CHAPTER 13

STANISLAVSKI TO MAGICAL REALISM

Despite the amazing explosion in theatre activity in the twentieth century and the appearance of a range of new types of theatre, the dominant form of the past 100 years has undoubtedly been realism. This has been just as true in television and cinema as on stage.

The core of realistic theatre is the creation of believable characters and situations that give the illusion of real life. The audience must believe in what they are seeing and hearing, and become involved in the play, accepting the performance as a true representation of human experience. For the audience this involves suspending their disbelief. They know they are in a theatre watching a play, but the plot and the characters are believable and interesting enough for the audience to accept them as real during the action of the play.

The theatre of reality evolved considerably during the twentieth century, moving away from the emphasis on complete realism that was Stanislavski’s legacy. In the USA, in particular, there was a move towards a more selective realism, with intense focus on particular characters and events—a form of heightened reality. The past three decades have also seen the emergence of magical realism, in which the plots and characters remain lifelike and believable, but supernatural and surreal elements are introduced into the texture of the play, such as nightmares coming true or angels appearing to change the course of events.

13.1 STANISLAVSKI’S LEGACY

Realism as a theatrical movement actually began in the nineteenth century with a number of attempts to move away from the exaggerated melodrama that was dominating the stages of the world. These tentative attempts to develop a more believable form of theatre were fully realised when a young Russian named Constantin Stanislavski decided to form his own theatre company.

Stanislavski’s real name was Constantin Sergeyevich Alekseyev and he was born in Moscow on 17 January 1863. His father was very wealthy and gave his son a private education that included frequent visits to the opera and theatre, as well as lessons in acting, singing and dancing. By the age of fourteen, Constantin was acting in plays in a theatre built by his father on their country estate. He took his stage name of Stanislavski from an actor he met in amateur theatre in 1885.

After finishing his education, Stanislavski started a group called the Society for Art and Literature, and between 1888 and 1897 he directed and acted in a number of their play productions. During this early period of his life, Stanislavski became increasingly unhappy with the melodramatic style of acting that was in fashion
The Moscow Arts Theatre Company, 1889. Anton Chekhov is reading *The Seagull* to members of the company. Stanislavski is seated on his right.

not only in Russia but throughout the world. As a result, he arranged to meet with a successful playwright and teacher of theatre named Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko to discuss ways of reforming Russian theatre. The meeting took place in a restaurant on 22 June 1897 and as a result they established the Moscow Arts Theatre, which aimed for a new truth and realism in the theatre. The opening production on 26 October 1898 was a tremendous popular success, and it was followed in December by Stanislavski’s production of a play by Anton Chekhov called *The Seagull*. The play had been a complete failure at its first production three years earlier in St Petersburg. Under Stanislavski’s direction it became world famous, the beginning of a revolution in the theatre that made the Moscow Arts Theatre the most renowned and influential company in the world. In 1889, Stanislavski married Maria Perevoschikova (stage name Lilina), who went on to become a great actor with the Moscow Arts Theatre.

While Stanislavski was completely responsible for training the actors and directing the plays at the Moscow Arts Theatre, Nemirovich-Danchenko was the administrator and also chose most of the plays that the company performed in its early years. He also advised Stanislavski on the interpretation of the plays and the problems of staging them.

In 1906, as well as working as an actor and director, Stanislavski began to develop a system for training actors. In 1912 he set up the First Studio, an experimental theatre for improvising plays and developing acting techniques. For the rest of his life, Stanislavski continued to work on his system for training actors as part of his total involvement in the theatre.

Between August 1922 and September 1924 the Moscow Arts Theatre toured Europe and America, with Stanislavski both directing and acting. The tour made the man and his work world-renowned, and in 1924 his autobiography, *My Life in Art*, was published in London.

On 29 October 1928, Stanislavski suffered a heart attack while acting in Chekhov’s play *The Three Sisters*. This forced him to give up acting, and for the rest of his life he concentrated on directing, teaching and writing books that described his techniques for training actors. The first two books, *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*, focus on the vocal, physical and emotional skills an actor must develop. The third book, *Creating a Role*, sets out in detail how to construct a character for performance on stage.

Stanislavski, who died in Moscow on 7 August 1938, was the single most influential director in the history of theatre. Since the time of the Greeks, actors have tried to create real, believable people on stage. Stanislavski’s achievement was to develop a whole style of realistic staging and acting that truly worked, and which could be taught to other people. This was his enduring contribution to the theatre.
STANISLAVSKI’S SYSTEM

What Stanislavski actually did was to apply a scientific approach to acting. He constantly experimented with his own work. Every time he trained, rehearsed or went on stage, he was experimenting. The system he developed taught actors how to use skill, discipline and willpower to achieve inspiration. His aim was to train actors to truly creative people, and the techniques he discovered through observation and experiment allow actors to achieve the kind of inspiration that comes naturally only to a real genius.

At the core of Stanislavski’s system is his insistence that actors must believe everything that is happening on stage. Most of all, they must believe in what they are doing themselves, so that acting a part becomes the extraordinary experience of living the life of another person. Stanislavski called this the ‘theatre of living experience’, and to achieve it actors need intensive training and complete self-control.

Throughout his life, Stanislavski went on developing the techniques required to teach actors to achieve this experience. When he was directing a play, the stage often resembled a classroom. The actors were put through an enormous range of exercises, and new techniques were invented and tried. Plays were analysed in depth as the actors worked on creating their characters.

The aim of all the techniques was the same: to develop actors who had creative intelligence, complete self-discipline, perfect control over their voices, diction and physical movement, and the ability to create and experience the whole range of human emotions. Anyone who could achieve all these qualities would be not only a superb actor, but a superb human being.

Stanislavski urged his students and admirers not to blindly copy his system, but to develop their own methods as well. He insisted that he was not the only source of truth about acting and the theatre. In an interview with American director Harold Clurman in 1934, Stanislavski concluded by saying: 'After all my years of study and work in the theatre, I have come to the conclusion that I know nothing about it'. This extraordinary modesty was characteristic.

His dedication to the theatre was total. He believed that it was important to society, brightening the dark lives of poor people and teaching them important truths. To Stanislavski, actors were people who had the vitally important job of educating society, and his commitment to this job never faltered. He worked ceaselessly, rehearsing and teaching throughout the day, then arriving at the theatre in the evening hours before the performance to prepare himself.

Stanislavski demanded the same dedication from his actors, and they were sometimes banned from the theatre for days just for being a few minutes late for rehearsal. In rehearsals, he would keep saying 'I do not believe you' if an actor's performance was not real enough. The actor would be forced to repeat the scene until Stanislavski was satisfied, and sometimes this would take hours. He would accept nothing less than complete emotional truth.

He applied the same standards to himself. An actor once asked him to demonstrate a piece of acting technique, and then interrupted Stanislavski’s demonstration by calling out, 'I don't believe you!'. Instead of being angry, Stanislavski simply replied, 'Really? Then I shall have to work on this at home.'

During his lifetime Stanislavski also displayed real integrity. The theatre was his life, and he remained totally true to his beliefs about it. He was always open to new ideas and techniques, but he refused to do anything that he did not believe in, even under threat.

After the communists seized power in Russia in 1917, Stanislavski continued to direct plays and work as he had always done. In the late 1920s, he was under tremendous pressure to stage plays that he regarded as worthless communist propaganda. He refused, even though it could have meant being sent to one of Stalin’s work camps where millions of Russians were dying.