthesized by Stanislavsky in the expression that constitutes the title of the two volumes of his book dedicated to the principles of the System, *Rabota aktiora nad soboi*, translatable as “the work of the actor on him/herself” (ZALTRON, 2012, p. 1).

Stanislavsky himself was never willing to define an exclusive and unique meaning for this expression, be it through summarized sentences or more elongated and philosophical constructions. With that, he seemed to want to ensure that his understanding was completed by each artist by means of direct experience of the craft, in full correspondence between the poetic exercise of the scene and the practice of transforming oneself involved in the creation process. As something that results from the tangent of diverse cultural and material references linked to the trajectory of the Russian director, “the work of the actor on him/herself” is a principle that calls for an equally complex interpretation, capable of resisting the temptation of the abolished definitions, without ignoring the specificities of a perspective that, after all, would establish – from Russia in the early twentieth century – one of the richest theatrical traditions of our time.

According to Maria Knebel, the common feature that united Russian artists such as Leon Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Dostoievski, Leopold Sulerjistski, Michael Chekhov and Stanislavsky, despite their different artistic projects, was the presence of a fundamentally inquiring attitude towards the world. They manifested the continued search for self-improvement and the desire to “know life in its broadest dimension” (KNEBEL. In: Chejov; Knebel,

2017, p. 101), which meant the refusal of self-absorption, understood as an exaggerated withdrawal of the actor to the point of isolating him from contact with external people and facts.. In the case of Stanislavsky, it is interesting to note that, far from the image of the artist comfortably consolidated by the official Russian propaganda channels, or even from the publicity that, in the United States, propagated his work under a questionable notion of "effectiveness" and "method," the formulation of the idea of "work on oneself" results from a life journey that involved both the investigation closed in the studio and the critical positioning and active participation of the director before the political facts that culminated in the 1917 Revolution.

Discussions, texts and artistic manifestations representing the Russian intelligentsia since the last decades of the nineteenth century foreshadowed an interesting articulation between themes such as spirituality, culture, art and politics, arranged not in an antagonistic manner, but based on the perception of being spheres directly concerning the practical relations of everyday life. In his autobiographical novel, Stanislavsky refers to that generation as being responsible for fostering the foundations of political ruptures and social innovations that would come later:

At that time, in the midst of the stifling stagnation that was in the air, there was no ground for revolutionary rise. Only somewhere underground, forces were prepared and mustered for the fearful blows. The work of the avant-garde men consisted in preparing states of mind, instilling new ideas, explaining the inconsistency of the old life. (STANISLÁVSKI, 1989, p. 366)

As remnants of a universalist Enlightenment that, imported from France in the 18th century, had incorporated elements of Slavic and Orthodox culture, these "new ideas" involved the attempt to build a national alternative to the evils envisaged by Western European civilization.

In historical periods of transition and times of crisis and catastrophe, it is necessary to think seriously about the movement of the historical destiny of peoples and cultures. The hour hand in history shows the fateful hour, the hour of the twilights that come, when it is time to turn on the lights and get ready for the night. Spengler saw civilization as the destiny of every culture. While civilization ends with death. (BERDIÁIEV. In: Cavalieri; Vássina; Silva, 2005, p. 265)

As an alternative, Russian youth, from the second half of the nineteenth century, would consolidate the ideal of a spiritual culture capable of renewing the forces of European civilization in decline, without, however, completely refuting aspects that seemed rich in that

western tradition, and which had already penetrated the aristocratic and bourgeois classes.

It was the case of Western romantic idealism, incorporated by the liberals defeated by the Tsar, after the 1825 Decembrist movement. According to religious and political philosopher Nicolai Berdiáev, since its origin, romanticism had expressed European nostalgia precisely for the loss of spiritual culture, due to the triumph of a technicist civilization, as demonstrated by the criticisms of authors such as Nietzsche or Goethe against rationalist values, industrialism and utilitarianism, dominant in Europe. However, while European artistic production was asserting itself about the values of an isolated individual in his own personal world, and for that reason some currents there called for the recreation of the divine sense in art, Russia remained particularly sensitive to the “problem of God in the soul” (BERDIÁIEV. In: Cavalieri; Vássina; Silva, 2005, p 27). This perception was also in line with the theories of Vladimir Soloviov (1853–1900), whose mystical-symbolist ideas definitely influenced some artistic generations. According to Soloviov, while the anonymous artisans of the Middle Ages, builders of the great cathedrals, painters of icons and idols, were possessed by the religious idea, from the second half of the nineteenth century it would be the artists who would “posses and guide it consciously” (apud IVÁNOV. In: Cavalieri; Vássina; Silva, op. cit., p. 198).

A similar conception is found in Stanislavsky, when he recounts the power that Anton Chekhov's plays exerted on him, engaged in the search for Truth in art based on these same assumptions of a “culture of the spirit”:

Chekhov's dreams of the future life speak of a high culture of the spirit, of the Universal Spirit of Man who needs not three meters of earth, but the entire globe, speak of a wonderful life for whose creation we need to work, sweat, and suffer another two hundred, three hundred, thousand years. This belongs to the field of the eternal, in which we cannot think without emotion. (STANISLÁVSKI, op. cit., p. 302)

At the legendary meeting between Stanislavsky and Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko, which lasted eighteen hours and established the first terms and agreements for the creation of the Moscow Art Theater Accessible for All¹, the partners agreed that the new theater should prioritize an idealistic cast.

¹ Name originally given to the Moscow Art Theater, which shows that one of its main purposes, already in its foundation, was to expand the access of the Russian people to this art.

Such a cast should be composed of actors and actresses who understood this expanded purpose of theater practice, the need to overcome personal vanity in their profession, who were willing to question the already established clichés and, thus, break with the production methods already known in all spheres of theatrical creation.

According to Nemirovi-Danchenko, since three or five hundred years, or even millennia, the actor's art had been treated as an abstraction of the living man. Now, a new theater required a new mastery of the actor who, recognizing that each man contains "all features of the human essence" (1990, p. 30), no longer represents an idea, but creates a real man by means of one's own sensibility and will (Id, p. 36). Thus, it is possible to recognize that the revolutionary aesthetic project of the two partners had as its main prerogative, since the beginning, the exaltation of a type of technology of oneself that is completely associated with the technical aspects of acting.

There is a sort of dispersion, a disarray in terms of the actor's art. So far it is not clear what living theater is, nor what a living man is in theater. You can accuse me of heresy, but I want to say this. We are forging a new art. And its base is the living truth, the living man. (NEMIRÓVICH-DANCHENKO, p. 27, our translation)

Contrary to the interpretations provided by some Western schools that, in consideration of the European paradigms of romantic genius, made this a principle of affirmation of the individual expression of the subject, the Russian theatrical project promoted by Stanislavsky and his collaborators was established on dynamics of essential otherness. If "man perceives man" (STÁNISLAVSKI, 1988, p. 326, our translation) it was necessary that the "truth" of the scene emerged from the character's human approach, based on the actor's ideas, personal memories and sensations, in order to make him "perceive himself in the role and perceive this within himself" (Id, p. 326). In promoting such an encounter, the theatrical game would not only register the contact between these two distinct realities, but would also assume a pedagogical function that would lead the artist to a certain dimension unknown to himself. It can be said that, in this sense, the fictional character assumed a role analogous to that of the mask that the comedian, in ancient times, observed before him before wearing it and that, in doing so, transformed him through an experience as extraordinary as magic.

Observed by Stanislavsky, this dynamic of transformation of the actor would result in a state of presence that the Russian pedagogue called "I am being²."

According to R. A. White, this concept has a strong theological resonance associated with the presence of yoga in the constitution of the System, an aspect that has come to be observed more attentively by researchers of this theatrical tradition only in the last two decades.

Without delving into the undisputed influence of the practices introduced by Leopold Sulerjitsky on the exercises carried out in the First Studio (1912), or even on the intense circulation of these principles among Russian artists and intellectuals of those years, White points out Stanislavsky's readings of the Yogi Ramacharaka collection³, launched between 1903 and 1907 by the American William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), as the source of this concept. There, the "I am being" would be identified with the practice of Raja Yoga and presented to the reader as one of the levels of Samadhi, a meditation stage in which two degrees of understanding would be reached, in relation to the real and to the nature of spiritual existence. However, according to White (2006, p. 87), while for Yoga the object of contemplation of this spiritual process was God, according to Stanislavsky it would be the character.

Although Stanislavsky's degree of knowledge regarding Yogic concepts and practice cannot be stated with absolute accuracy, the contact with this thought, taking into account the specificities of his own Slavic-orthodox culture, helped define the idea that the actor should have conscious means to touch the "creative self" that, located in the "subconscious," would then give access to the "superconscious" organic creativity.

Regarding terms such as "conscious," "unconscious," "subconscious" and "superconscious," it is worth noting that they were used by Stanislavsky to meet the concrete need to identify and name the processes associated with his own research practice, and did not correspond strictly to the theoretical definitions provided by the sources that inspired the director. Despite mentioning the research of one of the first names in French experimental psychology,

² The expression in Portuguese "Eu-existo" [I exist] follows the Brazilian translation by researcher Elena Vassina, but according to White's text, referenced here, it could also be possible to use "Eu-sou" [I am], as it appears in the American translations by E. Hapgood.

³ American baptized as William Walker Atkinson (1862-1932). According to R. A. White (2006, p. 82), Atkinson is the author of the following (original) titles found in Stanislavsky's library on the subject: Hatha Yoga; or, The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-being, Raja Yoga or Mental Development, and Teachings of Yoga about the Mental World of the Person.

Théodule Armand-Ribot, as an inspiration for his concept of affective memory, there is no evidence that Stanislavsky used precisely other scientific frameworks for the construction of his System, especially from psychoanalysis. The notion of the subconscious, for example, was used by Sigmund Freud only twice, in writings prior to 1895, which precede the peak of his psychoanalytic theory (SULLIVAN, 1964, p. 104), hardly having served as an inspiration for Stanislavsky, therefore. In Raja Yoga, by Ramacharaka, there is an understanding of “subconscious” that comes close to that adopted by the pedagogue, presented as a reservoir of ideas and experiences accumulated by the person. Similarly, Stanislavsky would have taken from this work the definition of “superconscious” as a spiritual category that goes beyond individual and isolated consciousness (WHITE, 2006, p. 86).

Although Stanislavsky himself was obliged to subject himself to the materialistic discourse standard imposed by censorship after the Communist Revolution, eliminating or altering terms in his vocabulary that referred to the mystical-religious or spiritualist impression, the non-self-absorption and the connection of the individual subject to the supra-individual powers is an assumption of his work in all creative phases. This implies the relationship between the Stanislavskyan “oneself” and a pattern of consciousness distinct from the modern paradigms of the self as identity that, according to Paul Ricoeur (2010, p. 113), would have been established only from the 15th century, in Western Europe.

In fact, the word consciousness derives from the Greek notion of *suneidèsis*, whose meaning is “to be informed, warned of something”; Descartes, in defense of a philosophy of substances and the continuity of essences, used the adjective *consciens* in the sense of “having current knowledge,” “experimenting” (RICOEUR, p. 113). Only after John Locke did the Western consciousness gain an ontological attribute, and the self, then understood as passive (linked to perception) and active mental operations, came to identify the condition of existence of the being. Even founded on the relationship with things, people, places, moments, the idea of identity consciousness, it would be established based on difference from then on, as a self-referential and immutable object. Understood as uninterrupted participation in life itself, this modern notion of consciousness would be born tied to temporal limits, as a synonym for singular and individualized thinking. Pondering the hypothesis of a person's resurrection in another body or world, Locke

would go so far as to affirm that if the same consciousness continues with the soul that inhabits man, "it is not the soul that makes man, but the same consciousness" (LOCKE, 200, p.113, apud RICOEUR, op. cit, p. 116).

Considering another framework, the use of terms such as "soul" or "spirit" is frequent in all of Stanislavsky's creative phases; after all, psychotechnics is a practical systematization of the actor's work that aims at the "Life of the Human Spirit," as expressed repeatedly by the pedagogue; this presupposes an artist's shift towards a dimension of oneself that clearly goes beyond the limits of their own personal identity.

In this sense, the process of human transformation resulting from the theatrical experience, as proposed by Stanislavski, bears a certain resemblance to the orthodox mystical experience that manifests itself in different areas of Russian culture. According to Mendonça (2011, p. 19), it is not possible to approach Eastern Christian thought without referring to the apophatic method³, which makes no distinctions between personal experience and theology. Very distant from the medieval scholastic tradition or the modern rationalist tradition, the method proposes access to divine Truth as an incomprehensible mystery, which brings about a profound change in the individual being and, at the same time, contributes to the metamorphosis of all humanity. In this process, each person is summoned to build heavenly life on earth, which happens through the "communion of nature created from the human being with the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit" (MENDONÇA, 2011, p. 33), constituting the dynamics of *theosis*, or *deification*.

If we want to unfold this analogy, it is possible to think that, while *theosis* is the "glorification of human nature, deified" (MEYENDORFF, 1995, p. 156, apud Mendonça, 2011, p. 75), theatrical creation, as conceived by Stanislavsky, also exercises a transfiguring power over this same nature, making it artistic. Psychotechnics operates ontologically on the actor's being, who would work "on oneself," but not for oneself. In communion with the "Life of the Human Spirit," the actor would know of oneself a poetic existence, built on the laws of organic nature.

⁴ The apophatic method goes back to Greek priests of the early eras of Christianity, adopted by orthodox theological practice. It consists in "rise or ascension with the objective of reaching mystical union with God" (MENDONÇA, 2011, p. 19)

Differently from the European definitions, according to Stanislavsky the term “organic” does not mean physical nature, “but nature, including that which is physical” (VASSILIEV, 2006, p. 317). This aspect allows us to understand why Stanislavsky founded his System equally on the visible and invisible aspects of acting, associated respectively with the phases of “experience” and “incarnation.” These, in turn, refer to the titles given to each of the two volumes of Stanislavsky's book on “the work of the actor on him/herself,” dedicated to the interior and exterior aspects of acting.

Although, according to Stanislavsky, these categorizations fulfilled exclusively didactic purposes, since Russian realism already contemplated the full integration between the physical and psychic aspects, it is still common to reproduce a discourse that states that only in the last stage of his investigations Stanislavsky would have pondered on the “concrete” aspects of the actor's work – which, according to the dominant Western perspective, is almost always equivalent to saying “physical.” As a consequence, internal work tends to be thought of as a moment of intimate exploration without materiality, amorphous, non-relational, whose function would only be to prepare the conditions for the emergence of poetic expression. On the other hand, this thought induces an approach to external work as something detached from the dynamics of subjectivity of the actor, removing from the form its capacity to be not only an object but an agent of the artist's transformation processes.

The art of “vivência” [experiencing], as a term traditionally chosen by Brazilian translations for the notion of *perejivanie*, was defined by Stanislavsky as the actor's work of “finding interesting and significant objectives of the role, finding the correct way to approach them, awakening in oneself just aspirations and carrying out appropriate actions” (STANISLÁVSKI, 2003, p. 32).

The prefix *pere* (пере) has, in the Russian language, a use close to the term *trans*, which refers to process, and can be used in words linked to the awareness of transposition, overcoming or crossing. The stem *jiv* (жив) refers to two verbs equally linked to the term “live”, “*jivat*” and “*jit*” (ZALTRON, 2012, p. 2-3). *Perejivanie* can be interpreted, thus, as a practice of “*transvivência*” [transexperiencing] that enables the actor, in each moment of life on stage, to awaken in oneself experiences corresponding to that of the role and, through a continuous thread of these actions, to establish the human spirit of the role;

According to Anatoli Vassiliev, *perejivanie* is the complete fusion between the “sensation of self” and the action (2006, p. 312), which implies, once again, the refusal to understand the actor's work as a stagnation in oneself. In an interview with French translators, this Russian director and pedagogue is categorical in distinguishing this notion of “sensation of self” and the notion of feeling. After all, to him, while sensation is a process, feeling is a result. With such statements, Vassiliev situates the perspective of the Russian theater school far from European melodramatic models that adopted the convention of overvaluing emotion in acting and, at the same time, highlights its pedagogical trait, the theater practice as learning that arises from the intersection between expression, technique and ethics.

Naturally, thinking of theater as a space for the construction of knowledge (which, although arising from the artist, does not end in them, as we have already clarified) would imply the need to review the production models then prevalent in that context, changing the actor's relationship with the time dedicated to creation, their purpose, and with the partners involved in this process, including the director. Even before the MAT's debut season, the impossibility of reproducing the expectations set by the professional companies of the time was clear to the very people involved in that venture:

The jokers had chosen us for their jokes [...] It irritated them that we had announced a repertoire of only ten plays: at the time, the other theaters were presenting at least one new play per week, with an audience that was nowhere near full, and suddenly some amateurs had the audacity to dream of maintaining an entire season with a dozen plays! (STANISLAVSKI, 1989, p. 265)

A few years later, in 1912, the creation of the First Studio by Stanislavsky, with the fundamental collaboration of Leopold Sulerzhitsky, would be Stanislavsky's attempt to further radicalize the project of a new theater based on the revision of the technical and human relations and practices involving the figure of the actor. With that, it would consolidate a new sense of mastery, understood no longer based on the accumulation of external technical skills, nor guided by the logic of results.

This issue is so elementary in the constitution of the System that it is the subject of the first chapter of the book *The Work of the Actor on Him/Herself: Work on Oneself in the Creative Process of Experiencing*⁵, titled “Dilettantism.”

⁵ *El Trabajo del actor sobre sí mismo en el proceso creador de la vivencia*, according to the title of the edition used.

There, Nazvánov, a fictional character who is a student of Tórtsov, the author's own alter ego, discovers that the accomplishment of the craft involves overcoming the very illusion of effectiveness. Grotowski, decades later from the publication of this book, would deepen this reflection by stating that dilettantism is the lack of rigor, which even hides, often, under the highest technical standards (GROTOWSKI, 1993, p. 20). According to Mollica:

The history of the First Studio begins when Stanislavsky puts into question the very way of being alive in the theater, when procedures and techniques that made the Art Theater grand began to feel the effect of time and to sclerotize in habit [...] . The Studio was also born as a place where he could verify the possibility of a new dimension for the actor's work. This is how Stanislavsky conducted his first attempts to define a "system" that opens to the actor the road to full and conscious creativity. By the practice of exercises with the *studijcy*, Stanislavsky seeks to reformulate the principles of an art, that of the actor, who is now undoubtedly situated at the center of the theater's existence. And this is not carried out by theoretical formulations of principles, but by a profound rethinking of the whole theater experience (apud Scandolara, p. 29-30).

For many years, Stanislavsky vehemently refused to make any kind of public statement about the Studio's activities, in order to avoid conforming the dynamic principles of the System to easy and stratified formulas. Differently from a traditional school, the First Studio's program of activities did not follow a single, fixed line, thus deliberately thought of as an attempt to break with the automatisms of the profession. Together with names such as Evgeni Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov and Richard Boleslávski, Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky conducted a disciplined work routine, through which they carried out hundreds of individual and collective exercises, which could be incorporated and conducted by the group or simply discarded.

According to Mel Gordon, these exercises were methodologically classified into two approaches. The first, related to the discovery of the states of the mind and body, involved topics such as "relaxation" (with attention to breathing processes, based on yoga practices), "concentration" and "spontaneity." The second, aimed more directly at the creation of the role, translated into the investigation of aspects such as "affective memory," "communication," and "rhythm." This classification, however, once again shows that the System has as principle the constant exchange and mutual transformation between actor and character, always approached by developing the nature and sensibility of the first, that is, as a "work of the actor on him/herself."

Always from the perspective of collective relations, in the dimension of the ensemble, the activities consolidated by the First Studio would result in Stanislavsky's psychotechnics, whose consequences, one can think, go beyond the aims of the work itself; as a "technique of the self," Stanislavsky's psychotechnics adds to the theater the dimension of an aesthetics of existence, inasmuch as the technologies and experiences that are used necessarily produce a transformation in the subject involved.

Although deliberately suppressed from the titles of the first American versions of the Russian director's work, the expression "work of the actor on him/herself" had its meaning grasped by several performance creators who, throughout the century, knew how to dialogue with this master not by the reproduction of his forms, but – as suggested by Grotowski – by the effort to provide concrete answers to the questions of their own time (1993, p. 18). Due to the recognition of this elementary ethical foundation of the System, performing artists, today, can still engage in a rich dialogue with this theatrical tradition, overcoming the limits of formulas and discourses derived from intercultural processes that sometimes ignore the cultural particularities that distinguish us, sometimes overvalue them in order to make them insurmountable barriers.

A few years ago it was heard, in discussions about the training of the performing artist, that the diversification of languages and the expansion of their limits required rethinking the pedagogies of performance based on these demands. Today, as in Stanislavsky's time, it seems impossible to disregard that the serious crisis of culture and civilization in which we find ourselves forces us to question the very function of the performing arts. In this effort, perhaps we can find inspiration in the example of Stanislavsky, who dedicated his life not to trying to correspond to known aesthetic models, or to molding the artist according to them, but to the task of confronting the creative subject so as to makes them push the known limits of art and society.

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