

STANISLAVSKI IN PRACTICE



Stanislavski in Practice: Exercises for Students

Stanislavski in Practice is an unparalleled, step-by-step guide to Stanislavski's system. Author Nick O'Brien makes this cornerstone of acting accessible to teachers and students alike.

This is an exercise book for students and a lesson planner for teachers on syllabi from Edexcel, WJEC and AQA to the practice-based requirements of BTEC. Each element of the system is covered practically through studio exercises and jargon-free discussion.

Over a decade's experience of acting and teaching makes O'Brien perfectly placed to advise anyone wanting to understand or apply Stanislavski's system.

Features include:

- practical extension work for students to take away from the lesson;
- notes for teachers on how to use material with different age groups;
- exam tips for students based on specific syllabus requirements;
- a chapter dedicated to using Stanislavski when rehearsing a text;
- a glossary of terms that students of the system will encounter.

Nick O'Brien runs Stanislavski workshops across the UK. He trained at the Academy of the Science of Acting and Directing and has a PGCE from Keele University. He is an Examiner for Edexcel.

Stanislavski in Practice: Exercises for Students

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FOR MARCUS AND LILLIA

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Introduction

BEFORE YOU START

If you are reading this book, the chances are you're either in the sixth form, or at college, university or drama school. Maybe you are starting your AS year, about to embark on the International Baccalaureate or in the first year of your undergraduate studies.

Acting, by its nature, is all about 'doing', and to understand how to act you must be prepared to 'do'. All the exercises and improvisations in this book are designed with this in mind – to be practised and experienced. If simply read, these exercises will often not be understood, because your understanding will come with practice. So, I ask that you read each exercise, and then you 'give it a go'.

Stanislavski envisaged his system being passed on from actor to actor, from teacher to student, in the form of exercises and improvisations that had evolved and developed in the studios of the Moscow Art Theatre. This book is a continuation of that tradition. It is a collection of exercises and improvisations that have been updated to suit the twenty-first-century drama student and teacher.

Stanislavski developed his system from his work as an actor, director and teacher. His system is a flexible guide for the student to explore and experience a character in preparation for a performance. The Stanislavski system was never intended to be rigid and should not be taken as so. The system evolved and developed over the course of Stanislavski's life, and this book will draw on exercises from Stanislavski's early life as an actor right up to his days at the Opera-Dramatic Studio in Moscow and beyond.

WHERE THE IDEAS AND EXERCISES IN THIS BOOK CAME FROM

A few years ago, I set up a company, The Stanislavski Experience. The company visits schools, colleges and universities, running workshops, initially on Stanislavski, but now on Berkoff, Brecht, devising theatre, physical theatre and directing. The idea behind the company was to deliver practical workshops to help the student understand and experience a practitioner, to give a taste of life at the Moscow Art Theatre or the Berliner Ensemble. We often say in workshops, ‘you cannot really understand the Stanislavski system until you use, experience and practise the Stanislavski system.’

I have run workshops from Edinburgh to Guernsey, Somerset to Suffolk, developing and designing exercises and improvisations specifically for the post-16 student. The exercises that appear in this book are taken from a variety of sources and, in most cases, they have been updated and modified to suit the post-16 courses available. Many of these exercises have evolved as I have toured the country delivering Stanislavski workshops; they are the product of what I have found works best in the drama studio with students. Many of the original ideas for exercises are Stanislavski’s own, and, as a drama school student, I was lucky enough to train under the late Sam Kogan, by whom I was introduced to many of Stanislavski’s exercises first hand. Sam Kogan was tutored by Maria Knebel, one of Stanislavski’s pupils and associates, and I feel privileged to be able to pass on to students exercises and ideas passed down through such an esteemed lineage. These exercises, like the system, are not gospel, but offer ways into understanding and experiencing the Stanislavski system.

This book takes the student and teacher through the key areas of the system and on to the rehearsal process. You will be introduced to Stanislavski through exercises that will enable you to understand, through experiencing, the system. Once you have a foundation of practical knowledge, built on real experience and understanding, it is then time for you



Figure i.1 Nick O'Brien

to look in depth at the theory. I often tell students that, really, Stanislavski wanted to make the actor's life easier. By evolving a system, he gave the actor a direction to go in, a path to follow that would lead to truthful acting. Stanislavski wanted us to experience, and, through experiencing, we learn. This book will give you, the student, an experience that will lead you to understand the system and enjoy it.

Many of these exercises, in truth, could appear in a number of different chapters. The system exists, not as stand-alone components, but in harmony as a collective. Therefore, an exercise on objectives can also be on action, imagination and tempo-rhythm. I have split the exercises into areas of the system to aid you in locating their primary purpose.

Recently, there has been a new translation of Stanislavski's work by Jean Benedetti. The new translation, for many, paints a truer picture of Stanislavski's ideas. When I first read *An Actor's Work* (a combination of the old *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*), I could hear, word for word, lessons from my old principal, Sam Kogan. Whole sentences that had been passed from Stanislavski to Maria Knebel and then on to Sam Kogan were, for me, brought alive again through the new translation. This book is designed to work in conjunction with *An Actor's Work*. You do the exercises in a chapter, say on imagination, and then you pick up the original texts and read the correlating chapter. Then, you can read Stanislavski's own words having already gained a practical understanding of that element of the system.

Stanislavski wanted his actors to experience a role actively, and, in that sense, there is always an element of the experimental in his work. In essence, the Stanislavski system is an ongoing process to create believable and truthful characters who harness their imaginations actively.

For you, the student of drama, the Stanislavski system is a guide to help you to experience the role, and, by going through this process, you will understand what

many would argue is the foundation stone of acting today.

Stanislavski, in *My Life in Art*, offered us some useful advice:

If it cannot be mastered immediately then it has to be done in stages, so to speak, put it all together out of individual elements. If each of them has to be worked on separately, systematically, by a whole range of exercises so be it!¹

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

For the student

This book is divided into chapters outlining the key areas of the system, with the majority of exercises being student exercises, with some that can be led by a group leader or your teacher. At the start of each chapter, there are definitions of the area of the system you will be working on. The majority of exercises have a follow-on exercise for you to practise at home. There are notes for you on each exercise, and exam, performance and rehearsal tips. The improvisations in this book will give you the opportunity to tackle adult characters in a variety of circumstances. This is in preparation for your work on Nina and Kostia, Nora and Torvald, Frank and Rita, George and Martha or Stanley and Blanche. If you are on an IB Theatre Diploma or BTEC National course, this book provides you with a complete framework for your written journals and evaluations.

The exercises throughout the book can be used to support and enhance your studio activities. You can work through the book over the two years of the course doing five or ten minutes here or there, knowing that the skills you are practising have been used by some of the great actors over the last 100 years. Those of you thinking of auditioning for drama school and university drama courses the exercises will give you a grounded technique to use during the audition process. The extension acting exercises ([Chapter 11](#)) will help you to gain solid reference points to take with you.

For you, as a student of drama, the book allows you to reflect on classroom exercises and to follow extension tasks designed to improve your understanding. It is the follow-on exercises and your evaluations of the work done in class, that will cement your knowledge and understanding of the system. The book will help you to build confidence and give you an arsenal of skills to draw upon as you develop and mature as an actor.

With the Stanislavski system came an acting vocabulary for all of us to use. The first time I use a specific acting term it will be written in **bold**, so you know that term is a Stanislavski system specific term. A definition of that term will be given in a box to the side of where the term has first been used. In the glossary at the back of this book there will also be a definition for each of these terms for you to read.

I have ordered the chapters in a way I believe best helps you to progress through the system. With each chapter, you will add more skills to the ones you have already learned, building towards chapters on the rehearsal process, improvisations and extension acting exercises where you can test out all your new skills. As you go through each chapter, think about adding the new area of the system to the ones already practised. Each exercise works as part of a chapter or as a stand-alone exercise, so you can work through the whole book systematically or dip in and out of exercises to support your studio activities.

At the end of each of the first eight chapters, you will find a summary box outlining the key areas of the system you have experienced in that chapter. This is to help you consolidate all that you have practised and learned in that chapter.

Ultimately, this book can stay with you throughout your journey as an actor, so in ten years' time, as you are sitting in your dressing room preparing to 'go on', you flick