

A Level Theatre Studies: Bridging Unit

What does this course require of me?

A level Theatre Studies is a fantastic, all consuming, eye opening, boundary pushing course which demands your full and willing engagement with a range of complex and thought provoking stimuli. The big step up from GCSE lies not only in the stimulus options but the approaches with which we choose to explore these. Your opinions of 'What is Theatre?' and 'Why do we perform?' will be continuously challenged; your views and experience undoubtedly enriched. To prepare you for this undertaking the following bridging unit will provide an insightful and essential foundation.

How will this unit help me prepare for A level?

This unit will broaden your understanding of where exactly some of the techniques and ideas you have explored previously have emerged from. Further to this, you will be given opportunities to further equip your repertoire of performance skills (yes even on paper). You will begin to think much more as a professional dramatist, considering the role of the audience in further depth and the role of Theatre not only to entertain but in terms of its social, cultural, political and historical implications. You will learn to record your findings and reflections with much more precision, depth and academic detail than you ever have before.

Contents:

Over the course of this unit you will be exploring the pedagogy of FOUR contrasting theatre practitioners- people across history who have had very definite ideas about how theatre works and who have changed it significantly. These are:

- Konstantin Stanislavsky
- Antonin Artaud
- Bertolt Brecht
- A modern practitioner of your choice (from a list of options)

Each practitioner will be explored over the course of a three week session. To ensure clarity and understanding, they will each follow the same format:

- A brief history-placing the specific practitioner in their historical/theatrical context.
- Fundamental theatrical beliefs.
- Key approaches and techniques.
- Application and exploration of the specific practitioner theories.
- Reflection and recommended further reading.

Suggested timescale for completion:

Week 1: sections 1-4 (section 8 ongoing)

Week 2: section 5 (section 8 ongoing)

Week 3: section 6 and 7 (section 8 ongoing)

Konstantin Sergeievich Stanislavsky (1863-1938):

1. A brief history:

Born in Moscow in 1863, Konstantin Stanislavsky is arguably one of the most influential Theatre practitioners of all time. Undoubtedly his ideology has had a profound effect on the process of acting and its longstanding impact can still be seen today. A keen advocate of 'naturalism' his body of work influenced remarkable changes in the world of theatre and has been used as a primary source of study for actors and teachers across the world. Many artists have continued experimentation with Stanislavsky's ideas long after his death, among these Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford Meitner; founders of the highly regarded American 'Method'. If this sounds familiar it's likely due to its close affiliation with the highly sought after Academy Award or better known Oscar. This often being regarded as the highest accolade any thespian can dream of receiving in acknowledgement of his craft. Well known Oscar winning 'Method' actors include Kate Winslet, Daniel Day Lewis, Meryl Streep, Leonardo Di Caprio and Joaquin Phoenix.

But long before the 'Method' was Stanislavsky's 'System' which would transform theatre of the time forever. At the mere age of just 14 years old, Stanislavsky joined a theatrical group organised by his wealthy family. His maternal grandmother was a French actress and his father even constructed a stage on the family's estate, setting the scene for a theatre adoring clan. He continued to hone his acting skills and began to both produce and direct plays in the late 1800's. By 1897, he and playwright/director Vladimir Nemirovich Danchenko decided to open the Moscow Art Theatre, an alternative to standard theatrical aesthetics of the time. Traditional theatre of the time placed emphasis on vocal and gestural training. The actor served to give life to the emotions of the text in a broad illustrative fashion- a much more melodramatic almost pantomime like style if you will. Stanislavsky felt such an approach was shallow and without authenticity. All of which were elements Stanislavsky would seek to eradicate with the creation of his very own 'system'.

Task: Answer the following questions in response to the above information

- What factors influenced Stanislavsky to develop a love of theatre?

- Which famous acting approach was inspired by Stanislavsky's work? Who developed it? Why is it so highly regarded?

- What did Stanislavsky dislike about theatre of the time thus inspiring him to develop his own approach?

2. **Fundamental theatrical beliefs**-what did Stanislavsky believe the role of the actor was? How did he feel Theatre should be presented? What did he hope would be an audiences response?

Follow the links below to read all about Stanislavsky's theatrical beliefs:

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zxn4mp3/revision/1> (READ PAGES 1-4)
2. https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/stanislavsky_c.html
3. <https://www.biography.com/actor/constantin-stanislavski>

Task: Highlight the theatrical statements in the table below you believe are representative of **Stanislavsky's** theatrical beliefs (some of them are NOT), **indicate the source** with a number 1-3 as above, the first one has been done for you as an example:

Audiences should be discouraged from empathising with events on stage-naturalism rejected.	Theatre should remove social inhibitions and restrictions to uncover our true authentic selves.	Actors should give consistently deep, meaningful and disciplined performances.
Audiences should remain objective and distant from emotional involvement to make considered and rational judgements.	The audience should be made to think. They should always be aware they are watching theatre not real life-therefore the fourth wall should be broken.	The audience should be provoked and confronted in order to directly unleash the primal, raw and real qualities of Human behaviour.
The actor should pay closer attention to importation unsaid messages within scripts.	Actors should use their personal histories to express authentic emotion.	Actors should present action realistically by implementing a fourth wall. Audience members should be passive voyeurs.
Audiences should be violently forced to experience their true selves and confront their deepest fears.	Actors should inhabit their roles- this includes offstage as well as on the stage. 1	Theatre should act as a force for change- socially, culturally, politically and eventually historically.
Actors should emphasise the use of stylised external actions as signs of social relationships.	Actors should explore Character motivations to give performances depth.	Theatre must go beyond words and connect with emotions: to wake up the nerves and the heart.
Theatre should consist of a single playing space (no stage or auditorium) with no barriers between audience and performers.	Actors should keep a distance between themselves and the characters they portray.	Theatre should transfer a sense of pain, suffering and evil using gestures, sounds and symbols instead of words.
Actors should speak in prose rather than poetry or any heightened use of language.	Theatre should be largely movement based using powerful imagery.	The actors key responsibility is to be believed as opposed to recognised or understood.
Theatre should bombard the audiences senses to achieve catharsis.	The actor is a tool in which to shock audiences out of apathy and complacency.	Emotional investment in characters should be avoided.
Theatre should present moral problems and reflect contemporary social realities on the stage.	Theatre should represent the lives of ordinary people in ordinary settings (and contemporary at that).	Theatre should appeal to the irrational mind- not one conditioned by society.

3. In Stanislavsky's own words:

Task: What is he talking about? Decode his quotes by putting them into **your own words**

- *'Our demands are simple, normal, and therefore they are difficult to satisfy. All we ask is that an actor on the stage live in accordance with natural laws.'*

- *The actor must '...look within himself and outside himself for the psychological material needed for creation'.*

- *'What kind of truth can this be, when all on the stage is a lie, an imitation, scenery, paint, make-up, wooden goblets, swords and spears. Is all this truth?'*

- *'I want you to remember this fundamental theatrical rule: establish truly and precisely detail that are typical and the audience will have a sense of the whole, because of their special ability to imagine and complete in imagination what you have suggested.'*

- *'What does it really mean to be truthful on the stage?...Does it mean that you conduct yourself as you do in ordinary life? Not at all. Truth fullness in those terms would be sheer triviality...'*

- *'An actor on the stage need only sense the smallest modicum of organic physical truth in his action or general state and instantly his emotions will respond to his inner faith in the genuineness of what his body is doing.'*

- *'Do not speak to me about feeling. We cannot set feeling; we can only set physical action.'*

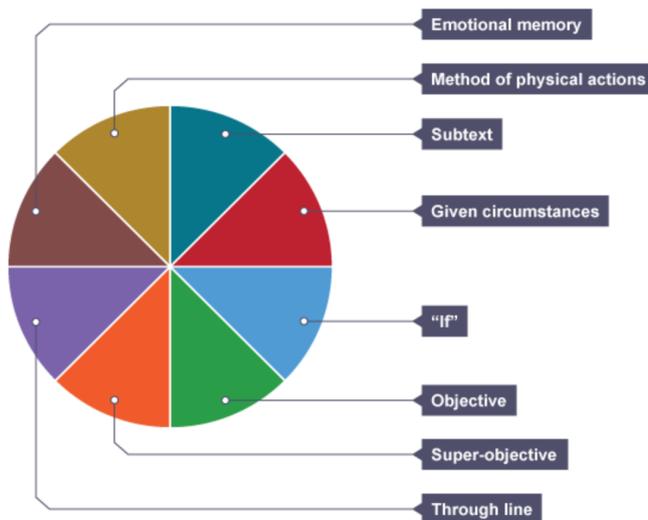
- *The life portrayed on stage 'must be convincing. It cannot flow amid palpable lies and deception. The lie must become or seem to be truth on the stage in order to be convincing...'*

4. Key approaches and techniques:

Fortunately for us, Stanislavsky left behind a largely coherent and logical legacy in his 'system'. This system whilst undoubtedly complex serves as a fantastic 'go to' manual for thespians across the globe. What is very important to remember though is that Stanislavsky very much valued experimentation. His own ideas shifted, at times even contradicted each other and noticeably changed over the course of his career. What remained unwavering was Stanislavsky's search for theatrical truth on the stage and the actors entire creative process requiring rigorous analysis both internally and externally to achieve such. We will be looking at some of these key approaches and applying them to several stimuli in the sections which follow.

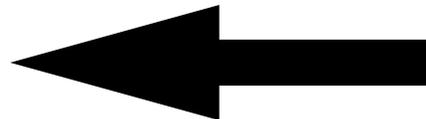
The System

This term refers to the methods used by Stanislavski to foster a good performance in his actors. It focuses mainly on helping an actor recall the emotions needed for a role. Don't confuse 'method acting' with the System. Method acting is how Stanislavski's work was interpreted by others, in particular, actors and directors in the film industry.



However, before we do we need to understand what these techniques are. **Watch the clip below**, it provides a brief insight into some of the techniques we will be exploring:

<https://youtu.be/vpEGXrDSXo8>



Task: familiarise yourself further with the techniques listed below. Have you used any of them before? I know for a fact you **have** in your GCSE journey but can you **remember where and how?**

Annotate the techniques with **examples from your own acting experience** (these can be inside and outside educational settings-you may even find you have used some instinctively without even realising they are specific Stanislavsky techniques).

For each one describe:

When did you use it? I.e. script/role/scene etc.

How did you use it?

What was the result of using it? Effective? Ineffective? Why?

Would you use it again? Why/why not?

- **Emotional memory:** encourages actors to deepen their feelings and reactions by remembering experiences in their own lives that are similar or analogous to those the character is going through and then applying them to the role. For example, an actor struggling to find Romeo's motivation for killing Tybalt in Shakespeare's 'Romeo & Juliet' would recall a time they felt blinded by rage and use these feelings to inform their acting choices e.g. what was my vocal quality? How did my body react?

- **Method of Physical Actions:** the process of selecting a logical sequence of physical actions for your chosen role in order to bring about the required emotion. This method assumes that emotion can be more easily aroused for performance through work on the physical life of the role as opposed to emotional recall (emotion memory). For example, the Landlady in Jim Cartwright's 'Two' would focus on a sequence of movements from seated tapping leg in an agitated manner to clenching fists to standing abruptly and knocking over their chair to rushing towards the bar and swiping glasses off the worktop to throwing their hands up in exasperation. They would repeat this sequence with growing intensity in hope that it would inspire in the actor the required feeling of desperate outrage as a sort of instinctive muscle memory response.

- **Subtext:** this is everything that is going on in the actors mind during the action (train of thought). It is inferred, unspoken text identified between lines in the script, during pauses, in ambiguities between what a person says and does etc. Subtext is filled with meaning produced by the combination of the actors inner monologues, mental images and emotion memories.

- **The Magic 'If':** a technique intended to inspire the actors creative state by asking oneself vital "If" questions. In doing so the actor puts themselves into the characters situation i.e. "What would I do if I was in this situation?" in order to open up their imagination and find the required **motivation** for the role. For example, an actor struggling to connect to Macbeth's motivation for killing Duncan in Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' may ask themselves, "What if the person I loved most in the world asked me to kill someone or they'd leave me?" to tap into Macbeth's devotion to his ambitious wife.

- **Objective (units and objectives):** these are the reasons for the characters actions in a particular scene or section i.e. what do they want at that particular moment? The actor would break a scene down into several 'units' of which each unit would have its own objective for their character. The objective should be expressed via an **active** verb e.g 'to annoy him, 'to ridicule her' so that the actor can develop a corresponding physical action to achieve said objective and allow flowing interaction between characters on the stage.

Note* the difference between objective and motivation is simple: motivation looks backwards into psychology and the past, objective looks forward towards an action.

- **Super objective/through line:** this is the characters overarching objective of which multiple smaller objectives will tie back to. For example, in Jim Cartwright's 'Two' the character of Roy can be seen as having a super objective of 'to achieve a superior status' with multiple objectives which help to achieve this e.g 'to mock', 'to threaten', 'to manipulate'. This is also what they **represent** in terms of the bigger picture of the play i.e. Roy represents the issue of domestic violence and what lies behind closed doors. Imagine the super objective as the 'spine' and objectives as the many 'vertebrae' that make up the 'back' as a whole.

This very act of stringing objectives together in a logical and coherent manner leads to a **through line** of action being effectively mapped out for the character. It is the actors responsibility to ensure this map is effectively developed, shifting and experimenting throughout the rehearsal process.

5. Application 1: 'Blood Brothers' stimulus

We are going to start with some activities briefly exploring a stimulus that is familiar to you. This is just so you get the idea of how the activities work before applying it to a lesser known stimulus. If we were with you it would be easy for us to explore new stimuli together but as that isn't possible we want to help you the best we can. If your memory is fleeting you may want to revise the play a little from the existing revision resources you have before undertaking the following tasks.

Tasks: Refer to the separate document titled 'Section 5: Blood Brothers extract' (also uploaded on Showbie in the session 1 folder). Complete **ALL** activities on **that** document.

6. Application 2: 'Road' stimulus

Some of you have briefly explored extracts from Jim Cartwright's 'Road', others may not have touched upon the play. Whilst reading the whole play is important, Stanislavsky often encouraged actors to undertake analysis **before** reading the whole play and so it is, of course, still possible. The actor must use their creative instinct and thought process to make intelligent choices gleaned from the available text. To help you a little more I have added a synopsis of the play as a whole and a character description for both roles in order to further inform your understanding.

'Road' synopsis: Road is a play by Jim Cartwright which examines the lives of a group of people living on a single road in the North of England during the 1980's. The area is working class and has been hit particularly hard under the rule of PM Margaret Thatcher, an era which saw mass unemployment and dire poverty.

Tasks: Refer to the separate document titled 'Section 6: Road extract' (also uploaded on Showbie in the session 1 folder). Complete **ALL** activities on **that** document.

7. Reflection:

Have you really been paying attention? If so you should smash the following online quiz:

Share your Challenge

Make sure to invite other players to your challenge!

<https://kahoot.it/challenge/07720082>

06894776



Google Classroom



Remind



Messages



Email



Copy Link



More

WWW (areas of knowledge):

IOTI (areas needing further revision):

8. Further reading: the following books, online resources and video clips will provide further insight and understanding of Stanislavsky's approach:

Books:

My life in Art/An actor Prepares/Building a Character/Creating a Role- all written by Stanislavsky himself (can be bought very cheaply online)

The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit- Bella Merlin

Online resources:

http://homepage.smc.edu/sawoski_perviz/Stanslavski.pdf

Video clips:

<https://youtu.be/2OD7phopWWk>

<https://youtu.be/VGAqGU-uv3A>