

## The Stanislavski System: A Psychophysical Acting Training Perspective

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### **Abstract**

*Konstantin Stanislavski was a well-known actor and director who developed a system to train actors. Stanislavski emphasised on the significance of establishing a strong link between psychology and physicality in actor training and performance. It laid the groundwork for what later became to be known as the psychophysical approach. Stanislavski's contributions to the art of acting were groundbreaking and he challenged conventional acting practices that relied solely on external gestures. He advocated for a more authentic and internally driven style of acting. He urged actors to delve deep into the psychology of their characters and connect their emotions to their physical actions. Throughout his career Stanislavski directed, taught, and extensively wrote about acting. He was also the first one to use the term "Psychophysical" in relation to theatre studies and actor training. He also developed a method of "Physical Actions" to help actors better understand the complexities of actor training. This paper explores the groundbreaking contribution of Stanislavski and its contemporary relevance.*

**Keywords:** *Psychophysical, Physical Actions, Emotional Memory, Embodying, Bodymind.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word "Psychophysical" is related to psychophysics and refers to sharing mental and physical qualities. "Psychophysics" as defined in Merriam-Webster dictionary is a branch of psychology concerned with the effect of physical processes (such as intensity of stimulation) on the mental processes of an organism. According to Zarrilli, "Psycho" is derived from the Greek psyche. Psyche can mean "life, spirit, soul, self". This meaning informs the commonplace contemporary use and understanding of the self as defined by modern psychology, "the science of mind or mental phenomena, the science of behaviour, the mental, attitudinal, motivational, or behavioural characteristics of an individual or of a type, class or group of individuals" (Zarrilli, 2009: 18).

Phillip Zarrilli discussed the meaning of psychophysical and mentioned that there cannot be one definition. There can be many interpretations related to it. He asserted that the definition cannot claim definitive answers regarding the inquiries central to its practice. Zarrilli dismisses the dualistic interpretation of the term and highlights its unity. He recognizes the composite essence of the term "psycho-physical" and "body-mind" which encompasses the integration of both mental and physical aspects. The interpretation of the term psychophysical may vary among practitioners based on their individual experiences with it.

Psychophysical Acting training is a method that aims to foster a profound connection between the body and the mind. It was first explored and formalised by Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) who is a prominent figure in theatre. Stanislavski along with Vladimir Danchenko co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) company. Stanislavski revolutionised the approach towards acting. It is important to clarify here that the term psychophysical was first used by him in theatre practice.

Stanislavski outlined his psychophysical approach to actor training in books such as "An Actor Prepares" (1936), "Building a Character" (1949), and "Creating a Role" (1961). These works explain the nuances of the famous "Stanislavski System" which emphasised the importance of emotional truth in acting. He encouraged actors to draw from their own emotional experiences and memories to create authentic performances referred to as the affective memory. His ideas concerning emotional memory and the method of physical actions hold significant importance within the field. Throughout the history of actor training, the emphasis has

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predominantly revolved around the psyche, often neglecting the significance of the physical body. Character building has traditionally been centred around the mind until Stanislavski brought attention to the importance of the physical body in the actor's craft. He devised a unique technique to explore the connection between the physical and the psychological aspects of acting.

Theatre making and acting represent a constantly evolving process which is deeply rooted in the phenomenon of self-discovery. It is a research into how individuals relate to their performances and the art of performance making. This dynamic field is characterised by continuous exploration, experimentation and adaptation because artists seek to push the boundaries of their creativity and expressiveness. Practitioners constantly strive to innovate and challenge conventional norms. They delve into various theatrical forms, styles and techniques embracing interdisciplinary approaches. Collaborative efforts between directors, playwrights, actors, designers and other artists contribute to the richness and diversity of theatrical productions. "Acting may be defined as that psychophysiological process by means of which a theatrical world is made available at the moment of its appearance/experience for both the actors and audience" (Zarrilli, 2009: 44). Acting as an art form is driven by the quest for authenticity. Actors engage in a profound exploration of their characters. Their body seeks to understand their motivations and emotional landscapes. Through extensive research and personal introspection, they embody diverse roles and bring them to life on stage. The interplay between theatre making and acting lies in the alliance of creativity and self-expression. As the landscape of theatre and acting evolves, it also alters connections between artists and spectators. The magic of theatre lies in its ability to evoke responses, provoke thought, and elicit a shared human experience that resonates long after the performance.

### **The Stanislavski System**

"Remember this: all of our acts, even the simplest, which are so familiar to us in everyday life, become strained when we appear before a public. That is why it is necessary to correct ourselves and learn again how to walk, move about, sit, or lie down. It is essential to re-educate us to look and see, on the stage, to listen, and to hear". (Stanislavski, 1936: 73)

Konstantin Stanislavski was the first known actor and director who developed a detailed system to train actors. He is read and taught in all drama schools almost all over the world. He was also the first one to use the term psychophysical in relation to theatre studies and actor training. Stanislavski recognized the need for an innovative approach to stage the evolving dramas in his time period. In 1904, the Moscow Art Theatre made a momentous decision to produce three plays by the Belgian symbolist playwright, Maurice Maeterlinck. It became evident to Stanislavski that this new wave of drama demanded a fresh acting technique to effectively bring these plays to life on the stage. According to Benedetti, (1999, as cited in Zarrilli, 2009: 15) Stanislavski "realised that a new acting technique was necessary for this static drama; however, his own experiments at home in front of a mirror, both vocal and physical, proved unsuccessful".

On the basis of his observations, Stanislavski made distinctions among theatre acting. The first kind of acting consisted of stereotypes and copying of gestures from experienced actors. He had respect for the second type of acting which he called the art of presentational performance. Through this second mode he genuinely wanted the actor to penetrate the psychic state of a character to be represented. He wanted the actor to experience the role while performing. When an actor experiences a role, Stanislavski believed, the fully realised personality of the character so dominates the occasion that the actor's own personality virtually disappears. The actor must learn to align his psyche with that of dramatic characters for a creative process to take place and for genuine character experience to appear for the audience. Stanislavski also made it clear that by experiencing he didn't mean to get possessed by the character. Experiencing is the key idea of the system and Hobgood considers another important term "embodying" the second major phase of actor's development. By embodying, Stanislavski meant 'to make visible the invisible creative life of the actor' and for this to happen the actor's body should be in ready condition to immediately respond to the inner impulses of experiencing. But in his early writings Stanislavski did not cope with the problem of actor's duality. His initial concept of experiencing called for an identification of actor and character so closely that it denied the fact that the actor continues to be himself while portraying a character. Stanislavski believed that "human spiritual life" had the

greatest power in the theatre and the actor must keep it intact in order to seek awareness and a sense of proportion. (Hobgood, 1973)

The various branches and practitioners influenced by Stanislavski's training are crucial in gaining a deeper understanding of his training system. One such influential figure was Richard Boleslavsky, who happened to be a student of Stanislavski. After training under Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre, Boleslavsky founded the American Laboratory Theatre in New York. This endeavour aimed to apply Stanislavski's principles in the American theatre context. Boleslavsky's work at the American Laboratory Theatre had a profound impact on American acting and theatre education. He played a significant role in spreading Stanislavski's ideas to a broader audience. He delivered a lecture in America titled "Acting: The first six lessons", which focused on Stanislavski's acting system. This lecture offered valuable insights into Stanislavski's principles and techniques further popularising the Russian master's approach to acting. The lecture was later published in the 1923 issue of *Theatre Arts Monthly* making Stanislavski's ideas accessible to a wider readership and contributing to the dissemination of his teachings beyond Russia's borders. This dissemination played a crucial role in shaping the development of acting theories and practices not only in the United States but also around the world. One of Boleslavsky's notable students was Lee Strasberg, who studied under him and later became a prominent figure in American theatre. Strasberg, influenced by Boleslavsky's teachings and Stanislavski's system, went on to establish the Group Theatre in New York. The Group Theatre was the first American ensemble to place significant emphasis on Stanislavski's teachings, pioneering the adoption of the Stanislavski System in American acting and drama.

### **The Method of Physical Actions**

American psychological realism often saw theatrical characters as separate entities of the mind and the body. When actors created a character, it suggested the character is made in the mind and then transferred to the body. There was less discussion about how this character becomes part of the actor's body. Stanislavski's "method of physical actions" tried to address this by focusing on physical abilities in acting training. Moore mentions that Stanislavski clearly stated that human behaviour is a psychophysical process. Every inner experience is expressed through a physical action. Considering all human actions to be psychophysical and united, it suggested that the truthful fulfilment of physical actions will involve an actor's truthful emotions. Moore asserts the importance of "the actor's physical training" in the Stanislavski System and its call for physical training to make the body "responsive." (Moore, 1979: 35). Students must be taught awareness of the psychophysical processes of an action and must learn to fulfil the psychophysical action. The actor must develop mastery of the choice of actions in the creative process which describes the inner life of character. Stanislavski strongly believed that physical action is the key to an actor's emotion and worked extensively on the development of this method.

Whyman Rose discusses Stanislavski's approach to acting and actor training. A distinction is drawn between acting training in regard to a text-based theatre where characters psychology is emphasised and on the other hand a post dramatic writing where psychophysical approach is preached. Rose explored the acting theories who observed the misconception of separation between the body and the mind and suggested psychophysical training as a possible solution for betterment. Stanislavski was the first to use the term psychophysical, focusing equally on the actor's psychology and physicality in developing characters. Though the term was used prior in different domains. Rose mentioned that Stanislavski believed that it is necessary to experience the role, that is to have the sensations of its feelings, every time and on every repetition of creativity. Stanislavski's psychophysical approach is an actor fully experiencing and embodying the role and their presence in the moment drawing from the sensory information available. Rose discusses the complications of acting and suggests that the solutions to these problems can be seen in psychophysical training. Many times, performance problems are perceived as mental or physical and they are dealt as two different entities. (Rose, 2016)

In relation to the actor's body, Whyman Rose explains how discussions of body, emotion, feeling, mind, memory, and action, among others, are being viewed as aspects of a unitary embodied human process. He calls an attempt to uncover Stanislavski's use of the term psychophysical and by examining this indicated the need for areas of research related to the performer's body and the training process. By reassessing Stanislavski's style

of acting process Rose argues that “All acting and performance is psychophysical. It cannot be anything else, since in all human activities, practically speaking, ‘mind’ and ‘body’ are inseparable” (Rose, 2016: 14). “Stanislavski described how the actors physical score, once perfected may go beyond mechanical execution to a deeper level of experience which is rounded out with new feelings and becomes one might say psychophysical in quality” (Zarrilli, 2009: 14). This is a good starting point to think about the psychophysical training in performance and how working on it helps an actor to work on his skills.

Bella Merlin’s experience of Stanislavski based training in Russia supports the idea that Russian teachers engage in “little cerebral analysis of texts in rehearsals” (Merlin, 2001: 6), they emphasised the method of physical action and active analysis where the emphasis is on “acting, doing, experiencing, playing” (Merlin, 2001: 255). Coger (1964) mentions that Stanislavski in training wanted the actors to discover their characters through the small truth of the simplest physical acts. The actor not simply performed the task but “experienced the task” as it is being done. Through this way of working the scenery and blocking of the performance evolved organically. Stanislavski used physical actions to create the need for that inner life which permits an actor to realise the external action; a circle of creation is made. He believed that exploring the physical actions helps actors in finding feelings, impulses and reactions suitable for the character. “With his work on physical actions, Stanislavski went beyond but also extended his old idea of emotional recall. He asked his actor, ‘What would you do if you were in the given circumstances?’ These circumstances are the circumstances of the role: age, type, corporality, a certain type of experience. From Stanislavski’s perspective, it was logical and very efficacious” (Grotowski & Salata, 2008: 37). The method of physical actions was the final phase of his discoveries before his death. Physical Actions provided elementary behaviour generated through truly physical actions. But Grotowski extends his views that an actor turns to his own life and instead of emotional recall, he turns to the body memory. He also claimed that more essential than this physical action is the pre-physical, which he called “Impulse”.

### **The Ethos of Acting**

Stanislavski had a great impact on the modern theatre and theatre practitioners. This impact can be traced back in his systematic exploration of acting as a creative process. Stanislavski centres his investigation of acting on the problematic tension between the actor and his role. By forcing the actor to avoid both the habitual mannerisms of the stage and the expectations of his audience, Stanislavski anticipates an “existential” regard for the artist’s authentic autonomy, his need to define his art by defining himself. Worthen claims that Stanislavski specified the moral relation between the actor’s identity, his performance and defined an art, an attitude, a set of values, an ethos for the modern actor. The actor must be freed from the conventions of society and of the theatre which makes his acting inauthentic (Worthen, 1983). Hobgood (1973) also mentioned in his writings that Stanislavski wanted the actor to experience both himself and character simultaneously during performing. His process is a process of self-analysis that allows an actor to achieve an authentic sense of self/being through acting. The actor achieves the state of “I am” uniquely every time he performs; to do so, he must overcome the deadening habits that theatrical repetitions threaten to encourage (Worthen, 1983). He challenged the conventions of acting and theatre in order to decentralise the established structure and offered contradictory imperatives to define the actor and his art. The actor’s authenticity and truth are of most importance to Stanislavski’s system. Despite contradictions of his system, the Stanislavskian actor kept on his struggle of self-realisation through art.

The influence of yoga and other non-western traditions can be seen in the work of Stanislavski. He wanted actors to practise psychophysical exercises as a means of cultivating strong focus and concentration. He was interested in yoga and used prana exercises in his teachings to develop concentration. “In a circle of light on the stage in the midst of darkness, you have the sensation of being entirely alone. This is called solitude in public” (Stanislavski, 1963). He further refined this public solitude as “a restricted sphere of attention”. The actor must be capable of controlling his attention. Stanislavski never wanted the actor to avoid the audience completely due to stage fright instead they should achieve a sense of solitude while remaining in the public eye.

## **Stanislavski as Director**

David Press (1966) discusses the problems faced while directing a “method” actor. He suggests that it is important for directors and directing teachers to analyse Stanislavski’s theory and practice of directing. He mentioned that the important principle behind Stanislavski’s directing practice seems to be that the actor felt that the work was his own. Stanislavski’s idea of directing was different in the sense that he saw the actor as a co-creator. His system motivated the actor to share his creative function in the production to discover the central idea of play and develop characters accordingly. He used the term “given circumstances” to connect the actor to the situations of a role. He motivated actors to conduct experiments while rehearsing. He was a keen observer of the rehearsals and suggested solutions for the actor’s to personally involve them in the role. His directorial method complemented the acting method but need not lose the control over rehearsals.

Brecht considered Stanislavski’s system to be a progressive one which systematically compelled the empathy of the spectator. Brecht’s epic theatre theory worked to find a method which could completely disclaim empathy. It wanted the spectator to be an active participant and the actor to be freed from the obligation of completely transforming into the character. This complete transformation is neglected in the epic acting style, its desired only in the usual method of acting. Brecht was not against empathy, but it should be limited to a certain stage of rehearsals. After that something must be added to it; a focusing on the character with which you empathise, a social evaluation (Brecht & Mueller, 1964). The major difference which Brecht mentions between his and Stanislavski’s acting theory is that he described a way of playing the character in which total identification does not happen while Stanislavski’s method eliminates actors’ consciousness and replaces it with that of character. Eric Bentley (1964) mentions that we must realise that Brecht was a playwright and Stanislavski an actor. Brecht regarded his writing and dramaturgy as always developing and transformable whereas he regarded actor’s craft as already there in finished form. Stanislavski on the other hand was always busy reworking with the actors.

## **Phillip Zarrilli on Stanislavski**

Phillip Zarrilli discussed Stanislavski’s system as explained by Sonia Moore (1979) in “Training an Actor: The Stanislavski system in class”. According to Zarrilli, Moore’s approach to the Stanislavski system tends to overemphasise the intellectual aspect of creating a character, leading to a neglect of the physical aspects of acting. Zarrilli argues that Moore’s language in her book suggests that the character is constructed logically by the mind through textual analysis and then imposed upon the physical body during performance. “The mind as a container of images remains separate from the body. Control is provided by what Moore variously calls “thinking,” “logic,” or “conscious control,” i.e., the Cartesian rational mind. It is assumed that whatever is “in the mind” can be transferred into the body. Precisely how this transfer from mind to body takes place is never discussed” (Zarrilli, 2009: 17). Moore views the mind as a container where emotions are stored and can be revived during the act of performance. This perspective portrays the mind as having conscious control over the body and the overall experience of the actor. Zarrilli highlights that Moore’s approach keeps the mind and body separate, with the mind serving as the source of control and the body as the recipient of its commands. The transfer of ideas from the mind to the body is considered self-evident, and the actual process of this transfer is not elaborated upon or discussed. According to Zarrilli’s analysis, Moore’s approach to acting, which heavily relies on mapping out a set of objectives in a text, can lead to an excessive self-consciousness about the acting process. Zarrilli contends that when an actor becomes preoccupied with these set objectives, there is a risk of overthinking and analysing, which might hinder the psychophysical process of embodiment. Instead of allowing the actor to immerse themselves in the character and physically embody their actions and emotions, focusing solely on objectives may encourage an intellectual approach that keeps the actor at a distance from their bodily experience. This intellectualization of the acting process can hinder the actor’s ability to fully engage with the character and their emotions on a deeper, more intuitive level. Zarrilli criticises Moore for not articulating a clear process by which bodily action is genuinely embodied or initiated. The absence of a well-defined method for integrating the mind and body in the acting process may result in a disconnect between the actor’s thoughts and their physical actions, impeding the authenticity and effectiveness of their performance. “Stanislavski’s use of “psychophysical” in relation to acting was therefore an innovative, if historically limited and not always

successful, attempt to problem-solve the relationship between the “psycho” and the “physical” elements of acting” (Zarrilli, 2009: 13).

According to Zarrilli, Bella Merlin’s writings on Stanislavski offer a pragmatic and comprehensive approach to the psychophysical process. Unlike Moore’s overemphasis on intellectualization and separating the mind from the body, Merlin’s approach emphasises the seamless integration of body and psychology. Merlin’s practical approach views the body and psychology as a continuum, meaning there is no rigid boundary between the two aspects. This perspective highlights the interconnectedness of the mind and body in the actor’s creative process. In other words, the actor’s physical actions are not just a result of intellectual analysis, but rather an organic and embodied expression of their psychological and emotional states. The concept of “constant inner improvisation” in Merlin’s psychophysical actor points to a dynamic state where the actor remains open, responsive, and adaptable to the present moment within the performance environment. This mindset allows the actor to engage with the scene, other actors, and the audience in a spontaneous and authentic manner. Merlin’s pragmatic approach to Stanislavski’s psychophysical process emphasises the unity of body and psychology and promotes a state of continuous improvisation, facilitating a richer and more embodied acting experience for the actor and a more engaging and impactful performance for the audience.

## **CONCLUSION**

Historically, in the actor’s training process, a lot of importance has been given to the psyche and the physical body was neglected in many of the discourses around actor training. The mind was always central in character building until Stanislavski worked on the new method of training actors. His influence or criticism can be seen in the work of practitioners such as Michael Chekhov, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and A.C. Scott. They developed their own techniques to work with the physical body and its relation to the Psychic. All the teachers mentioned here have one thing in common that they all worked around breath, awareness, presence and body-mind connection. Stanislavski concluded that the personal emotional feelings help authentically in creating a role. He was one of the first acting theorists to suggest that the character is sometimes formed in the psychological domain and at times derived from totally external explorations.

Stanislavski was the first to use the term “Psychophysical”, even though his use is historically limited. He developed the “Method of Physical Actions” which offered to bridge the gap between bodymind and challenged his own techniques of Effective Memory. Michael Chekhov interpreted Psychophysical through his coinage of “Psychological Gesture”, which is a concentrated and repeatable movement that awakens the actor’s inner life and its kinaesthetic image. His training of the body is a training in awareness, in learning how to listen to the body, how to be led by it. Grotowski, through his Psychophysical developments, hoped to explore the innermost core of the performer’s personality and wanted him to sacrifice it through years of bodily training. This innermost core is the innate physical power present inside the body. He wanted to investigate and find a way to wake up this physical power through bodily training which when awakened can increase our awareness, sensitivity and perception. Jacques Copeau’s work on psychophysical training highlights the link between the breath and the body in motion and the link between doer and done accomplished through long term bodily based training. (Zarrilli, 2008)

“The study of the performance practices of the past is essential. Theatre history is not just the reservoir of the past, it is also the reservoir of the new, a pool of knowledge that from time to time makes it possible for us to transcend the present. The entire history of the theatre reforms of the twentieth century, both in the East and in the West, shows the strong link of interdependence between the reconstruction of the past and new artistic creation.” (Barba, 1995: 11)

There are many discourses of acting written from a specific point of view and historically diverse views on acting invites practitioners to (re)consider both acting and discourses on acting from time to time. Actors are often required to perform in diverse styles and the process often involves a process of negotiation with the self. These negotiations involve navigating through various competing ideas and approaches to acting and performance. Through specific training methods these negotiations are continuously reshaped. These moments of reconsideration can stem from personal or cultural factors, making them unique to each individual. They

hold the power to impact not only one's approach to acting but also their perception of self. Both practitioners and theorists undergo periods where their perspectives on acting, and its techniques evolve. For actors, these moments of reflection lead to insights that refine their embodied performance practices and techniques.

Stanislavski is renowned for his emphasis on physical activity or scores as vehicles for exploring and conveying dramatic action. He developed comprehensive actor training methodologies characterised by a series of psychophysical exercises. These exercises serve as foundational tools for actors to delve into their characters, emotions, and performance techniques, ultimately enhancing their overall capabilities on stage. Through his approach he has significantly contributed to the understanding and development of psychophysical. Actors, Directors and theorists of acting should scrutinise and contextualise the psychological itself as a phenomenon whose cultural meanings and social significance have altered over time. Thus, it requires reconsideration from time to time. This analysis aims to reshape the discourse around acting by transcending traditional dichotomies like body/mind or emotion/reason. They seek to portray acting in a holistic manner, acknowledging that meaning is crafted and conveyed not only through language (mind) but also through movement (body). In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature recognizing the holistic aspect of acting, often using the term "psychophysical" to describe this integrated approach. Phillip Zarrilli is one such theoretician and practitioner who explored the realm of psychophysical.

Stanislavski wanted the actor to be consciously present in the moment and attempted to develop a technique to maintain consistent attention. Grotowski on the other hand wanted to diminish the time gap between inner impulse and outer reaction. He believed that the integration of an actor's psychic and bodily powers can bring forth a transillumination. Copeau, similar to Stanislavski, worked on uninterrupted concentration starting from repose, silence and calm. Most of the great teachers mentioned above investigated this concept of mental and physical separation, they all concluded that psychophysical training is needed to put them together. Merlin who worked extensively on psychophysical training also noted that psycho-physicality means training your body to be receptive to your psyche and vice-versa.

### Future Aspects

Actors, Directors and theorists of acting should scrutinise and contextualise the psychological itself as a phenomenon whose cultural meanings and social significance have altered over time. Thus, it requires reconsideration from time to time. Stanislavski matured his understanding of the craft of the actor and inspired many to take the same task. He was first to introduce the term 'Psychophysical' and after him it is taken on by many to new explorations to it. Phillip Zarrilli is one such theoretician and practitioner who explored the realm of psychophysical. He mentions that his take on psychophysical acting takes a post stanislavskian approach to acting i.e. it does not reject Stanislavski per se but moves acting theory and practice beyond some of the historical and practical implications which have formed our understanding of the Stanislavski's legacy.

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