



# The Stanislavski Game: Improvisation in the Rehearsal of Scripted Plays

by Tom Scholte

The history of directing practice across the Western world is rife with the use of improvisational games and exercises in the rehearsal of scripted plays. From Vassily Toporkov's book *Stanislavski in Rehearsal* to various accounts of the practice of twentieth-century British theatrical pioneer Joan Littlewood, the power of improvisation to forge a deeper connection between actor and text has been made abundantly clear. And yet, in seventeen years as a professional actor in Canada, I have never once seen improvisation used in the rehearsal process for a scripted play. Why is this so? The prevailing wisdom seems to be that time is the enemy and that, in the increasingly truncated rehearsal periods common to professional theatre practice in Canada, "exploratory" techniques such as improvisation are an impossible luxury.

Over the last few years, my ongoing research and teaching at the University of British Columbia in the field of directing methodologies has led me to the exact opposite conclusion. I have come to believe that the integration of improvisational techniques, rooted in the neglected "later legacies" of Konstantin Stanislavski, might, in fact, be the most effective way to make our work go further faster and to make the most of the extremely limited time available to Canadian theatre practitioners in a professional rehearsal context.

Like many actors in this country, my training in the late eighties was firmly rooted in the Stanislavski System. Central to this approach, as I received it, was the practice of "round-the-table analysis," in which an actor analyses the given circumstances found in a text, determines their character's superobjective, breaks the script down into beats, and determines the appropriate actions and objectives to play on a beat-by-beat basis. Every responsible actor was expected to complete this process *before* rehearsals began. When I began teaching acting in the mid-nineties, I passed this tradition on to my students.

My journey away from this method, and towards a primarily improvisational approach to text, was prompted largely by the invaluable writings of such scholars as Jean Benedetti and Bella Merlin, who revealed to me that the Stanislavskian training I had received had only told me half the story. I, and many of my contemporaries, had been

completely ignorant of the fact that, by the end of his life, Stanislavski himself had abandoned the practice of round-the-table-analysis in favour of two improvisation-based approaches now known as his “later legacies”: Active Analysis and the Method of Physical Actions.

Merlin points out that there is “some debate among international scholars as to whether a difference between the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis actually exists, and certainly the overlaps are considerable” (Merlin, *Konstantin* 33). In a detailed account of her training in Moscow under direct artistic descendents of Stanislavski, Merlin describes the Method of Physical Actions as she encountered it:

[T]he actors were asked to come to a rehearsal, read a scene through—after which there would be some brief discussion of the structure and content of the scene—and then they would get up and improvise it. After each improvisation, the actors considered what they had done, both in terms of the line of physical actions and the sensations which had arisen out of those actions. They then assessed how appropriate those actions and sensations were to the characters and the scene. And at each subsequent rehearsal, they made the necessary adaptations to the physical actions to enable them to draw closer to the experience of the characters and the intentions of the playwright. (Merlin, *Beyond* 18)

American acting teacher Anita Jesse speaks of the actor’s need to create a “sticky surface” to which their lines can adhere, allowing them to be memorized easily and flow with ease and authenticity in performance (Jesse 97). Merlin indicates that, by allowing actors to focus exclusively on the rigorous pursuit of their characters’ objectives within the play’s imaginary world, Stanislavski’s process of increasingly refined improvisations can facilitate the creation of this surface with tremendous ease.

After participating in Active Analysis in Russia, Merlin tells us that

[t]he result of this process was a seemingly effortless passage from (1) the actors’ improvised speech, through (2) the director’s sideline promptings from the author’s text, to (3) an ultimate state of knowing the lines because those were the words the actors needed. They didn’t have to learn them in a formalized manner. By working this way, Stanislavski believed that the actual speaking of a text could become the “creation of the living word” with its roots running deep into the actor’s soul and emerging as an expression of his or her true inner action. (Merlin, *Beyond* 21)

At Stanislavski’s Moscow Art Theatre, these methods



Acting teacher Tom Scholte has become increasingly interested in applying late Stanislavskian processes of progressively refined improvisations to the confines of the typically short Canadian rehearsal process. Here he discusses the “Given Circumstances” of a scene from Chekov’s *Three Sisters* with student Christine Quintana.  
*Photo by Stephanie Meine*

would have been undertaken over a period of at least six months, but as my study of them proceeded, I became increasingly interested in the potential application of some adapted version of them within the confines of the typical Canadian three- to four-week rehearsal period. While some Canadian directors, anxiously aware of the clock ticking relentlessly in the background, might blanch at such a notion, my belief in the method’s potential was greatly buoyed by the rapidity with which scenes were springing to life when I employed similar methods in my acting classes. A graduate seminar on directing styles that I was teaching provided an ideal laboratory in which to begin exploring this possibility. I am eternally grateful to the four MFA candidates who participated in this experiment over the last two years and whose dedicated efforts and insightful feedback have made a profound contribution to the evolution of this approach.

The assignment that all four directors undertook, exclusively using the Method of Physical Actions, was the staging of Joe Pintauro’s six-and-a-quarter-page play, *Uncle Chick*. This was to be completed in a single three-hour session utilizing professional actors whose only obligation prior to the rehearsal was to have read the text at least once.

The piece depicts a highly charged encounter between Nickie, a young gay man who has recently moved from suburban New Jersey to Manhattan, and his estranged middle-aged uncle Chick, whose long-time male lover has recently passed away. Nickie’s family is unaware of his sexual orientation and the details of Chick’s life have also been kept secret from most of their relations, including Nickie. On this night, through a chance conversation with a mutual acquaintance in

a gay bar, Nickie learns Chick's secret. Nickie subsequently rushes to Chick's apartment and surprises his uncle, who is in the midst of packing his dead lover's belongings. Masking his trepidation beneath a veneer of youthful bravado, Nickie proudly tells Chick that they are "the same" and attempts to cast his reluctant uncle, scarred by his recent loss and grappling with the shock and shame of being outed to his nephew, in the role of role model and protector. A complex tug-of-war ensues, coming to a head when Nickie confronts Chick with his own loneliness and makes the audacious suggestion that he spend the night in Chick's bed, on top of the covers and just holding hands with his uncle. By then end of the scene, Chick's resistance has been seriously eroded and the two men stand in an awkward embrace.

Although differing from "round-the-table-analysis" in its continuous oscillation between reading, discussion, and improvisation, the Method of Physical Actions still dictates that the work should proceed one beat at a time and that each component of a character's "unbroken line" of actions be determined piece by piece. As such, it can still be a highly time-consuming process. Under the guidance of each directing student who participated in this experiment, many wonderfully truthful and richly nuanced moments, which would have been impossible to pre-plan intellectually, were discovered, and many of the actors agreed that the scene began to take on a comfortable, organic, physical shape much more quickly than was their normal experience with a text of this length. They also discovered that the lines did, indeed, begin to "memorize themselves." However, it was still seemingly impossible to stage the entire piece in the allotted time. Given that the "rehearsal hours to pages of text" ratio with which we were working would only translate to seventy-eight pages of text over two weeks of Equity rehearsal, we had to find ways of moving faster without compromising the very purpose of working this way in the first place, if this method was to have any value within the practical realities of contemporary Canadian theatre production.

The most significant shifts in the early development of this adapted approach came thanks to the input of two artists with a basic aversion to all things Stanislavskian. Catriona Leger's undergraduate actor training had been almost identical to my own and, after over ten years as a professional actor in Canada, dissatisfaction with her own working methods led her to Paris to study with the avowedly anti-Stanislavskian clown and bouffant master, Phillippe Gaulier. Reinvigorated and inspired by this experience, she returned to Canada to pursue an MFA in directing. In the lead-up to our exercise, she made no secret of the fact that being sent back to stiflingly cerebral "Stanislavski school" was a truly gut-wrenching proposition. I assured her that this would not be the stuffy, static Stanislavski she was used to and encouraged her to remain as open as possible to the experience. She gritted her teeth, began her analysis, and recruited two actors for the exercise, including

fellow Gaulier alumnus, Nicolas Di Gaetano (co-artistic director of Ottawa's MiCasa Productions,) who had made the pilgrimage to Paris for reasons similar to those of Catriona.

While some progress was evident, the rehearsal session did indeed turn out to be a somewhat laboured affair and was not exactly paying huge dividends. Everyone was embracing the work in absolute good faith but something was in the way that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Something was making even the improvisations themselves awkward and stilted, never mind the subsequent attempts to lift the lines off the page. Finally, with time almost up, I suggested that, as a final experiment, the actors improvise the entire scene once more with only one incredibly simple and tangible scene objective in mind: Nickie wants Chick to let him stay the night and Chick wants Nickie out of the apartment immediately. Nicolas perked up considerably when I made this suggestion: "Okay, so *that's* the game? Get him out of the room? Cool."

What followed was a lively and dynamic improvisation



"Okay, so *that's* the game? Get him out of the room? Cool." Nicolas Di Gaetano is shown here in MiCasa Productions' *Inclement Weather*, directed by Catriona Leger at the Dorothy Somerset Studio Theatre, Vancouver, in November 2009.  
*Photo by Tavis Dunn*

full of surprise, humour, and pathos. We then returned to the text. Playing on their feet with scripts in hand, they pursued these objectives, and only these objectives, relentlessly from the very first moment of the scene using every single line in the service of achieving them, even if it was not immediately apparent how the objective might relate to a given line (i.e. Nickie asking Chick if a particular book on his coffee table is interesting). The text flew off the page with astonishing ease. While the basic pursuit of each character did not vary,



transitions, tactics, tempo, and rhythm shifted with great clarity, variety, and, above all, a sense of truthful interaction between real and complex people. Not only was this a vast improvement, this was easily the most successful version of the scene I had witnessed thus far. I was elated and Catriona shook her head knowingly at the fact that we had spent so much time going through the “Stanislvskian motions” before simply letting the actors “play.”

Unpacking the experience with both Catriona and Nicolas

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revealed to me some significant areas of both difference and overlap between Russian and French philosophies of acting. Their insight helped me refine my approach to the upcoming iteration of this experiment. For Gaulier, the sheer pleasure to be found in the child-like state of play is perhaps the essential component of the actor’s work. When working on text with his students, Gaulier routinely employs games, such as trying to pluck scarves from each other’s back pocket while they deliver the text. Such games do not emanate from the circumstances of the text themselves but are employed to get the actors “out of their heads” and playfully engaged with each other. What seemed to me to be the secret of our success in our last pass of *Uncle Chick* was that we had managed to find “Stanislvski-style” text-based scene objectives capable of engaging the actors in a similar way. Even as a non-Stanislvskian, Nicolas agreed that a certain level of analysis of a scene’s given circumstances is, indeed, an essential component of the work:

You still have to set the context properly for the scene. What do you want, what are your tactics for getting it; those sort of things still apply. But then you have to ask a question and, for me, that question is, “What’s my game?” Some people will choose an action like, “I’m playing ‘I push you.’” But for me, the question is, “Are we playing ‘Keepaway’? Are we playing ‘Ring Around the Rosie?’” It’s finding the game between the actors. Our fun being on stage together. (Di Gaetano)

When we discussed the apparent ease with which tactical shifts or “beat changes” were discovered when the actors had picked up their scripts once more for the last run at the text, Nicolas again drew a parallel with work he had done under Gaulier:

Phillipe would give us a simple scenario for an improvisation like, “Nic, you want to have sex with Cat and Cat doesn’t want to.” The game is, how are we going to negotiate this? And the parameter is that we have to stay on stage together. And I remember doing this exercise in university during my initial (Stanislvskian) training as

an actor but I didn’t have the tools to play it properly. Or play it well. And the main tool is that love of fun, the love of staying on stage. Instead of trying to be “true” to the character and to the scenario and to real people, it’s about being true to the game and not letting her kick me out of the room. And it’s the same in that scene. He says something really powerful and I’m thinking, “Great, I have to go.” But the scene still continues. So instead of being “true” to Uncle Chick, I’m being true to the game which says that I’m not allowed to go. So I have to find a way to turn this around again. (Di Gaetano)

The principles expressed above reinforce, rather than contradict, the true core fundamentals of Stanislvskian pedagogy, while simultaneously casting them in a more playful light that may prove liberating for actors feeling bogged down in the supposedly Freudian, psychoanalytical side of the work. For me, personally, the principles have breathed new life into the branch of Stanislvski’s legacy most commonly associated with Stella Adler emphasizing the actor’s use of imagination within the given circumstances and emotional “truth” as a by-product of “objective” meeting “obstacle” rather than the result of endless self-examination and a search for psychological overlap between actor and character. A thorough and highly specific inventory of the given circumstances, including characters’ relative status, the sense of territoriality, and the social norms of the historical period in question, establish the parameters for the ensuing “game” that is the scene. That game is then defined through the actors’ choices of a scene objective fulfilling three of the essential criteria for playable actions laid out in the invaluable Stanislvskian shorthand of *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*: it must be physically capable of being done, must have a cap (that specific thing you are looking for that will mean you have succeeded at your action), and must be *fun* to do (Bruder, Cohn, and Olnek 13 emphasis added)!

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liberating power of “staying true to the game” rather than some idea of “the character” will be central to the revised approach we will use. We will also adhere to David Mamet’s admonition that “the correct unit of application is the scene” (Mamet 76). While Mamet proffers this advice in order to counteract the notion that actors must determine their superobjective and arc for the entire play, I am applying his advice in the opposite direction. It is not necessary to break the scene down into smaller units or beats. These are discovered organically when scene objectives are pursued rigorously, first in an improvisational context, and then when channelled through the language and thought structures already provided by the



As Scholte moves into the next iteration of his experiment with "The Stanislavski Game," the liberating power of "staying true to the game" rather than some idea of "the character" will be central to his revised approach. Here theatre students Barbara Koziki and Claire Hesselgrave (l-r) play "The Stanislavski Game" in a scene from Act Three of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

*Photo by Stephanie Meine*

playwright. In both cases, shifts in action and tone happen in "cybernetic" response to what is *actually* taking place between the actors in the present moment and whether they are getting closer to or further away from achieving their objective. This is what can maintain a true spirit of improvisational spontaneity and life in what is still essentially a game. The only real difference now is that the game's parameters happen to include the author's words and whatever blocking the director has chosen to layer into the scene as opening night approaches.

Through these adjustments, I hope to move a little closer to confidently bringing these methods into the crucible of present-day professional production conditions in Canada. In 2011, I will begin a multi-year research project in which they will be implemented over the course of three productions with standard Equity rehearsal periods and featuring blended casts of student and professional actors. It is my sincere hope that the fruits of this enterprise will greatly enrich my own directorial practice and be of some benefit to my peers as well. Let the games begin!

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