CHAPTER THREE
CREATING A CHARACTER

At the heart of all drama, in the classroom, on stage, on television and on film, are the characters portrayed by the actors. Some of the most powerful drama takes place when we forget that these characters are fictional, we identify with them as human beings and become engaged with their stories in the play or film we are watching. In turn, when we are working on a performance ourselves, we want the roles we play to be as intense and believable as possible.

It is a difficult and complex art to actually create a character and function as though the person were real. When you have to bring a character to life for an audience, as the best professional stage and screen actors do, the task is even harder. If your character is to be interesting and credible, and able to interact believably with other characters in the drama, then you must appear to become the person you are portraying. This requires speaking, moving, thinking and feeling as they would. At the same time, you must be completely in control of the character, consciously applying a range of expressive techniques to your performance and effectively interpreting the text for the audience.

This chapter explores the elements required to achieve this complex task, beginning with the expressive physical and vocal techniques that are a necessary starting point. The chapter focuses on Constantin Stanislavski’s system for training actors, which is still the most complete and effective structure we have for learning how to create characters. This is followed by an exploration of Jerzy Grotowski’s work, which attempted to create extraordinary actors capable of achieving self-knowledge through intense training and dedication. Throughout the chapter you will be asked to apply the techniques you are learning to a range of improvised and scripted characters.

CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI’S SYSTEM

Of the major innovators who have influenced the development of drama in the last 100 years, none has been more significant than Constantin Stanislavski. As an actor, and most of all as a director, he transformed the whole nature of theatre and had a profound and lasting effect on film and television as well.

Although he died more than seventy years ago, the style of realistic theatre that Stanislavski developed and popularised is still the dominant performance style on stage and screen throughout the world. The actor training he pioneered still provides the most complete and effective way to achieve realistic characterisation.

Stanislavski did not invent realistic acting. Since the time of the Ancient Greeks, there have been actors who tried to create real, believable people on stage. Stanislavski’s achievement was to develop a whole system of realistic staging and acting that worked, and which could be taught to other people.
Our immediate interest is in Stanislavski’s system of actor training, which he developed and refined over a period of forty years. He used his own theatre, the Moscow Arts Theatre, as the location for his investigations into the craft of acting, and experimented with his own acting in order to try out new approaches to performance. The end result is a coherent set of techniques that we can apply to enhance our ability to create characters based on any script we wish to perform.

3.2 STANISLAVSKI’S TECHNIQUES

CONCENTRATION

Stanislavski demanded an incredibly high level of concentration, both physical and mental, from his actors. To achieve this, he trained them in a range of concentration and relaxation techniques.

One of the most important techniques involved circles of attention. Actors were taught to begin by concentrating all their attention on a single spot, ignoring everything else. They then widened their focus to include a single object, such as a chair. The circle of attention became wider still to include an area, and finally widened to take in the whole room. At each step, the concentration of the actors had to be total, so that they were aware of everything inside each circle of attention and oblivious to everything outside.

PHYSICAL SKILLS

Throughout his life, Stanislavski emphasised the importance of physical training for actors and used exercises, mime work and dance to make his actors supple, graceful and strong. Towards the end of his life, he became increasingly convinced that physical movement and control were the keys to acting, a theory that Jerzy Grotowski was later to develop much further.
Stanislavski argued that on stage, and in real life, some of the strongest human feelings are signalled by small, natural movements. Even complete stillness can be the result of a very strong emotion, as when people are frozen with fear or rigid with barely controlled anger. Every physical movement we make has a reason or cause.

**VOICE**

Stanislavski argued that actors were far more intensely involved in communication than people in ordinary life. They therefore had to be able to use their voices much more effectively. He insisted that his actors do regular voice exercises to improve their diction, projection, resonance and expressiveness.

**EMOTION MEMORY**

Stanislavski demanded that his casts actually experience the emotions of the characters they were portraying. This seems an impossible demand to make. How can a young actor who has never been a mother genuinely feel the joy of a character in a play who has just given birth to a baby? How can an actor who has never deliberately hurt anyone in his life become a vicious killer in a play?

One of Stanislavski’s greatest achievements was to solve this problem. It was Stanislavski who developed the use of emotion memory to train actors to remember and experience a whole range of human feelings. When we remember something important, such as a very exciting time in our lives, our hearts actually beat faster and we experience a feeling of excitement all over again.

Stanislavski’s actors were encouraged to use this experience of emotion memory all the time. The young actor portraying the mother could use her emotion memory to recreate the joy she felt as a child when she was given something special, such as a new pet or a much-loved doll. The actor portraying the murderer could use the emotion memory of a time when he felt intense hatred or the urge to destroy something.

If we develop the use of our emotion memories through constant practice, we will learn to put ourselves emotionally in another person’s place and experience what they are feeling. The more we use our emotion memories, the more sensitive we become, not only to our own feelings but to the emotional lives of everyone around us.

**OBSERVATION**

All of Stanislavski’s actors were encouraged to use their powers of observation to learn more about people and their behaviour. He instructed them to watch and listen with real concentration every minute of their waking lives, and urged them to read books, study paintings and listen to music. The more they observed, the more they would learn.

Observation of people and places is an important part of the actor's training.
HARMONY

In essence, Stanislavski taught people to cooperate together with complete commitment, sacrificing their own ambitions and desires for the good of the whole group.

Both during rehearsals and in performance, Stanislavski insisted that his actors must be in harmony with one another. At the Moscow Arts Theatre he created an ensemble, a group of actors who cooperated together to create superb theatre. An actor might have the main role in one play and only one line to say in the next. Working like this was part of Stanislavski’s philosophy, and one of his most famous observations was that there were no small parts, only small actors.

On stage his actors worked together in character, making eye contact with each other and genuinely responding to the actions, words and emotions of the other actors. They were told to completely forget the existence of the audience and concentrate on working in complete harmony with each other.

ANALYSIS

One of the most important skills Stanislavski taught his actors was the ability to analyse human behaviour. As well as rehearsing a play, actors at the Moscow Arts Theatre spent many hours analysing it, discussing each character in detail. Stanislavski pointed out that every character in a play has a particular reason or motive for his or her behaviour. Each character is trying to achieve something vitally important to him or her. Stanislavski called this motive or aim the ‘super-objective’ and his actors were required to study their characters in depth to work out what their super-objectives were.

Once the actors had discovered this, they could understand why their characters behaved as they did. All the actions taken by the characters would make sense because they would be aimed at gaining what the character wanted. For every character, there would be a clear line of action running through the play leading to the character’s super-objective.

For example, in one scene a man might be extremely generous and friendly to a woman he has just met, while in the next scene he might threaten her with violence. These actions seem contradictory, but if we know that the man’s super-objective is to gain complete control over the woman and make her obey him, then both the friendliness and the violence make sense. They are part of a clear line of action aimed at dominating the other person. An actor taking the part of the man would know how to act both scenes to show that all his actions had the same motive.

Stanislavski did not limit analysis only to plays. He instructed all his actors to analyse themselves as well as the characters they created. Actors were asked to examine their own actions, knowledge and experience, to look inside themselves and discover their own motives and super-objectives. Things they had done in the past were described and analysed, and the actors were able to recognise the lines of action they had taken and to identify their own super-objectives.

CREATIVITY

At the heart of Stanislavski’s system is a very simple question: ‘What if?’ Stanislavski called this question the ‘magic if’, and he made his actors use it all the time as a stimulus to creativity.

Once they had used all the other techniques we have been studying, the actors then had to ask themselves: ‘What if I were this character in this situation? What would I do?’ For example, the actor creating the character of Nora in Ibsen’s play A Doll’s House must answer the question: ‘If I were a young wife trapped in an unhappy marriage, what would I do?’
When a group of actors use the 'magic if' with real skill and total commitment to their characters, all of them become completely involved in the imaginative reality of the play. Everything the characters say and do on stage is real for the actors playing them, and therefore real for the audience watching.

The 'magic if' is not just an important theatrical technique, it is the key to all drama. By visualising an imaginary situation, and then projecting ourselves into it as different people, we can live a whole world of experiences and emotions that would never be available to us in reality.

Anyone can use the 'magic if': it only requires a simple act of imagination. However, if we have also learned all Stanislavski's techniques for creating a character, then we can use the 'magic if' to experience a range of alternative realities. We can effectively become other people, living other lives.

**PERSONALISATION**

On stage, Stanislavski's actors seemed to become the characters they were acting, until the audience watching believed that the people on stage were real in every way—speaking their own words, feeling genuine emotions, taking important decisions and committing real actions.

Stanislavski insisted that this fusion of the actor with the character must never be total. Actors must always be in control of their creations, so that a part of their consciousness remained separate, observing and directing the behaviour of the character. Stanislavski claimed that actors who really believed they were the characters they played were unbalanced.

What Stanislavski required of actors was the difficult but rewarding skill of personalisation. To achieve it, actors had to use their emotions, observations and experiences to create a character and then become that person as completely as possible on stage. While they were acting, they had to seem to be the character, yet be in control of their performance and return to being themselves as soon as the play was over.

We can use personalisation ourselves to experience the world from different points of view. In a way, it is like stepping in and out of other people's shoes. What does it feel like to be a mother or a father? We can use Stanislavski's techniques to answer that question, creating the character of a parent with total conviction and being that character during an improvisation. At the same time we remain ourselves, in control of our creation, and can leave the character behind once the improvisation is over.