

Approaching Stanislavski's work at the Opera-Dramatic Studio:

Part 2.

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Abstract: This is the second article written from an investigation of the Opera-Dramatic Studio (1935 – 1938) unpublished files, held at the Moscow Art Theatre Museum between November 2017 and February 2018. In it, we try to present an analysis of some new aspects of Stanislavski's preparation of the Studio's faculty and his practice with the pupils. After a short introduction to the research, we present the period of the faculty's preparation (Jun-Oct 1935) and the training work conducted with the pupils (Nov-Dec 1935). We analyze three aspects of Stanislavski's practice during his last years: the *étude*, the physical actions and the subconscious moment, as a triple basic-training structure used in the preparation for the future work on the play and the role. To finish, we present a short conclusion the analyzed material.

Keywords: Stanislavski, Theatre History, Opera-Dramatic Studio, Physical Actions, Training.

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4. Some of the elements of Stanislavski's pedagogical practice at the Studio.

Stanislavski's first lesson given at the Opera-Dramatic Studio to the twenty pupils of the Opera and Dramatic Arts sections took place on November 15, 1935. As previously stated, there are records of 14 encounters between Stanislavski and the Dramatic Arts pupils between November 15 and December 23, 1935. I have selected three stenographic transcripts from this

period, examining the lessons given on November 15, 17 and December 5. These documents, in my view, exemplify the totality of the pedagogical procedures used by Stanislavski during the pupils' preparatory period for the collective creation, a year later, of a new approach to the work of the actor on the role.

In the first two lessons, dated November 15 and 17, Stanislavski goes back to the issue of "Ethics and discipline", which he had worked on during the faculty's pedagogical orientation period. Here, however, there is a clear distinction made between ethics and discipline. The first revisits the need for collective construction, or better yet, the need for constructing what he calls a collective creator. He opens the November 15 lesson with the following words: "You just started studying a collective form of art. You must completely merge into a collective. The common cause (общее дело) must be looked after collectively. Learning this means reeducating yourselves both as human beings and artists." (KS 21142)

With these words Stanislavski, ahead of any practical work, sets an ethical imperative: merge into a collective. He states that, unlike other artists, who are able to create individually, "you (...) are tied to the collective, when it comes to your work." (KS21142) Or yet, "Just as a singer is dependent on their maestro, the dramatic actor is dependent on their scene partner." (KS21144). That is to say:

You must merge completely; you must understand the meaning of collective art and what are the positive and negative aspects of it. If you don't acquire that conscience, the split collective is bound to shatter, and all sorts of vulgarity may take place, since you are unable to preserve the common cause. We need the conviction that all of our energy is utilised so that it [the cause] will not dissipate. (KS21142)

In the November 17 lesson, he shares an interesting piece of information on his conceptions concerning the Studio, in a passage where he distinguishes a collective from a theatre: "Needless to say, nowadays there are many collectives, but they don't exist as collectives, but as theatres." (KS 21144). In other words: there is, to Stanislavski, a fundamental difference between a performance production-oriented theatrical organism and another one, oriented towards artistic creation. The second model should have been the one adopted in the Opera-Dramatic Studio¹.

The fact that Stanislavski uses terms such as "common cause" and "collective art" is interesting. On November 17, we come across a passage in which he goes further into this concept:

The issue with the collective is an important and complex one. It must not only be understood, but felt. Each one of you should think about your acts: is this necessary for the collective cause? Know to say out loud only that which will not destroy the collective cause. (KS21144)

This was, to him, a question whose answer should be present at all times. He states: "The collective, and why you are here – these are the two questions you should remember, think and write about. (...) By forgetting it, you won't recognize yourselves as soon as you have your first success. (...) Before anything else, you must think about what you do." (KS 21142)

In order to discuss discipline, Stanislavski uses a few examples taken from his own life. In two of the cases, it is interesting to see how he resorts to German theatre, recalling the fascination he had felt, years earlier, upon seeing the troupe of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen and hearing the ringing of the bell as rehearsals began². Then, after asking the pupils to place their chairs on the ground without making noises, he says:

You must be disciplined. The actor must feel the stage, feel the room. When we were visiting a theatre abroad, we saw a note at the door: 'The fine for knocking is three Deutschmarks'. In come the Russian actors and I hear: 'Knock! Knock!' We had to place security guards on every dressing room door and pay them extra so we wouldn't need to pay a lot in fines. Learn to be disciplined from the start. (KS 21142)

In another lesson, still insisting it was necessary to move the chairs around silently, he recalls a visit to Bayreuth, where he meets Richard Wagner's widow:

Move the chairs noiselessly. For each noise I hear - three Deutschmarks, like at the German theatre. Last time, I told you how the wife of Wagner, the composer, took me to the stage to show how, in a minute, with no noise whatsoever they were able to move a ship out of scene and replace it with a lady spinning on a spinning wheel. Or, on another occasion: a large amount of crystalware had to be moved off of the stage. Each actor grabbed two glasses and left. It was all done momentarily, quietly, no noise whatsoever. (KS 21144)

When giving an example for a "disciplined actress", he cites Sarah Bernhardt, who acted in the play *L'Aiglon*, by Edmond Rostand, even though she only had one leg:

I remember how Sarah Bernhardt came on tour, missing a leg. She was in *L'Aiglon*. Fabulous technique. And every day she would take lessons in singing, speech and fencing. I went with her to a few of those lessons. She did *L'Aiglon* on one leg! That is technique. (KS 21142)

Or, rather, he called for the discipline seen in musicians:

Learn to be systematic like singers. Violinists are even more so. Once I was in the United States, at a ball where Jascha Heifetz, a known violinist, also was. During the most interesting moment, just as everyone prepared for dinner, Heifetz suddenly leaves the room. He returns shortly after. It so happens he had a concert the following day and left the dining hall to switch the box where he kept his violin (different temperatures). No one could do it for him. (KS 21142)

These concepts, of course, were connected to Stanislavski's concept of artistic work: "The greatest pleasure is in working for art, sacrificing yourself for art. You must have a clear understanding of what brought you to Theatre." (KS21144)

Once again, he resorts to a personal example in order to develop the concept of the super-supertask, in response to the question: "why am I in theatre?":

I have more than once told you of when, after a really bad rehearsal in Leningrad, at Mikhailovskaya Square I saw a lot of people sitting around bonfires. It was winter, and it was cold outside. I walked over to see what it was. People were guarding their spots in line to get tickets to see our performance. I thought: WHAT could've made me sit, at night, on the ice, out on the streets? What would I do that for? And those people were there, waiting. (KS 21144)

He insists:

[You must] Decide: what are you in Theatre for? Don't be afraid to say what you think. Speak nonsense, let others disagree with you, but you must talk about it, you must constantly think about it, because it is your main drive, your guide. And that, the reason we are in theatre, we shall call super-supertask. Constantly think about the super-supertask of your lives. (KS21144)

The super-supertask, according to Knebel, was an entirely new concept, introduced by Stanislavski during his working years at the Opera-Dramatic Studio. To her, it was "the idea of the artist's worldview as an indispensable condition for making conscious art."³ For Stanislavski, however, as we can see in the citation above, it was the resolution to the answer to "why am I in Theatre?": a sort of ethical North that would reorganize the complete practice of a theatre collective.

It is not by chance that during practice in the Studio, the two fundamental elements which should be put into "even the tiniest thing you do on stage" (KS21138) were the supertask and the throughaction⁴. In the Studio's lessons, this is Stanislavski's explanation of the connection between these two elements:

You all have a picture in which the elements are represented as the tubes in an organ⁵. Each tube is made up of many parts, connected through the same line, like beads on a necklace. This reminds us of the line made of tasks, objects, communication, adaptation, affective memory, etc., which, weaved together make up the throughaction. The throughaction tends to the supertask, which is not yet totally clear, but will become clearer as we go deeper into our studies of the play. (KS 21137)

In the following lesson, he recalls the importance of the two elements in the following way:

All things must lead to the throughaction and, through it, to the supertask. Now, whenever you read my book [*An actor's work*, that would come out only in September 1938], know that I was unable to properly start from the throughaction and the supertask. These are my shortcomings as a writer, and if I could have done it, I would have done it immediately. For instance, even Rhythmic lessons should have throughaction and a supertask. (KS21138)

In practical terms, however, how did this happen? To formulate possible answers to this question we must analyze a few basic procedures which, in my opinion, make up the core of Stanislavski's pedagogical practice during the Studio years.

a) the *étude*

Action as a central element for the actor was, as we have seen, essential to Stanislavski since the beginning of the 1930s. It is in the Studio, however, that he manages, as we shall see, to build a true experimental field along with the faculty and pupils, and to launch the bases for a

new approach to the play, the role and theatre in general, with the scenic action as both its starting and finishing points.

The structure which allowed for each exercise to be permeated by a supertask and a throughaction, in the Studio, was that of the *étude*. The term, which can be found in Stanislavski's practices as early as 1888, had, over the years, come to designate widely divergent things.⁶ Since the System's conception, that is, the 1910 – 1920s, the word had been used to describe the improvisation of a situation. Knebel recalls, in her autobiography, how "before [the Opera-Dramatic Studio], Konstantin Sergeyevitch did *études* with us about the 'adjacent' themes of the play."⁷ In the first document ever published on the System, Mikhail Tchekhov's article "On the Stanislavski's System", dated 1918, the term *étude* figures merely as a way to designate "the tasks a pupil must fulfill on the given themes of the play."⁸

In his book *An Actor's Work*, Stanislavski employs the term to designate the improvisations proposed to his pupils by his alter-ego, Arkadi Tortsov. Thus, the most famous among them, the "burnt money *étude*" is the basic improvisation structure which becomes more complex as new elements of the System are presented to the pupils⁹.

Novitskaya presents, in her memories of the Studio, notes on one of Stanislavski's speeches about the *étude*, which shows the first work made around the *études*, before introducing the dramatic material from a play:

If, in a play, the actor materialises the playwright's concepts and uses the author's text - as he would always repeat to us - then, in an *étude*, they are always the playwright as well as the author of their own texts, and that is easier for the beginner actor, since something they have created is closer to themselves, and they are acting within the proposed circumstances created by themselves in an organic manner. By creating an *étude*, the Studio's pupil is obligated to remember an *étude* must have a beginning, a climax and an ending, just like a small play. In the *étude*, a final, fundamental goal is called for, that is, a supertask, and preliminary versions of the throughactions of each character, the conflict and scheme of the episodes and facts. First the made-up *étude* comes together in an improvised manner (once or more), and then the text is set and defined.¹⁰

What is Stanislavski proposing through this practice? That the basic dramatic structure (events, facts, episodes, actions) be isolated and recreated by the pupils, at first from their own will and imagination. Indeed, as observed through the transcripts of his lessons, in the Studio, all exercises should become *études*, that is to say they should all involve a supertask, throughaction

and events. But these *études*, done between 1935 and 1937, contained a fundamental element, an entirely new exercise which should be dominated: the physical actions.

Before exemplifying the practice of the *études* from the beginning of the Studio to show how it served as a preparation to experimentation on the new procedures on the play and the role, however, we must elaborate on this element, contained in the structure of the *étude* between the years 1935 and 1938.

b) physical action exercises using imaginary objects

The exercise of performing physical actions without objects, or rather with imaginary objects (drinking water, cleaning the floor, crossing a brook, etc.) was not something completely new to Stanislavski's practice. I have mentioned the first volume of *An Actor's Work*, which had been almost entirely finished by the beginning of the 1930s, where Stanislavski's pedagogue alter-ego, Tortsov, guides pupil-Stanislavski, Nazvanov, through the logics and coherence of physical actions of the "burnt money *étude*"¹¹.

In the Opera-Dramatic Studio, however, the procedure becomes central, and becomes the basic training for new experiments. In order to give us a glimpse of the importance Stanislavski attributed to this exercise, in the December 5 1935 lesson, for instance, he says that, although it might seem like a "silly class, this [the exercises of physical actions using "imaginary objects"] contains an enormous, important essence" (KS 21147). Before understanding the "enormous, important essence" of these exercises, however, we must understand how they worked in practice.

The pupils were told to perform simple, daily physical actions, using "imaginary objects". The first thing to stand out, when reading Stanislavski's conducting of these exercises, is his insistence on performing them with precision. On December 5, he conducts a series of exercises named "kneading the dough", in which the pupils were supposed to, presumably, manipulate imaginary bread dough. A pupil comes in to perform the exercise. Stanislavski says:

Inject life into your fingers. Their tips should be working the hardest. Your fingers are working too little, and the fingertips are supposed to do the most work. Develop each of your actions to complete truth, then, the same muscles used for the proposed action will begin to come into play. (KS 21147)

Or, yet:

Do it very slowly, so that your fingers feel it. Your dough is being kneaded on its own, there is no truth to it yet. (...) Hold the dough in a way you can say to yourself: 'Yes, I'm holding it, I can see it, I can put it here or there'. And notice it is so, so sticky. Work on the smallest subtleties. (KS21147)

In another passage, for instance, he talks about the necessity of conveying the correct sensation of the weight of the imaginary object one is manipulating: "The hardest thing, up to now, has been lifting and lowering weights. Hold something and see it for yourselves: this is what holding means. See how holding a single feather is an entire story in itself." (KS 21147)

Or, better yet, in another exercise of the same kind, where he asks a pupil to open an imaginary door:

Now try opening the door. (*the pupil tries to open an imaginary door.*) Now truly open it. (*the pupil walks towards the door and opens it.*) Take real material from your life and understand all about it. We must know what can be retrieved from real-life and brought to the scene. Do it a few times to fixate the results on your muscles. (*The pupil repeats the exercise.*) When does the turning of the doorknob occur? Feel this detail. These exercises teach your attention to follow the muscles' movements. All exercises involving weight lifting, door opening, etc. need to be brought to truth. Here, a small truth brings about another and this is when you start to create. (KS 21147)

Were such levels of precision really necessary? It was not, after all, about representing actions without objects on stage. To Stanislavski, precision was key for a different reason. The exercises, as demonstrated, should bring about "real truth", "the whole truth" (KS21147). He proceeds, then, with his comments on the "dough kneading" exercise:

What are we doing now? We are performing actions you know very well, from your daily lives. And well, now we are trying to imitate these actions. What kind of attention is necessary in order for every moment of the action to be felt? You see, here, not a single transition moment can be missed. Notice what kind of attention you need to discover what your muscles are doing. Let your muscles work in the same way with the "void", and then you will feel the physical truth. (KS 21147)

Later, another pupil demonstrates an exercise in which she eats an imaginary cake. Stanislavski also emphasizes the precision of physical sensations:

Every one of your taste nerves must work. See, when you recall the memory of a cake, you must salivate. For instance, if I were to take this cup and drink, like so, (*K.S. drinks slowly, savouring the drink*) you should feel how fresh and delicious this drink is.

Pupils. Yes, it is delicious, we can feel it. (KS 21147)

In both of the above-mentioned passages, the connection made by Stanislavski between precision and attention is very interesting. Precision, according to him, is necessary as a means of guiding and concentrating the actor's focus on the action to be performed which, in its turn, makes it true.

In this sense, the first goal of the exercises using imaginary objects was, to Stanislavski, leading the muscles to feel the "physical truth", the "real truth". This "real truth", also referred to by him as a "small truth", achieved by an actor through concentrating their attention on the physical task to be performed should be linked, in a cohesive, logical line, to other "small truths". This is what we see when, upon noticing the "small truth" in the manner with which one of his pupils performed the dough kneading exercise, Stanislavski says as she "starts to inject life into it, the proposed circumstances begin to develop little by little, a truth requires another. And then, from this small truth you found, you slowly begin to grow a new one." (KS 21147)

This "line of physical actions", of "small truths" one after another should be trained. The explanation for these exercises is formulated on the lesson given on December 12, 1935:

K.S. What is all this [the exercises using imaginary objects] for? Do you understand? We are, little by little, training our attention so it can be brought to muscles, to your interior logic. We are working on directioning attention because, if it is trained, once you are on stage you are able to walk your own lines, and you will not need to even think about muscular liberation. Otherwise, the line crosses the limelight and reaches the audience, and you will be worried about whether the audience is laughing or not. As we are preparing to act with no *mises-en-scène*, this will be your only line, running through it all: focus on your bodies and the internal movement centres, and attention to emotions, logic, etc. You must appropriate yourselves strongly of this, it is crucial that you do. (KS 21150)

An imagetic example largely used by Stanislavski demonstrates, to us, the concept of the "line of physical actions". It is the example of the shortcut, which is also given, in slightly

different ways, in the lessons given on November 11 and 17. In the lesson given on December 5, it appears as follows:

Another example: I arrive at a place I have not been in a long time. A long time ago, when I used to live there, I opened a path among the woods, going from my house to the train station, from walking on it so often. There is another road adjacent, full of bumps. It is the path of clichés. Maybe going along this path would be easier than searching for my own. But I follow my path twice, stepping on the traces I left behind, and then a third, and so on, until, at last, the path I walked on appears once more.¹² (KS 21147)

This means that, first of all, he was looking for logic and coherence between actions which, when linked, could become the path the actors were to cross, on stage, towards their final goal (цель). This line, perfected through the creation of a sequence of small physical truths, through the imaginary object manipulation exercises, was intrinsically related to another one, to Stanislavski: the human body line within the role. In the first place, we must recall that "THROUGH THE LINE OF PHYSICAL ACTIONS YOUR EMOTIONS ARE AWAKENED." (KS 21147) Just as with the exercises, "if the role is crossed by external actions, you end up with a sort of line, which we will call the life [line] of the human body and, at the same time, we are developing the line of the human spirit." (KS21147)

According to Stanislavski, the "line of the human spirit" could only come to be once the actor created along what he called the "organic nature", something that, according to him, could only be present in subconscious creation.

c) the subconscious

There is a long, ongoing discussion about the precise origins and meaning of this term in Stanislavski's work¹³. During the Opera-Dramatic Studio lessons, however, the terms subconscious and unconscious are interchangeably used by Stanislavski, much like synonyms. A few words on his use of the term follow.

In an attempt to trace the origins of some of the elements of the System, Tcherkasski finds, among Stanislavski's archives of 1915, Russian psychologist's Sergei Sukhanov's article, "The Subconscious and its Pathologies."¹⁴ In 1916, according to Vinogradskaya¹⁵, Stanislavski starts to use the term "unconscious" (бессознательное) in the creative process of *The Village of*

Stepanchikovo. Similarly, we can see how the subconscious is present in his writings about the work of the actor on the role, written in the early 1920s (the very same "previous method" targeted by his criticisms during his lessons at the Studio). In 1935, the subconscious not only remains on the list of elements of the *inner creative state*, but it has gained enormous importance, practically and methodologically.

It is important to recall how Stanislavski opens his work with the Opera-Dramatic Studio's pedagogues by talking about this. So, on the lesson given on November 9, 1935 he states that "each of the [System's] elements is equally important (...), because each one of them leads the actor, through conscious technique, to the subconscious." (KS 21140). Or yet, on the November 11 lesson, when he states that the entire System "exists to cause, through conscious technique, the subconscious creation and, thus, get our nature to start acting, as nature is the greatest artist there is." (KS 21141)

By analysing the 1935 stenograms, however, we can see precisely how the physical action exercises using imaginary objects were a procedure made not with the objective of creating a credible image, but accessing what Stanislavski calls the "subconscious", which is where, to him, lies the "true art of creation" (KS 21137). Let us look at a few examples of this, starting with the example we have previously explored, the "dough kneading" exercise. We have seen how, in this exercise, for instance, pupils were merely supposed to "knead the dough". We have also seen how Stanislavski insisted on logic and coherence, to the point of saying that the muscles should learn to perform the task automatically. We have seen, moving further, how at a certain point Stanislavski interrupted a pupil to say, "something went right", precisely when she acts like she is peeling dough away from her fingers (KS21147).

Another, similar moment from the same lesson allows us to observe that Stanislavski was chasing after this moment when action "goes right", or, as we have noted, when the exercise reaches the "physical truth":

Get to the smallest possible details. (*Pupil B. continues to knead the dough and, with her fingers, she cleans up a water spill.*)

Stanislavski. (*to pupil B.*) You start fantasizing, that's good.

Pupil B. When I poured the water, I remembered that, in order to keep it from spilling, I should use my hands quickly to stop the flow. (*She demonstrates.*)

Stanislavski. See, life starts living through you. Where did that come from?

Pupil B. I simply thought about the correct way to do it.

Stanislavski. And what made you think like that? The fact that once, somewhere before in your life, you have done it correctly or seen it done correctly. (KS 21147)

What could have "gone right"? What was it that made "life live" through the pupil? We see how, while demonstrating the exercise, he says: "Here is the dough, and I start to knead it. (*K.S. shows how to knead the dough, repeating each little movement a few times*) I am searching." (KS 21141)

Going back to the November 11 lesson given to the pedagogues, we see Stanislavski defining this moment as the moment in which the subconscious starts to act: "There are moments in which we perform an action that was asking to be performed, but we do not know how we did it. That is a subconscious moment." (KS 21141)

In the December 5 lesson, he explains the subconscious moment:

Sometimes, as it happens, we go on stage and cannot act at all, nothing comes of it. All of a sudden, our scene partner drops a handkerchief. You break character for a second, take it, and suddenly feels in that second you did it not as an actor, but as a human being. "Look at that, life. That's the way it is." And you start seeing life and the truth. You ask yourself the question: "What would I do now?". An experienced actor, then, takes this moment, this tuning fork, and starts doing the role differently. We must love this tuning fork. From a small, true moment like this you can play an entire show differently, like a gust of live wind has flooded the still atmosphere in the same moment you, humanely and truly, picked the handkerchief up from the floor. (KS 21147)

These casual events, which as seen, would be like a gust of live wind flooding the still atmosphere of a scene were, to Stanislavski, the subconscious moment that made, then, the actor act in a human, true, organic form. This subconscious moment, to Stanislavski, is the moment sought after through physical action. He goes back, then, to calling the action performed during the subconscious moment a "small truth": "See how the small casual events, these small truths have an enormous meaning? These are the truths I am trying to teach you." (KS 21147)

The fact that, to him, the subconscious moment could be accessed through objectless physical action exercises, through the creation of the "life line of the human body" can also be confirmed in the document *Opera-Dramatic Studio's Scenic Program Staging Plan*.¹⁶ He makes, in this document, the following formulation: "starting from a completely accessible physical action, we guide ourselves in a natural way towards organic nature with our subconscious, which are not accessible to our conscious mind."¹⁷

This is, we must stress, a complete shift in the sense of this exercise. If previously, as seen in *An Actor's Work*, the physical action exercise using imaginary objects is simply a training in order to create the logic and coherence of scenic behaviour and it does not go beyond verisimilitude, here, on the other hand, it becomes the mediation procedure between the conscious actor and their subconscious, that is, the place wherein, to Stanislavski, lies true artistic creation. This shift is crucial and defining for Stanislavski's and his collaborators' practices during the Studio years.

In this sense, in the lesson given to pupils on December 5, we can see how the link to subconscious creation is precisely obtained through the objectless physical action exercises. At a given moment in this lesson, Stanislavski demonstrates to the pupils how to do the "dough kneading" exercise. As he explains, after demonstrating, we can see how deep he goes into the concept of this link between physical actions and subconscious creation:

Take all the small actions, the minimal elements, and when they reach the absolute physical truth, you are taken to the threshold of the subconscious. And from this little story, told with truth, in a minute you will be in the ocean of the subconscious. It might look like we are doing something foolish, but in fact we are doing something very important since, because of it, we force ourselves to stand at the shores of the ocean of the subconscious, the hardest place to be in creation. Yes, I repeat: just like the sea shore. The first wave comes, and hits your ankles, then the second one - your knees, the third one takes you completely, the fourth one throws you into the sea, shakes you around and throws you back to shore. This is what happens when you reach the subconscious. But there are technical procedures, psychotechnics, which help you enter the ocean at once. You might be there for an entire act, or an entire scene, in this ocean of the subconscious, and after that, if anyone asks you how you acted – you will not know what to say. These are inspiration minutes. (KS21147)

The images of the actor at "the threshold of the subconscious" had inhabited Stanislavski's classes and writings for a while. Tcherkasski (2016), in the previously cited *Stanislavski and Yoga*, traces interesting parallels about this image, which was further excluded from his texts by Soviet censorship.

In another passage of the same lesson, the "threshold of the ocean of the subconscious" is described, once again, as the place "where true acting starts":

In this way I am teaching you, through the sensations of truth and faith, to reach the threshold (the shore) of the subconscious, where true acting starts. In such a way that what we are doing now is very important. (KS 21147)

It is interesting to look back on Stanislavski's previous positions, and realise how here, during the second half of the 1930s, they are still similar, especially with regard to the subconscious as a fundamental part of the actor's creation. An excerpt from the first drafts of *The Work on a Role*, dated 1916-1920 shows the way in which he, "like the hindu yogis", approaches the unconscious "through consciously prepared procedures, from physical to spiritual, from real to unreal, from naturalistic – to abstract" (1991: 141).

During practice at the Opera-Dramatic Studio, in its turn, one of the "consciously prepared procedures" becomes fundamental: the line of physical actions. This technical procedure, prepared in a completely conscious way would, when applied to the improvisational structure of the *étude*, allow access to "subconscious creation". Next, we will take a further look on how this took place during lessons.

d) The physical action *étude* as a work tool on the subconscious.

The first occurrence of the term *étude* on the Opera-Dramatic Studio lessons can be found right at the preparation of the faculty. On that occasion, Stanislavski warns them that "supertask and throughaction" must be present even during the smallest *étude*. Later, on November 15, in the first lessons given to the pupils, a comment from the stenographer reads "the pupils perform *études*."

The first lesson in which he indeed examines and comments on an *étude* done by a pair of pupils is on June 4, 1935. While our only source on this is Stanislavski's comments on their work, I found its examination to be fruitful:

(Pupils Kristi and Zvereva show their étude) You are waiting for Stanislavski. Half an hour goes by, which is already a lot and if Stanislavski is late, you know he might not come at all. Stretch it, emulsify this moment, you must know everything you do while you wait. Each pose you embody must come from a certain state of mood (настроение). Seek the calm that generally doesn't exist in M.B.'s [Zvereva's] life. Find activity within inaction. Look for what to do, for even searching for what to do is already an action.

If you are to use a word, it must be active. Where do you get the right word? Here there should also be proposed circumstances. Intensify the proposed circumstances. Your action upon another person must be active.

If the beginning does not work, then the rest will not work as well, and you must stop. An actor searches for intonation, that is, the results. The roots couldn't spread. Search for something to surround yourselves with, make it necessary and important. If you see your partner is struggling, help them.

You say a word, but the subtext might be entirely different. You must know what is the relationship between the two of you. Do it so you both end up under the table. (The two of them perform the *étude* again) Why did I say so? So that the flirtation comes across more obviously. You must strengthen the inner line in order to justify it. Receive and give back to your partner. Communicate your idea through your eyes, before you start. When she said, "I love you" - that should be a moment. When you judge, you must see. (KS 21138)

First, it is important to note this was an *étude* the pupils themselves were improvising. From the start, we have Kristi and Zvereva in the classroom, waiting for Stanislavski. He starts talking about the act of waiting: every action taken while they wait must be familiar. Search, he says, for what to do while you wait, that is, small actions. Through Konstantin Sergeyevitch's comments we see, however, that waiting and the actions involved in it are merely a means for the event (событие): Kristi starts to flirt and, as a result of the interaction, Zvereva admits, by the end, that she "loves him".

When Knebel speaks of the "*études* using the play's material", it is interesting to note how she precisely emphasizes the event (событие). Korogodsky, in his turn, by deeming the event the "goal the pupils must reach through the *étude*", classifies these actions (waiting and all the small actions within it) as the movement towards the goal.¹⁸

It is clear how, in this preparation, everything is related to the event to be improvised by the pupils.

The November 17 lesson is interesting because it conveys the way in which Stanislavski formulates an *étude*, precisely emphasizing the events. After briefly exposing the proposed circumstances under which the pupils must improvise, he says: "Now I will give you an *étude*. You arrive home and set the table, as you intend to serve dinner to your father. But you know your brother has been hit by a car, and you must tell your father this." (KS 21144)

After this, he comments on the development of the *étude*, as the pupils act, on stage. The first thing to stand out about the practice of the *étude* during the first months of the Studio is that, in a certain way, it encompasses and resignifies the exercises made using "objectless actions". In

the excerpt below, Stanislavski reprehends his pupils for not paying attention to the opening and closing motions of doors, or in how you place your coat on a hanger. This shows that, in the first place, these *études* were made without physical objects. Secondly, to Stanislavski, the small truths, the small actions which were to be faithfully executed during the imaginary objects exercises were precisely the actions which composed the greater action that would mediate the event in the *étude*. He states, quoted below:

You must wake everything, right until the end, every detail. Even the smallest daily details must be true to reality. Remove the lies. What doors are these, opening on their own so you can walk by? And what of this magical hanger, seemingly able to stretch its arms and grab whatever you throw at it? And it even straightens the coat out for you. But what is it like in life? Constantly compare. Each action must have its time, and that is as long as it needs in order to be fulfilled. Everything must be entirely true, from start to finish. Do not search right away for a big truth, search it through the small truths in actions. (KS 21144)

The second aspect we must notice is that "each action must have its time, and that is as long as it needs in order to be fulfilled." This affirmation, along with the question "What is it like in life?", immediately places the *étude* in a different field, not that of the presentation of improvised scenes (true to life or not), but one of a kind of favourable structure for a real, live experience (переживание) through imagined circumstances. These circumstances, albeit rich in detail, could not impede a real experience. We can see, then, how Stanislavski formulates the necessary conditions to begin an *étude*: "Ask yourselves only this question: 'what would I do if' - and start acting. Then, it will be true. (...) You must develop these conditions and find yourselves in them, put yourselves into new conditions and find yourselves in them - that is how creation begins". (KS 21144) The developmental logic of the *étude* as an investigation tool is, to Stanislavski, almost a paradox: everything is agreed on and, right away, one must improvise as if nothing has been agreed on, searching for themselves under the given circumstances¹⁹.

An excerpt taken from the same transcript signifies the changes proposed by Stanislavski to his previous "procedure": "Thus, where does creation start? I. "If" II. Proposed circumstances. III. What would I do? Not how would I act it, but what would I do precisely". (KS 21144)

Taking into account the complex scheme of the 1920s, in which so many layers of meaning of a play needed to be studied before going on the stage, I believe it is not an exaggeration to say this was a methodological innovation.

We would, then, consider it interesting to analyse this innovation, taking Stanislavski's lessons in 1935 as the starting point, as the proposal of a triple structure which would allow the actor access to creation in its organic state: the subconscious - the physical actions - the *étude*. Therefore, during the *étude*, through the physical actions the actor would search for the "subconscious moment", which would open to them the doors of creation through its organic nature.

5. Conclusions

Tcherkasski (2016), when writing on the initial field experiences of the System, correctly problematised a forced, artificial split of Stanislavski into two distinct beings, the "late" and the "early" Stanislavski. According to him, a rupture had been established, in the critical tradition about Stanislavski's thought, which placed an experimenting young man, albeit innocent, enthusiastic about the theoretical novelties of his time, in contrast to a wise old man, full of conviction, worried, upon realising his death is near, about taking conclusions from his artistic trajectory and testing his final discoveries.

The Stanislavski we see here, on the other hand, is much more similar to an authentic experimenter than to a great professor, a sapient educator of the new theatrical scenes of the young Soviet republic. The amount of themes and procedures used by Stanislavski in his lessons is impressive. Thus, at a given moment we see him insisting that the actor "acts from their own" and, on another, that they learn from great actors such as Duse, Salvini or Ostuzhev²⁰.

We can, therefore, see how Stanislavski proceeds to reorganise the System's elements in view of the central role of action. It is, as I had thought, a radically new structure, in regards to the previous methodology, created in the 1920s, as well as what is established in an "official" manner after Stanislavski's death as the "method of physical actions", or even "active analysis". The goal of this reorganisation would, however, be a new type of theatre, empowered by a new creative method.

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- 1 Two years later, on May 8, 1937 an article by Stanislavski is published on the *Izvestia*, named "The road to mastery" (Путь мастерства), in which there is further elaboration of his concepts regarding the difference between a collective and a theatre. In this article Stanislavski creates two models for the theatre schools: the theatre college (училище), where pupils would be formed into whole theatre collectives with their own particular ethic and aesthetic directions, and the school "on-the-go" (школа на ходу), where pupils would immediately be incorporated to the theatrical practice as disciples of actors of a specific existing theatre. (Stanislavski, 1953: 367)
- 2 See *My Life in Art*, on the chapter "Meiningerians" (Stanislavski, 1989: 129)
- 3 Knebel, 2016, 119.
- 4 It is important to recall, here, that this idea that the supertask and the throughaction should permeate all aspects of teaching at the Studio were part of Stanislavski's thought even earlier, since the initial project for the Academy. On it, see MOSCHKOVICH, 2019b: 238.
- 5 The figures were given to the assistant-pedagogues and can be found attached to the mentioned stenographic transcript.
- 6 See Filshtinsky, 2006, 49.
- 7 Knebel, 1967, 267.
- 8 Tchekhov, 46.
- 9 Later on, as we can see in the transcript dated October 13, 1937 (KS21170), the development of improvised *études* and their complexification by inserting new elements from the System becomes the main pedagogical method of the Studio during the first two years, according to the program presented by Stanislavski then. The same scheme is present in Novitskaya's memoir (1984: 53), although she introduces it as something "concluded" before lessons had started, while the program was formulated only after two years of work.
- 10 Novitskaya, 359.
- 11 It is interesting to notice how, as early as the time in which *An Actor's Work* was being written, the same logic and coherence of physical actions were used to awaken faith and the sense of truth. On a passage of the Russian edition, he states: "The secret behind this procedure is clear. It lies not on physical actions themselves, but on the truth and faith we awaken and feel within, through the help of these actions." (1989: 224) If, here, truth and faith can still be interpreted as verisimilitude, by analyzing the Opera-Dramatic Studio material, however, this possibility is eliminated.
- 12 This example is also explored in the first volume of *An Actor's Work*: "After a brief pause, Tortsov began to speak: Last summer, I went back to a *datcha* in Serpukhov I had not been to in a long time, and where I used to spend every summer. The house in which I rent a room is very far from the train station. However, by cutting through planes, a poultry farm and some woods on a straight line, the distance is considerably smaller. When I used to go there often, due to my coming and going, I ended up opening this path on the ground. This year, I found it dominated by high grass, grown during the years I did not go there. I had to walk this path again, more than once. At the beginning it was not easy: I sometimes lost my way and ended up on a dirty road, completely marked by the traces of those that followed it each day. This road, however, lead to the other side, opposite to the station. So, I had to walk back and search for my own footprints, in order to keep consolidating my shortcut. In doing so, I was guided by the familiar position of trees, trunks, the path's highs and lows. The memory of those grew ever stronger in my memory and came to direct me in my searching. By the end of summer, the contour of a long line of stomped grass was there, and that was my way to the station and back. Since I would frequently go into town, I would take the shortcut almost daily, which thankfully reopened my path." (1989: 236)
- 13 During Soviet times, for instance, the term was commonly attributed to the mystical influence on Stanislavski after the loss of the 1905 Revolution, while later the term "remained" on Stanislavski's practice, but was given a fully scientific character (Kristi and Prokofiev in: Stanislavski, 1957: 31). Tcherkasski approaches this problem by looking at Stanislavski's connection to the book written by yogi Ramacharca, in *Stanislavski and yoga* (2019), and Smelianski proposes a rather curious use of the term in his introduction to *An Actor's Work* (Stanislavski, 1989: 26-27)
- 14 See Tcherkasski, 2016, 100.
- 15 See Vinogradskaya, 200, 42.
- 16 Stanislavski, 1990, 393.
- 17 We found it interesting that even emotions could, to Stanislavski, be broken into actions: "What actions make up love? Take a series of actions. They say to the actor: you must play a love such as, say, that of Romeo. Why, then, does the immediate interpretation of passions, the frenetic movement of hands ensue... Can you see all of this is a cliché? And what is love? I am walking down the street and I see a [blonde] girl. "Not bad", [I think]. Another one, a brunette, is even prettier. I go up to her and talk, but I do not talk to the first one, because she is too quiet. But she comes around and looks at me, again. Oh, what for? Well, either way is good for me. She goes into one of the park's groves, and I follow. I reach her. I want to introduce myself, I end up giving up, seeing she gets mad and, by the end of it, I have forgotten about the brunette, and remember only the blonde girl. Following, we go on and on, until our wedding. See how many pages could be written on this? On stage, nothing must go unnoticed. Thus, EVERY EMOTION NEEDS TO BE DECOMPOSED INTO ACTION. Know how to fragment actions into its building parts. There cannot be emotion "in general", it means nothing. Only a corpse can be devoid of feeling." (KS 21144)
- 18 Knebel, 2016, 307.
- 19 These conditions could either be real (as in the aforementioned case with Kristi and Zvereva's *étude*) or imagined. In the same lesson, on November 17, a group of pupils performs and *étude* titled "plane flight". It is impossible to understand, solely through the transcript, the plot of this improvisation, but we still see Stanislavski

asking the pupils to "seek the truth". He says: "In this *étude* the proposal was not close to you, it was unknown [considering that flying on an airplane was not an ordinary experience in the 1930s. – D.M.]. How to do it, then? Search for help by asking, by consulting books. You must feel and believe every detail so that everyone else will believe it as well. It does not matter if reality is exactly as you play it - still it must, of course, correspond to reality -, but the most important thing is that YOU believe it completely." (KS 21144)

20 The Italians Eleonora Duse (1858 - 1924) and Tommaso Salvini (1829 - 1915) and the Russian actor Aleksandr Ostuzhev (1874 - 1953) were examples of the "classical" actors admired by Stanislavski. The first two were considered role models for the "theatre of live experience", to which Stanislavski was affiliated, and the last one, for "representation theatre".