

FOREWORD

by Joshua Logan

Perhaps Konstantin Stanislavski was a legend before his death in 1938. He is certainly a legend now. All over the world actors, directors, students, and teachers of acting are quoting his writings and following his teachings. Here in America new words have sprung up in theater language. For years the phrase "Stanislavski's method" was used in theatrical conversations. Now it's simply "the method." We hear phrases like "he's a method actor," "method writing," "method directing." All this, I believe, has stimulated interest in the theater and is producing some great results.

How did all of this start? Who put the word "method" into our language? Who was Stanislavski? What did he really believe? What did he really teach?

In the winter of 1930 and 1931, I had the unique opportunity of studying with Stanislavski in his studio home in Moscow and of watching him direct rehearsals. Along with my fellow student the late Charles Leatherbee I had tea with the great man and his lovely wife each day after rehearsals. I also met and talked with Nemirovich-Danchenko, the equally illustrious co-director of the Moscow Art Theater, and the great actors of the day who were then performing in the Moscow Art Theater repertory. Among the ones we

got to know were Leonidov, Moskvin, Kachalov, and Mme. Knipper-Chekhova (the widow of the great Anton Chekhov).

On several afternoons a week we would sit for three or four hours at Stanislavski's side in his studio home while he conducted rehearsals for the Stanislavski Opera, a project which was occupying most of his time during that winter. At night we attended performances of the Moscow Art Theater, and when we had exhausted that repertory we began visiting the other theaters of the rich Russian theatrical season. We saw the performances and met the artists of the Vakhtangov and Maly Theaters and especially of the startling Vsevolod Meyerhold Theater. Some of these men had been students of Stanislavski previously but were now working out their own systems and directing their own companies.

On our first night in Moscow we saw a play directed by Stanislavski himself, and it was an extraordinary surprise to us. The play was *The Marriage of Figaro* by Beaumarchais, and it was done with a racy, intense, farcical spirit which we had not associated with Stanislavski. It was as broad comedy playing and directing as anything we had ever seen. The high-style members of the cast in flashing colored costumes would run, pose, prance, caress, faint, stutter in confusion, and play out all the intricate patterns of the French farce with a kind of controlled frenzy.

We were stunned. Was this the Stanislavski of the famous method? Was this the work of the great teacher of "affective memory"? It was our first shock at the realization that Stanislavski was a human being—not a distant god—that he was first and foremost the interpreter of the author's play. Up to that minute we had thought of him as a remote philosopher who had envisioned a mystic method of acting. Now we realized he was also a practical man.

In the weeks and months that followed, we saw many plays directed by Stanislavski, including *The Cherry Orchard* with Mme. Chekhova in the leading role and the part originated by Stanislavski now being played by Kachalov. This, of course, was true Stanislavski—moody, thoughtful,

and emotional. But it had an underlying earthy humor which was another surprise to us. There were often lusty physical jokes. I can remember Moskvin as Epikhodov watching the departing family talking while he nailed together some crates, his attention so fixed on the touching scene that he was constantly hitting his finger instead of the nail. All through Stanislavski's work there was a strong sense of humor, and it was boldly stated.

On the other hand, *Czar Fyodor Ióannovich* was a pageant. Moskvin played the leading role in a serio-comic way that reminded me often of Chaplin. This pitiful story of the feeble-minded and ineffectual czar even though robed and bejeweled to a dazzling magnificence, was human and tragic, yet always pathetically comic.

Three Fat Men, a Stanislavski-supervised Soviet piece, was somewhat in the style of our modern cartoon motion pictures. The three fat men were three actors blown up with papier-mâché and stuffing to resemble three gross caricatures. They represented the Church, Capitalism, and the Army, and it was all done with the exaggerated style of a children's fairy tale.

Such political plays were forced on Stanislavski at the time by a Soviet director who had been assigned to the Moscow Art Theater, and, in order to function, Stanislavski had to include one Soviet play every so often in the Moscow Art repertoire. Yet each production was produced with the same care and vitality that he gave to the classics.

An outstanding memory to me is the production of Leo Tolstoi's *Resurrection* directed by Nemirovich-Danchenko. Kachalov played the author of the play and walked through the elaborate production speaking the emotions of the actors when they were not speaking themselves. The director took full advantage of the revolving stage at the Moscow Art Theater, and a great deal of the effect of this play was visual. We were impressed by the theatricality of the Moscow Art Theater. We had expected it to be predominantly an actors' theater; instead we found a theater that was shared by the director, the designer, the musician, and above all the author.

In watching Stanislavski rehearse, I saw him making experiments in improvisation. He was directing an opera with young students, and he was trying to break down the cliché gestures and grimaces that had been taught them by singing, dancing, and diction teachers. It was a battle of egos, constant complaining by the actors that they could not sing if they were forced to take this or that position, insistent encouragement from Stanislavski—"Go on! You can do it! Make the tone! Sing!" When the effect had been reached, he was quick to praise.

We asked Stanislavski about the method. "Create your own method," he said to us. "Don't depend slavishly on mine. Make up something that will work for you! But keep breaking traditions, I beg you."

As you can see from reading Mrs. Moore's book, Stanislavski was a complete man of the theater. His teachings encompass voice, diction, dancing, voice tone, singing, make-up, costume, wigs—all the various physical things that would change an actor's shape, form, and size to make him suit his character better.

Mrs. Moore has made a digest in her own words of many of the things Stanislavski talked about and wrote about. It will help actors and students of drama to understand something of Stanislavski's teachings.

Most of all, as Mrs. Moore points out, Stanislavski did not want the method to be an end in itself, but simply a means to an end. It suggests a way of finding personal truth in the creation of a character.

But to enjoy one's creativity to excess, to fall in love with one's inspiration, was furthest from Stanislavski's belief. When I left him that summer he wrote on the photograph he gave me, "Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art."

THE STANISLAVSKI SYSTEM
