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Creative State / Flow State: Flow Theory in Stanislavsky's Practice

Nearly seventy-five years after his death, Konstantin Stanislavsky remains a toweringly influential figure, and many fundamental ideas about acting can be traced back to his practice. In this article, Marc Silberschatz examines the correspondences with, and divergences from, flow theory – the theory surrounding the psychological state associated with 'being in the zone' – in Stanislavsky's practice. Although separated by vast differences in social, cultural, and historical context, some significant and increasing correspondences between flow theory and Stanislavsky's practice are revealed and examined. Additionally, divergences from flow theory are identified and interrogated, suggesting that Stanislavsky's reliance on fixed, repeatable performance scores and divided consciousness are direct impediments to the achievement of flow. Marc Silberschatz is a PhD candidate at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. He is also a professional theatre director whose work has been seen in both the United States and Scotland.

Key terms: Stanislavsky system, flow, divided consciousness, fixed performance scores.

KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKY (1863–1938) is widely thought to be the originator of modern acting theory and it is often argued that many fundamental assumptions about performance emanate from his ideas. The scope of his work and writing is immense; it attempts to cover all aspects of acting technique. Reduced to essentials, however, Stanislavsky sought the 'creative state', in which 'the actor's whole creative apparatus, all its separate parts, all its, so to speak, internal "springs" and "knobs" and "pedals" function superbly, almost the same as, or better than in life'.[1]

Stanislavsky saw his technique as a way to 'prepare the soil for this kind of genuine, subconscious creation'.[2] Implicit in this description is the idea that the actor's performance happens almost automatically, undirected by conscious thought. The field of positive psychology recognizes a similar phenomenon – 'a harmonious experience where mind and body are working together effortlessly, leaving the person feeling that something special has just occurred'.[3] This is flow.

Although Stanislavsky's creative state and flow share this basic similarity, it is impossible to determine if they are analogous. In spite of this, when examining Stanislavsky's practices, significant correspondences with flow theory emerge. Moreover, it becomes apparent that, as these practices evolved better to 'prepare the soil' for the creative state, they also became more effective as flow-conducive activities. The correspondences are not total, however, and even in their final form Stanislavsky's practices manifest key divergences from flow theory.

In this article I will examine these correspondences and trace their increase over the evolution of Stanislavsky's system. I will then interrogate the divergences and trace their effect, ultimately suggesting new potential performance territory for investigation. Before this, however, the context – first, the developments and dissemination of Stanislavsky's ideas and, second, flow theory and its suitability as a tool to analyze them – requires examination.

Stanislavsky in Context

Analyzing Stanislavsky's work is complicated by numerous issues, including a lifetime of developments (leading to confusion in its practical dissemination) and political and

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editorial intervention in its written dissemination.

First, Stanislavsky's system was never fixed; over the course of his career he radically revised it. This inherent fluidity drastically affected the practical dissemination of his ideas via the teaching of his collaborators. It is safe to assume that any actors or directors with whom he worked would have taught their interpretation of Stanislavsky's system as they understood it in whatever form it had taken while they worked with him. Early twentieth-century members of Stanislavsky's company, the Moscow Art Theatre, would have been exposed to a vastly different process from the actors who worked with Stanislavsky at the end of his career.

What they taught and wrote may well have been an accurate representation of the system as they understood it, but it was only a snapshot of Stanislavsky's thinking at a given point in his practice. One example is Richard Boleslavski, who worked with Stanislavsky in the early twentieth century. By 1920 he had left Russia, settled in New York, and in 1924 established the American Laboratory Theatre, which included among its early members Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Stella Adler, who would later found the Group Theatre.[4] The Group Theatre's work led to the creation of an approach to acting that eventually became known as the 'Method', which placed primary importance on emotional identification with the character portrayed (emotion memory). The Stanislavsky scholar Jean Benedetti accurately assesses the difference between the Method and Stanislavsky's system:

> In the 'system' the primary emphasis is on action, interaction, and the dramatic situation which result in feeling with Emotion Memory as a secondary, ancillary technique. In the Method, Emotion Memory is placed at the very centre; the actor consciously evokes personal feelings that correspond to the character, a technique which Stanislavsky expressly rejected. Whereas in the 'system' each section of the play contains something an actor has to *do*, in the Method it contains something he has to *feel*.[5]

Benedetti further observes that 'one major obstacle to the proper understanding of Stanislavsky's teaching has been the widespread confusion between the "system" and the Method as defined by Lee Strasberg'.[6] While this is certainly an accurate observation, it must be noted that the stark contrasts Benedetti identifies only exist between the Method and later iterations of Stanislavsky's system. The Method has thus been described as 'early Stanislavsky'.[7]

Defects of the First Translation

Like the practical dissemination of his ideas, Stanislavsky's writing has also suffered distortion. The English-language version of Stanislavsky's major text, *An Actor's Work*, was divided into two books, *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*, which were published thirteen years apart: this was a separation that had the effect of destroying any sense of a holistic, psychophysical technique.[8] Moreover, Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, the translator, and Edith Isaacs, the managing editor of Theatre Arts Books, the American publisher, cut the text of *An Actor Prepares* to almost half its original length.[9] Benedetti observes that, as a result, the book not only loses its form as a student diary, but replaces 'a rigorous and sympathetic teacher who guides students through a process of trial and error' with a 'Director enunciating principles in the abstract', and that Hapgood even opted to replace Stanislavsky's simple terminology with 'more abstract words. Thus, "bit" becomes "unit".'[10]

Simultaneously, as Stanislavsky was preparing the Russian edition of his book he rewrote large sections to appease the Soviet authorities, who refused to recognize the existence of the subconscious.[11] (It should here be noted that what Stanislavsky refers to as 'subconscious', modern psychology would call 'unconscious'.[12] In this article, I follow Stanislavsky and use the term 'subconscious'.) This resulted in a version of his ideas that was acceptable to the Soviet government but was highly distorted, given the degree to which Stanislavsky relied on the idea of the subconscious in his thinking.

Benedetti has attempted to clear these distortions through a new translation of the

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original text. He admits that his version 'is neither a literal nor an academic translation but rather an attempt to follow Stanislavsky's original intention: to provide an accessible account of the "system" for actors in training without abstract theorizing'.[13]

This attempt has proven largely successful. It has been observed that Benedetti's translation 'is far superior to the excised and rushed work of the American translator and editor, Elizabeth Hapgood, which has dominated non-Russian theatre classrooms for the last seventy years', and that it is particularly admirable in its 'efforts to de-Stalinize Stanislavsky's Russian versions, reviving terminology and concepts that Soviet censorship would not permit'.[14] Moreover, it has been suggested by Maria Shevtsova that Benedetti's translation 'will allow readers who cannot access Stanislavsky in Russian to discover him at long last – not rediscover him, but actually come face to face with a practitioner whose reputation is marked by numerous misunderstandings'.[15]

It should be noted, however, that Shevtsova also identifies flaws in Benedetti's translation, particularly in his decision to simplify some of Stanislavsky's Russian terminology, foregrounding the rational at the expense of the emotional and spiritual emphasis in Stanislavsky's work.[16] While this criticism is valid, this article focuses on the form and structure of Stanislavsky's practices and how they may or may not correspond with flow theory. As such, the comprehensiveness of Benedetti's translation makes it most appropriate for such an inquiry.

Flow in Context

Flow was identified over thirty years ago by positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who has since refined his theories about this state, identifying its nine dimensions: (1) challenges and skills are balanced, enabling the establishment of (2) clear goals with (3) immediate feedback. These dimensions allow for (4) the merging of action and awareness, a level of involvement that creates (5) a sense of control, (6) excludes distractions from consciousness, and (7) eliminates self-consciousness. This generally coincides with (8) a distortion of one's sense of time. Finally, the experience is described as (9) 'autotelic' or enjoyable in itself.[17]

Since Csikszentmihalyi's initial identification of flow, it has been studied in a variety of contexts: daily experience, athletics, and professional dance are but a few examples.[18] Researchers have examined flow's effect on work and leisure environments and family life. Flow has even been used as a tool for historical and sociological analysis.[19]

There is a burgeoning interest in acting's potential as a flow activity. Attempting to establish flow's incidence in actors, Jeffrey J. Martin and Keir Cutler studied a limited sample of actors in training. They found that actors experience flow on an average just under four times per year and concluded that actors' flow experiences are neither common nor rare.[20] In an experiment where actors were provided with neurofeedback training, John Gruzlier, Atsuko Inoue, Roger Smart, Anthony Steed, and Tony Steffert uncovered a correlation between incidents of flow as reported by the subjects and objective performance quality.[21]

Practical applications of flow theory are also being explored. Acting instructor John Briton has proposed shifting the paradigm of actor training from an extrinsic approach centred on skill-acquisition to an intrinsic model that foregrounds a positive subjective experience of training.[22] These studies suggest that it is not a distortion to examine contemporary acting through the lens of flow theory. Stanislavsky's work, however, pre-dates flow theory by decades; vast cultural, political, and social differences exist between the context in which he worked – imperial and Soviet Russia – and the one in which Csikszentmihalyi developed his flow theories, 1970s Chicago. So the validity of utilizing flow theory to analyze Stanislavsky's practice requires careful consideration.

First, it should be noted that Stanislavsky's work is not a historical artefact but a foundational system of thought for much modern theatre practice in the West. Its continued influence has given rise to various re-examinations of his working methods,

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including, among others, Peta Tait's gender-based critique and Roy Connolly and Richard Ralley's examination of the degree to which Stanislavsky's process is consistent with contemporary psychological understanding of behaviour and emotion.[23] Following the example set by this use of modern understanding, an evaluation of Stanislavsky's approaches from the perspective of flow theory becomes plausible.

Second, flow theory has proved particularly useful in evaluating historical systems of thought. Isabella Csikszentmihalyi has used flow theory to explain the success of the Jesuit movement of the sixteenth century, arguing that some measure of the movement's success was caused by its ability to provide a structure that enabled the Jesuits to experience flow with much greater frequency and potency in daily life.[24] In this case, she uses the modern flow construct to examine a system of thought even further removed from modern psychological understanding than Stanislavsky's.

Finally and beyond these precedents, flow and flow theory do not represent the discovery of a new psychological state. Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges that 'to call it a "discovery" is perhaps misleading, for people have been aware of [flow] since the dawn of time'; but he defends the use of the word 'discovery' because 'even though my finding itself was well known, it had not been described or theoretically explained by the relevant branch of scholarship, which in this case happens to be psychology'.[25]

It has been further demonstrated that, in addition to being understood 'since the dawn of time', flow is recognized across a vast spectrum of social and cultural groups: Japanese motorcycle gangs, elderly Korean immigrants, Australian ocean cruisers, Italian and American high school students, and traditional Occitan villagers, to name only a few.[26] In every study, the respondents recognized the flow state, confirmed they had experienced it, and provided new insight into the mechanisms of flow.

These studies have led M. and I. Csikszentmihalyi to assert that 'regardless of gender, age, ethnic or cultural origin, enjoyment [flow] is the same everywhere, and it is made possible by the same configuration of subjective and objective conditions'.[27] If flow is a universally recognized feature of human life, as has been demonstrated, it is reasonable to assume that Stanislavsky and his actors would have experienced it, even if they lacked the psychological framework to explain or understand it adequately. In fact, awareness of the flow experience is demonstrated in Stanislavsky's own writing.

Stanislavsky's Recognition of the Flow State

Stanislavsky's text *An Actor's Work* takes the form of a fictional diary of a student, Kostya, studying with a director, Torstov, who is teaching Stanislavsky's approach. This method of presentation allows Stanislavsky to illustrate his ideas under dramaturgically ideal circumstances, where Kostya's experience demonstrates every point Stanislavsky wants to make. And he opens the book with what is arguably a flow experience.

To begin their training, Torstov asks the student-actors to prepare and perform a scene of their choosing. Kostya chooses a scene from *Othello*. He rehearses at home by reading the play, but gives this up in favour of improvising a costume and exploring a physical life based on a tiger. During this exploration, he prowls around the room, rolls his eyes and bares his teeth. He becomes so absorbed in what he is doing that five hours pass without his noticing. Upon reflection, he observes that 'some moments weren't at all bad'.[28]

Although Stanislavsky uses this episode to illustrate mistakes that actors might make when working on a role, many dimensions of flow are present. First, Kostya finds a way to balance the challenges of the role with his skills. Untrained, Kostya does not know how to analyze a script – the challenge of interpreting it is too great for him. To accommodate this, Kostya focuses on stereotyped physical embodiment. He later admits that his work has no relationship to either the character or the play.[29] At this point, however, his lack of skill requires that he instinctively reduce the complex challenges of playing

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Othello to something more manageable. He is not specific about his goals in this initial private rehearsal, but Kostya's acknowledgement that some moments were good indicates that he had goals in mind and, as well, was able to determine whether those goals were being met. By turning his focus on to the physical life of the character and instantly exploring it through embodiment, Kostya successfully merges action and awareness, although at a basic level. The fact that he works for five hours without noticing indicates that his sense of time was distorted and that he was neither distracted from what he was doing nor self-conscious. Finally, he clearly enjoys the experience. In creating a fictional situation where every dimension of flow is realized, Stanislavsky demonstrates his recognition of the flow experience (even if flow theory did not yet exist) and its effect on actors.

Stanislavsky understood, however, that the experience he described is not a panacea for acting problems. In fact, it often hinders the acting process. A novice who finds flow is unlikely either to achieve a good performance or experience flow again without proper skills. Stanislavsky's text illustrates this. When Kostya ends his first 'rehearsal', he is bombarded by the reality of what he has done. Seeing himself in a mirror, he is disappointed that his appearance does not match what he thought he was doing.[30] From this moment on, every time Kostya rehearses or performs his scene, he desperately tries to recreate the experience of his first rehearsal and with the exception of one moment during the final performance where his own fear, anger, and frustration match that of the character, he fails.

Repetition of previous work no longer excites him and he has no idea how to proceed. He is unable to set any goals for himself and although he knows he is not performing well, this feedback is virtually meaningless as he cannot utilize it positively. Kostya observes a lack of control when he admits that, 'It was obvious I couldn't play my savage except by using the ways I knew. But I wasn't in control of them, they were in control of me.'[31] He becomes increasingly distracted by the auditorium, which he describes as 'the gaping hole of the proscenium arch and beyond it a boundless, deep, dark void'.[32] He feels an intense desire to entertain anyone in the auditorium and becomes distracted by technicians, the prompter, and virtually everything that happens outside his performance.[33] Ultimately, he develops 'a feeling of complete indifference to it all'.[34] When he finally does perform, his work is considered to be 'the worst kind of stock-in-trade' with the exception of the one moment described above, which arrives by accident.[35]

Stanislavsky writes a fictional account of an actor's experience in which all nine dimensions of flow occur, capturing the exhilaration that often accompanies flow.[36] He also documents the frustration and despair that follow when flow cannot be rediscovered due to lack of skills.

The failure to recapture flow is most interesting. It could be argued that while Torstov's function is to teach specific skills, Kostya spends the duration of the book judging his successes and failures by his subjective experience and enjoyment. As he becomes more skilled in Stanislavsky's technique, incidents that are potential flow experiences become more frequent, suggesting that the techniques Stanislavsky developed to 'prepare the soil' for the creative state do the same for flow.

Correspondences with Flow Theory

In his early career Stanislavsky directed by developing elaborately detailed production plans which actors were obliged to execute exactly.[37] Actor and teacher Bella Merlin attributes Stanislavsky's successful production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1898) to the fact that he was able to 'turn the nuances of Chekhov's script into very specific directions for the actors'.[38] Although successful in performance, the rehearsal process for *The Seagull* occurred with great difficulty owing to the fact that 'the details that worked on paper in the Ukraine', where Stanislavsky created the production plan, 'didn't always translate smoothly to the rehearsal room in Pushkino' – where Stanislavsky's partner,

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Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, was tasked with the plan's implementation.[39]

A production plan approach fulfils several flow dimensions, including clear goals (execution of the plan), immediate feedback (the actors' ability to compare their performance with the plan), and elimination of distractions (focus could be centred exclusively on the execution of the plan). However, the production plan approach significantly inhibits challenge–skill balance.

Stanislavsky placed enormous demands on his actors. They were effectively given their performances by an absentee director and expected to execute them. So great was the primacy of his production plans that Stanislavsky was present at less than half the rehearsals for *The Seagull*.[40] For a large proportion of the rehearsal process the challenges of this working process must have been far in excess of the actors' skills. It is hard to imagine any actor who could execute a fully detailed performance score being dictated to him/her by a director without encountering significant difficulty.

Csikszentmihalyi indicates that 'when a person is bombarded with demands which he or she feels unable to meet, a state of anxiety ensues'.[41] This is consistent with Merlin's description of the problems in and complaints of Stanislavsky's acting company.[42] Given the success of the production, it is reasonable to speculate that, eventually, the actors were able to match their skills to the challenges posed by Stanislavsky's production plan. However, based on what is known about the process, it would be no less fair to speculate that it was neither enjoyable nor conducive to flow with challenges and skills so far out of balance.

A few years after his production of *The Seagull*, Stanislavsky gained an actor's perspective on production plans. Working on another director's production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* led Stanislavsky to realize that performance choices forced upon actors are not effective; actors require their own inner justification for performance choices. Without this, acting could never be 'truthful'.[43] He realized that an actor must not only know what to do, but *why* it is being done. If this justification is lacking, actors may not fully understand what is being asked of them and might potentially resort to self-conscious evaluation to accomplish a production plan, particularly in the early stages.

In flow, however, 'the participants need no self to bargain about what should or should not be done'.[44] Stanislavsky found that it is not enough to execute a plan, but that in order to achieve 'truthful' acting the goals must also be connected to the character being performed. It is this insight that caused Stanislavsky radically to revise his approach to performing through years of experimentation, leading to a process that created conditions in which more flow dimensions could be more fully realized.

Merging Actor's and Character's Goals

This process advocates merging the actor's goals with those of the character being portrayed. To achieve this, Stanislavsky developed the concepts of 'bits' and 'tasks' by which a scene is broken into small sections, each having its own goal.[45] Stanislavsky defines the parameters of tasks by indicating that they must be:

1 Tasks that exist on our side of the footlights and not on the other. In short, tasks related to the play, directed towards the other actors and not to the audience in the front rows.
2 Tasks which are right for the actor as a person, and are in keeping with the role.
3 Creative and aesthetic tasks – that is, ones conducive to the basic goal of acting, the creation of 'the life of the human spirit of a role' and to communicating it artistically.
4 Genuine, living, dynamic, human tasks which drive the role forward, and not histrionic, conventional, dead ones which bear no relation to the character but which are there to amuse the audience.
5 Tasks in which the actor, his fellow actors, and the audience can believe.
6 Fascinating, exciting tasks which are capable of stimulating experiencing.

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7 Apposite tasks – that is, ones typical of the role and precisely, not approximately, related to the meaning of the play.
8 Tasks which are rich and correspond to the deeper meaning of the role, not ones that are shallow, and skim the surface of the play.[46]

Finally, Stanislavsky insists that tasks must be immediately achievable and they must be active and concrete rather than theoretical.[47] Tasks, therefore, form clear goals for the actors – another flow condition – and do so within the fiction of performance: they are character goals, facilitating the merger of actor and character.

The use of bits and tasks also helps create conditions in which both distractions and self-consciousness can be eliminated. Recognizing the variety of distractions an actor might encounter, Stanislavsky reoriented his focus on to the other actors by insisting that all tasks be directed toward them: 'If, after a scene, you can recall all the barely perceptible finer points of your partner's behaviour, it means you played the scene well, and you have the most important quality an actor needs – concentration.'[48] He went on: 'You must use regular exercises to help you hold your concentration. You must develop a special technique which will help you focus on an object in such a way that the onstage object will distract you from what is offstage.'[49] Csikszentmihalyi also discusses the mental requirements in order for flow to occur:

> Unless a person knows how to give order to his or her thoughts, attention will be attracted to whatever is most problematic at the moment: it will focus on some real or imaginary pain, on recent grudges or long-term frustrations. Entropy is the normal state of consciousness – a condition that is neither useful nor enjoyable.[50]

What Csikszentmihalyi describes as ordering consciousness Stanislavsky achieved by codifying where actors should focus: on other actors. This created conditions where distractions and self-consciousness become less likely to occur due to the potentially ever-changing nature of a scene partner as an object of focus.

The Method of Physical Actions

These developments demonstrate that Stanislavsky's process achieved radically greater correspondence with flow theory. Even if this increased correspondence was incidental, it cannot be ignored that the developing processes more successfully created conditions in which flow could occur. Stanislavsky, however, continued to revise his approach to performance, arriving at what is now called the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis, two similar processes that are often grouped together. These processes further increase the likelihood of flow.

In the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis, Stanislavsky found a way to bring balance to challenges and skills from the first day of rehearsal. Merlin describes how the process of rehearsal in this phase of Stanislavsky's work begins:

> The power of Active Analysis lay in its immediacy. It acknowledged the reality of the situation ('Okay, we're on stage, so what shall we do?') and combined it with a sense of playfulness ('But what would we do *if* . . . ?'). Stanislavsky called it 'Here, Today, Now'. The actors were starting from *themselves*, so they had as much information as they needed to kick-start the creative process into action. Because it was so effortless, the very pleasure of acting and the excitement of live performance became valid emotions in themselves. Whatever the actors had – here, today, now – were the physical and emotional tools with which they worked.[51]

By starting with the actors themselves and working from that foundation, the challenges normally associated with performance, while still present, are minimized in early rehearsals. Actors are not attempting to tackle every aspect of their performances from the start, but, rather, are working from what they have. This allows a balance between challenges and skills from the first rehearsal. As these challenges are mastered, new ones are then introduced by working through a scene, analyzing what worked and what did not, then, little by little, constructing the score of the scene with the dialogue.[52]

This gradual increase to the challenges of final performance helps support a rehearsal process where challenges and skills are

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potentially always in balance. By using this approach, Stanislavsky created significant intrinsic motivation to rehearse. He understood that

> one cannot enjoy doing the same thing at the same level for long. We either grow bored or frustrated; and then the desire to enjoy ourselves again pushes us to stretch our skills, or to discover new opportunities for using them.[53]

In Stanislavsky's practice at this point, the rehearsal journey is one where challenges continually increase in sympathy with actors' skills. This approach, added to his earlier developments, led to a significantly more flow-conducive process.

Divergences from Flow Theory in Practice

In spite of all this, however, Stanislavsky's practice manifested significant divergences from flow theory. Actor and writer Simon Callow observes that, 'at core, Stanislavsky did not trust actors or their impulses, believing that unless they were carefully monitored by themselves and by their teachers or directors, they would lapse into grotesque overacting or mere mechanical repetition'.[54] A side effect of this severe lack of trust is that elements of Stanislavsky's practice became contradictory.

In a rehearsal of Molière's *Tartuffe*, Vasili Toporkov, an actor in Stanislavsky's final productions, records Stanislavsky saying: 'Never pre-plan a word or action. You'll have self-consciousness, not intuition.'[55] In giving this instruction, Stanislavsky seems to be advocating a process in which the actor has the freedom to shape his/her performance choices based on what is happening in the moment. However, in the very same rehearsal Stanislavsky instructs an actress to 'work out, before each rehearsal, ways of provoking Toporkov, of tricking him, so that he always falls for it'.[56]

To plan in advance and then execute ways of provoking or tricking Toporkov requires the actress to know, in advance, what Toporkov will be doing in the scene. If she does not know this, she cannot work out how best to trick him.

The actors, therefore, do not have the ability to shape their performances based on the specifics of what is happening, as Stanislavsky's first statement seems to suggest, but rather they are executing a mutually agreed structure in which the planned actions of one actor are met by the planned actions of another. Even if the actress in this example is given the freedom to vary what she will do, it is still a case of one actor's pre-planned performance interacting with another's. This ensures that the performance is always controlled. Stanislavsky as director knows exactly what each actor will do, and there is no need for him to worry that the scene will depart from its pre-planned shape.

This is not a unique example. In discussing the performance output of Stanislavsky's late rehearsal practices, Merlin observes that, even though the rehearsal process utilized improvisation, the actors' work was eventually structured into a fixed, repeatable score, adding that 'It's quite possible that the final "score" bore a strong resemblance to the kind of prompt copy that Stanislavsky forced upon his actors during his early days at the Moscow Art Theatre.'[57] No matter what the process, the result was a score of actions and blocking, fixed by Stanislavsky and his actors, that could be repeated with every performance.

It could be argued that fixed, repeatable scores help to fulfil a dimension of flow – the sense of control. Flow is, after all 'typically described as involving a sense of control – or, more precisely, as lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life'.[58] In addition to his own control over the performance, Stanislavsky's actors would not have had to contend with the fear of losing control of their performance. They could feel secure.

To assert, however, that this fulfils a flow dimension would be a misunderstanding of the nature of the sense of control that occurs in flow. Csikszentmihalyi observes that what is essential is 'the *possibility*, rather than *actuality*, of control'.[59] He adds:

> What people enjoy is not the sense of *being* in control, but the sense of *exercising* control in difficult situations. It is not possible to experience a feeling of control unless one is willing to give up the

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safety of protective routines. Only when a doubtful outcome is at stake, and one is able to influence that outcome, can a person really know whether she is in control.[60]

If the score is fixed, the outcome is not in doubt and flow is hindered. The type of structure Stanislavsky advocates is actually a reorganization of the challenge–skill relationship. An illustration of this can be seen by examining the subdivisions of the challenge–skill dynamic suggested by flow researchers Fausto Massimini and Massimo Carli as an eight-channel model:

- High Challenge/Moderate Skill – Arousal
- High Challenge/High Skill – Flow
- Moderate Challenge/High Skill – Control
- Low Challenge/High Skill – Boredom
- Low Challenge/Moderate Skill – Relaxation
- Low Challenge/Low Skill – Apathy
- Moderate Challenge/Low Skill – Worry
- High Challenge/Low Skill – Anxiety [61]

While a fixed, repeatable performance score might initially feature high challenge and demand high skill as it is rehearsed, the challenge of executing it diminishes with repetition, leading to a situation where the actors' skills exceed the challenges presented to them by the score. From the actors' perspective, executing the score might become a moderate or even low challenge activity that they meet with high skill. As may be seen in the eight-channel model above, entirely different experiential states – control and boredom – are the result. A similar situation has been shown to occur with professional dancers, where over-familiarity with a piece leads to a similar reorganization of challenges and skills, making flow harder to attain.[62]

Moreover, by its very nature, a fixed and repeatable performance score suggests that every member of an ensemble knows in advance what every other actor will do at every moment. While the actors' goals have been structured to match those of the character being portrayed, each actor will act and react in the same manner every performance. No matter how well or poorly an actor pursues his/her character's goals, the outcome is unchanged. No genuine feedback can emerge within the performance itself.

This forces the actor to rely on an inner model of the performance provided by the score he/she has established. The only source of feedback available to the actor comes from a comparison of what he/she is doing with the inner model of the score. In contrast to the goal structure (which exists within the fiction of the performance on the level of character), feedback exists only on the technical level of the actor. Both goals and feedback are present, but disconnected from one another, leading to a division of consciousness in the actor.

In performance, the actor must focus on the scene he/she is playing and the goals within that scene, but simultaneously remain outside the scene to compare what he/she has done with the inner model of the score in order to receive feedback. The merging of action and awareness, therefore, becomes difficult, if not impossible. The actor cannot fully merge his/her awareness with the action he/she undertakes because a part of it must remain separate to facilitate this comparison.

Stanislavsky recognizes this division of consciousness and describes it himself: 'One half of you is moving towards the Supertask, the Through-action, the Subtext, mental images, the creative state, and the other half is concerned with your psychotechnique.'[63] Stanislavsky does not see this division as problematic. On the contrary, he argues that divided consciousness helps the actor if he/she gets lost by allowing his/her psychotechnique to guide him/her back to the performance he/she is meant to give.[64] Stanislavsky further suggests that a divided consciousness enables the actor to craft his/her role more artfully:

> So, as we develop a role we have to bear in mind *two perspectives, one belonging to the role, the other to the actor himself*. Hamlet must not know his fate at the end of his life, but the artist must see the whole perspective the whole time, otherwise he will not be able to order, colour, shade, and shape the different parts.[65]

He further asserts that 'we are split in two in the real world. But that doesn't stop us living

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or feeling deeply.'[66] This is undeniably true. In daily life, consciousness can be divided successfully. However, division of this nature precludes the achievement of the flow state. Consciousness can only be successfully divided if the challenges presented by the separate activities on which consciousness must focus are not of a particularly high order. If a challenge suddenly demands the full skill of a person to meet it, consciousness will re-unify and attention will centre on that task. This is a mechanism by which flow is made possible. Viewed from the perspective of flow theory, divided consciousness has the potential to divert an actor away from flow.

Therefore, with respect to flow theory, Stanislavsky's methods present an extraordinary difficulty. While they brought the acting process more in line with the dimensions of flow, they also introduced two fundamental flaws: that fixed, repeatable scores offer too much control, and that the actor's consciousness is divided by the process's goal-feedback mechanism in such a way that action and awareness cannot fully merge. These are significant barriers to the successful achievement of flow.

The sum total of Stanislavsky's practice, when viewed through the lens of flow theory, is an approach to acting that creates conditions in which most, but not all, flow dimensions can be fulfilled. That the correspondence is so high opens a tantalizing avenue for future research (and is the subject of my doctoral research). How might the divergences be resolved? What are the implications of doing so? What new performance territory might be opened? How might it be maintained? Research along these lines would help develop understanding of how theatre might best facilitate flow and how flow might best facilitate theatre.

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