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# 'Everything Now is Lost': Stanislavsky's Last Class at the Opera-Dramatic Studio

On 22 May 1938, Stanislavsky gathered his group of eleven assistant-pedagogues at the Opera-Dramatic Studio for a last collective class. The Studio was already free for the summer vacation after the tumultuous first show of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, opened only to a small number of guests a week before. Mikhail Kedrov had rehearsed the performance with the students for the preceding three years, and it was doomed to become the first public presentation of the so-called 'method of physical actions'. Nevertheless, the presentation brought nothing more than doubts about the work done, and Stanislavsky felt compelled to call upon the pedagogues to understand what had happened. After briefly presenting his opinion of the work that had been shown, he started to elaborate on the technical and artistic achievements of the Studio. Stanislavsky began his talk in its stenographic transcript (File No. 21179 in the Stanislavsky Fund of the Moscow Art Theatre Museum Archives) with: 'Everything now is lost. The technique and all the rest. I don't see any foundation . . . any more. You should now start by the critique of the method I have been experimenting on.' This article analyzes Stanislavsky's documented talk, showing that he was not convinced that he had a new methodology, let alone one that synthesized his life-long theatre experiments. It seeks to present evidence that both the Physical Action and Active Analysis methodologies derived from Stanislavsky's thought post mortem were developed only as two possible paths from his experiments, but were not the telos of his thought.

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*Key terms:* theatre history, theatre pedagogy, Russian theatre, physical actions, active analysis.

## 'Everything Now is Lost'

On 22 May 1938 – almost exactly three months before his death – Konstantin Stanislavsky gathered his assistant-pedagogues for a last class at his private cabinet in Leontievsky Lane, at the very centre of Moscow. Spring had already blasted in all its colour and perfume, and the meeting was held with a feeling of ease: after three years of hard work, the Opera-Dramatic Studio had opened its doors for the first time, and it was generally perceived as a success. A series of works-in-progress of different operas and plays was shown to a small public, among them Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, and Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Snow Maiden*. One of the guests, Boris Pokrovsky, then a

directing student, claimed the presentation was 'a theatrical miracle'.<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Rekhels, another of the guests, said that he left with 'the highest impressions' of what he had seen: 'For us, the performance was ready.'<sup>2</sup> Then, some weeks later, Stanislavsky summoned his crew to his house, to discuss the presentations and to elaborate on what had been done. But the class started with a rather daunting assessment of the work by Stanislavsky. After claiming not to understand why the work had pleased the audience so much, he sparked off: 'Everything now is lost . . . The technique and all the rest. I don't see any foundation, any ground, any more. You should now start by the critique of the method I have been experimenting on.'<sup>3</sup> This article presents and

analyzes this documented tale, and seeks to clarify that Stanislavsky was not convinced he had a new methodology, let alone a new working method that synthesized all his life's work.

Reading through the words of the stenographic transcript of the class may seem a little shocking for those of us who have grown accustomed to the narrative by which Stanislavsky's last years were years of methodological synthesis. Irina Vinogradskaya, for example, omits this class from her selection of stenographic transcripts and states that Stanislavsky's work at the Studio was a conclusion of his work.<sup>4</sup> For Boris Levinson, the performance of *Three Sisters* was the first public display of Stanislavsky's latest Method of Physical Actions.<sup>5</sup> But was there an actual Method of Physical Actions? And if there was, why does Stanislavsky seem so adamant in saying that 'everything is lost'?

It is possible to trace up to three main lines in the development of what I call Stanislavsky's thought, spreading from his experiments at the Opera-Dramatic Studio. None of them, as will be evident, was developed by Stanislavsky himself, but rather by his pupils after his death, and were attributed to him post mortem. The first of these is the already mentioned Method of Physical Actions, as conceptualized by Mikhail Kedrov. Kedrov inherited first the Opera-Dramatic Studio, and then the Moscow Art Theatre itself after Stanislavsky's death, and he declared the Method of Physical Actions the official and the only possible creative method in Soviet theatre during the 1940s. According to his version of this Method, the creation of a score with typical physical actions for the role automatically created experiencing on the stage.<sup>6</sup>

The second line is that of Active Analysis, or Action Analysis, elaborated by Maria Knebel and Alexei Popov. This version of the methodology was created in Knebel's various laboratories in the 1940s, based on her experience as an assistant-pedagogue to Stanislavsky at the Opera-Dramatic Studio. According to Knebel's thought, it was necessary to create the conditions for the actors to act (physically, psychically, and verbally) on the stage, which was done through the

device of the *étude* and the study of the proposed circumstances of the play.<sup>7</sup> While overshadowed by the Method of Physical Actions during the 1940s and 1950s, it became the main creative device for rehearsal in the USSR in the second half of the twentieth century, and gained momentum outside it in the late 1990s and 2000s, mainly through the work of Lev Dodin and Anatoli Vassiliev.

The third line, only recently revived in Russia and slowly starting to spread outside it, is what is being called the Method of the *Étude*, which was mainly worked by Stanislavsky's long-term friend and assistant Nikolai Demidov. Demidov's method is one of the most complex, because it tries to tackle the *subconscious* directly, and works from it in the form of *études*, as well.<sup>8</sup>

Although very different from each other, both in their finality and in the hierarchy of the 'system's' elements put in motion to enable *experiencing* (that is, *perezhivanie*), they all resemble one other in two main points. First, they all draw on the same elements and practical devices for rehearsal: *études*, actions (psychic, physical, and verbal), and the supertask. Second, they all claim to be versions of what has been called the 'late Stanislavsky period', that is, precisely the period in which Stanislavsky worked in his Opera-Dramatic Studio from 1936 to 1938.

The Opera-Dramatic Studio existed under Stanislavsky's direction from 1935 until his death in 1938. Also known as 'Stanislavsky's last studio', it came into existence after several years of preparations for a full-fledged Theatre Arts Academy in which Stanislavsky and his collaborators expected to lay the foundations of a school that would educate not only actors but also theatre collectives as a whole, all bred in the philosophical and artistic principles of the original Moscow Art Theatre. Despite Stanislavsky's dreams, the Soviet authorities ended up giving money only to a 'small Opera academy' that was to function as a laboratory, a sort of experimental ground for what new, all-Soviet actor-training programmes should be.<sup>9</sup> During the summer of 1935, then, Stanislavsky and his sister, director

and pedagogue Zinaida Sokolova, gathered a group of sixty students for the studio. Of those, thirty were chosen for the dramatic section and the other thirty for the Opera one.

Due to illness, Stanislavsky had adopted a new pedagogical approach in the Opera-Dramatic Studio. He had focused on teaching the teachers: he had gathered a group of pedagogues 'drilled' in the system by Sokolova and placed them as the front-line pedagogues of the studio.<sup>10</sup> Among these assistant-pedagogues were Maria Knebel, Lidia Novitskaya, and Mikhail Kedrov. They would conduct classes and rehearsals, while Stanislavsky would oversee the work, mainly working directly with the teachers.

The Studio worked almost non-stop during its three years of existence, developing new forms of actor training, and experimenting on new methodological approaches for the actor's work on the play and the role.<sup>11</sup> But, even so, in his last class with the assistant-pedagogues, Stanislavsky seemed to think that everything was lost.

### The Class of 25 May

When reading through the stenographic transcript, the first thing that comes to mind is that Stanislavsky seems to know, or to feel, that it is one of his last classes.<sup>12</sup> It begins with a brief description of a talk that he had had with actors from Leningrad in which he stated that they seemed to have no technical foundation for their work whatsoever. Right from the beginning of the class, we are presented with Stanislavsky's attitude towards the experiments in the Studio. After the bold words that 'everything is lost', he starts instructing the pedagogues on where to start after he is gone:

[You should] start directly by building a *critique* of the method I propose. I don't consider it to be ideal, without mistakes. Of course, it is one of the many stages in the research. . . . And what has this method shown in practice? What was good, and what was bad, about it? What could be wrong or too difficult in it? This or that question, were they clarified or not? Maybe there are mistakes in the method itself and, if we were to develop this method, we would be only be deepening these mistakes?<sup>13</sup>

The first step towards the continuation of the work was, for Stanislavsky, its critique – the ability of those involved in it to look at what had been done from the outside and evaluate it. The necessity of a critique of one's own work had been present from the beginning of the Studio, and was especially felt in Stanislavsky's classes by the assistant-pedagogues.<sup>14</sup> To lay the foundations for this critique, then, he started to elaborate on what had already been done at the Studio. The first topic was the initial *études*. The example was taken from Maria Lilina's work with the Studio on *The Cherry Orchard*:<sup>15</sup>

The director's work is to find a series of *études* that draw on to the line of physical actions of the play. You should do a whole series of *études*.

What do I mean by *physical action*, what are these actions? Let's say you have thought of an *étude* called 'The Reception', where some of the actors are to arrive from a very long journey by train and the others are at the station to receive them. All creation starts with: 'WHAT IF THIS ROOM WASN'T A ROOM, BUT THE PLATFORM OF A TRAIN STATION?' There, where you see the portraits, are the tracks, and the furniture against the wall are the news kiosks. In one word, do as a child's creativity would do: 'AS IF IT WAS, BUT IT IS NOT.' Remove what is in the way, leave that which helps.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, for Stanislavsky, the director's first task is to find, in the dramatic material, actions that are physically performable by the students. This means actions that wouldn't first require a deep dive into a play or a character's circumstances. In the case of *The Cherry Orchard*, the circumstances were a meeting at a train station – something that happens somewhere at the beginning of Chekhov's play but that could also happen with the students today in much the same way. Then, the creation begins by asking the question 'What would I do if . . . ?' Here Stanislavsky is categorical. Instead of imagining a train station that does not exist, he gives very concrete directions: the elements in the room are to be dealt with as if they were elements in a train station. By giving direct instructions on how to relate to the surrounding materiality as if it were something else, Stanislavsky is insisting that the action transformed in *études* should not

only be physically performable but must also be experienced today, here, and now.

Stanislavsky had been insisting on these words for almost six months. Actions taken from the material but with the proposed circumstances ripped away were valuable because they functioned both as the organic core of the play and the performance-in-progress.<sup>17</sup> That is, if these actions were both taken from the material and performed *today, here, and now*, they could form a strong, organic connection between the actors and the material. Methodologically speaking, *experiencing (perezzhivanie)* ceases to be the result of a long process of investigation and becomes the first need, the *sine qua non* condition of acting through the material. Stanislavsky continues:

What's new here? A lot. Before, when we said 'Divide the role in bits', you'd start to divide from there to there, from this line to the other, full stop, and then in the chosen bit, you'd analyze the thoughts – what is being thought here, what is the *idea*. That is, in other words, the task. But where does this work take place? In the mind. This work is nothing but analytical. Here the mind plays an enormous part, more than emotion.

What I am now saying, instead, is: 'If you are really at the station to receive your friends, what would you do?' Of course, you can tell me analytically, 'I would . . .' No. If you see the train station in your minds, you are already mentally acting.

Where does it come from? From the conscious mind? No, no. This comes from the hardest path, the path of the subconscious. And here by 'subconscious' I mean everything: reflexes, instinct, and so on. I am very afraid to go into these scientific nuances because here the mind is quickly replaced by reason. Take it all, and call it organic nature and the subconscious, and we don't need anything else.

So, instead of breaking the role into bits and tasks, you start to break it into actions, because they attract the subconscious, whereas before it attracted only rationality.<sup>18</sup>

There are, then, two ways of analyzing the material. From the 'bits and tasks', which was a method developed in the 1920s and 1930s and still pretty much in use, Stanislavsky goes to another, new one. The formula 'WHAT WOULD I DO IF . . . ?' must be answered in action, on the stage, and not with

words. This is an analysis that was to provide concrete answers, here and now, in improvisation. Further, Stanislavsky says that this kind of analysis is the best resource to attract subconscious creation – for him, the main goal of the actor's work. Even organic actions should be, before anything, experimented practically and reached through *études* before anything else. He goes on to say that, after this series of organic actions is discovered in improvisation, they should be used to compose *études* following the dramatic material itself:

You do *études* in such a way that we are left with the *actions* [that were discovered in the first round of *études*]. Then you should act this line of tasks going through all the episodes [of the play] – first through bigger actions, trying to perform the bigger actions through smaller tasks. The simple fact that you perform these actions on the stage is already a study of these actions themselves, of their nature.<sup>19</sup>

Then, the work continues:

Take this line [of *action*], look at it and then compare it to the line that is written in *The Cherry Orchard*. It's not the same. The proposed circumstances are not the same, but they are very close – indeed, almost related – and it can't be otherwise because they were born from the same matter: from the logic and coherence, and the same logic and coherence are necessary to both.<sup>20</sup>

Stanislavsky calls for a study of the action *in* action. Once these actions are performed, the actor can arrange them in a temporal sequence, in a line of actions that are organic both to the material and to them. The fact that he considers both lines – the one in the play and the one created by the actor – to be made of the same matter allows us to see something else. For him, by performing the actions taken from the material, the actor accesses something deeper, a kind of source that was once accessed by the playwright. In fact, this creates a *double* organic bond. The first is the bond between actors and the surrounding materiality. The second bond is that of the actor's corporeality with the material. This double bond is what Stanislavsky calls 'the organic

process of communion' (*organicheski protsess obschenia*), the basis on which all the other elements of performance should be built.<sup>21</sup>

As the organic process is established, each performed action requires to be given a sense – that is, be justified. Nevertheless, this justification is to be emotional:

See, we must justify them [the actions] with our own emotions. In other words, a parallel line starts to develop along this line of tasks, a line that justifies these actions. And here, if actions are logical, emotions can't be illogical. That is, besides the logic and coherence of the line of actions, we give birth to the logic coherence of the line that justifies these actions with emotion. Doesn't it seem a bit ironic to talk about the logic and coherence of emotions? How do we look for it? I talked about that with a bunch of up-to-date psychologists, but they don't know any rule for that. Nevertheless, we have found it: 'WHAT WOULD I DO IF . . . ?' Then I manage to transfer everything to the field of the personal experience, where the material is endless. . . . With that I transfer you to the field of the real living and mobilizing material.<sup>22</sup>

The question 'What would I do if . . . ?' has some implications in this passage. First, we must acknowledge how the emphasis here falls on 'I' (the actor who is performing) and is counterposed to the 'Other' (the character). The classic formula 'What would I do in this or that condition, if this or that happened to me?' can also be proposed in the following way: 'What would I do if I was in the place of this Other?' Here is what Stanislavsky says to that: 'The actions are yours; the feelings are yours; logic and coherence are yours; the proposed circumstances are yours, but action itself belongs to the role. That is the fusion, already.'<sup>23</sup> In other words, the formula 'What would I do if . . . ?' should be seen not as a hypothetical question to mentally arrange the play's circumstances, but rather as a concrete device for organizing the bond between action and emotion, all at once, while performing.

Then there is the second position, that in which 'in the field of personal experience, the material is endless'. Connected to personal experiences and emotions, the material endlessly actualizes itself, creating a third realm, a mixed realm, a realm that lies between the actor's own personal experience and the

author's fiction.<sup>24</sup> This assertion also shows us that, for Stanislavsky, *experiencing* is not directed towards the conventional field of theatrical representation or a specific formal-aesthetic conception, but beyond it, towards devices and procedures that place theatre as a kind of authentic human experience, everlasting.

But there is yet another consequence coming from this work. The so-called line of physical actions is to be quickly abandoned for another, much more important one:

We cannot forget that physical actions are deeply connected to muscles, and they grow used to clichés much faster. In other words, we must be careful not to misuse this line. You start to put the physical actions in motion for them to spark the line of the inner actions, the justifying actions. Then, as soon as you feel this justification, drop the actions at once. In this way you are using the line of the actions to spark and control the line of the impulses. And the line of the inner impulse – this is the line that drives the role.<sup>25</sup>

There are three lines, then. The first one, the most reachable one, is the line of physical actions. As we have just seen, for Stanislavsky, it exists with one purpose only: to spark the other two, more complex and difficult to reach, for they require the subconscious to be at work. Then, once the physical actions enable the *organic process of communion*, it sparks the subconscious, and with it the line of inner actions is set in motion. This inner line first appears as a means to justify, to give sense to, the physical actions, but then it acquires its own right of existence, as inner actions need inner impulses. Then, however, impulses overshadow the actions and braid their own line, which becomes the main line to be practised during rehearsal:

In this way, you go through the line of the impulses of the whole play. When it is done, whether you want it or not, you are already living the role, because when you go up these steps [that is, from the first, to the second, to the third line] you have nowhere else to go but to where the inner line of the play drives you<sup>26</sup>

According to the transcript, Stanislavsky talks about going up the steps from one line to the other. But the movement seems not to go up,

but outside-in: that is, from the most reachable, material aspects of the process to the more personal and subjective ones. The surrounding materiality is in constant change and cannot be fixed; but what must be fixed is the line of the impulses and not the physical line. This line of impulses, to Stanislavsky, is the line that allows *experiencing* to renew itself every day.

## Some Conclusions

Back to where we started. The first thing that seems clear is how each one of the methods developed from Stanislavsky's thought after his death emphasizes one of these three lines. The Method of Physical Actions uses and develops the 'line of the physical actions' for its own purposes. Action Analysis, in its turn, takes the second line, the line of the 'inner', justifying actions. Therefore, we do not see the need, in this method, for a clearly designed score of actions; the emphasis is on the circumstances that generate these actions. The Method of the *Étude* tries to access, directly and at once, the most difficult, which is 'the line of the impulses'. Nevertheless, Stanislavsky's own field of experimentation was obviously broader, and it sought to encompass all three aspects of the work as a whole.<sup>27</sup> For him, 'going through the physical actions of the role' did not mean mechanically reproducing a series of actions put by the playwright in the play, or finding the right circumstances to be historically accurate, or even managing the impulses alone. For Stanislavsky, the three lines must be accessed together, and do not exist separately from each other. Working with physical actions meant going through a path to access an analogous source of imagery to the one accessed by the author in the first place. But as this imagery is intrinsically linked to the personal experience of the actor, it becomes infinite: images feed into each other and transform each other endlessly, providing the role and the performance not only with a breath of life, but with life's respiration itself.

## Notes and References

1. See Irina Vinogradskaya, *Stanislavsky repetiruet* (Moscow: MkhAT, 2000), p. 496.
2. Ibid.

3. KS21179. The Moscow Art Theatre Museum Archives keep a set of documents from the Opera-Dramatic Studio, among which are forty-nine stenographic transcripts from Stanislavsky's classes. These transcripts are identified by the initials of the fund in which they are held ('KS' here stands for Konstantin Stanislavsky) and then the relevant number, which is how they will be cited throughout this article. All translations are mine.

4. See Vinogradskaya, *Stanislavsky repetiruet*, p. 435.

5. Ibid., p. 491.

6. The most well-known account of Kedrov's method is nevertheless not his own, but his actor Vasili Toporkov's. Toporkov's memoirs end with a very detailed description of Kedrov's work on Molière's *Tartuffe* in 1938 and give a very clear image of what this methodology looked like. See Vasili Toporkov, *Stanislavsky in Rehearsal*, trans. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2004).

7. Knebel's writings on the methodology of Action Analysis have been recently translated into English. See Maria Knebel, *Active Analysis*, ed. Anatoli Vassiliev, trans. Irina Brown (London: Routledge, 2021).

8. A selection of Demidov's writings has been translated into English as Nikolai Demidov, *Becoming an Actor-Creator*, ed. Andrei Malaev-Babel and Margarita Laskina, trans. Andrei Malaev-Babel, Alexander Rojavin, and Sarah Lillibridge (London: Routledge, 2016).

9. The project for a Theatre Arts Academy was developed between 1933 and 1934 but ended up frozen in the Narkompros (*Narodni Komissariat po Prosviascheniu*: the Commissariat for Enlightenment), the organ that dealt with all the aspects of culture and education in the first decades of the Soviet government. Then, in a letter to Zinaida Sokolova, dated April 1934, Stanislavsky talks about transforming the project into a 'small Opera academy' or studio, which came to be accepted by the authorities. Another interesting fact is that Narkompros granted the Studio special permission to work without a pedagogical programme. According to Stanislavsky, the deal with the government was that the Studio should work on a programme to be implemented later in the whole country. See Konstantin Stanislavsky, *Sobranie Sochinenia v 9ti tomakh. Tom 9* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1999), p. 518, 541.

10. In a letter to Elizabeth Hapgood, his North American translator, from December 1936, Stanislavsky writes: 'A year ago I opened my new school-studio for Opera and Drama. That's how it came to be: my sister Zinaida Sergeevna [Sokolova], whom I think you may know, had for some time a private group of students. She drilled them in the "system" so much that even at a very young age it was possible to entrust them with the pedagogical work at the new studio. We made cadres out of them, all directed by my sister' (Stanislavsky, *Sobranie Sochinenia*, p. 584).

11. I have recently published a two-part article with a detailed account of the first year at the studio and the development of new training devices. See Diego Moschkovich, 'Approaching Stanislavsky's Work at the Opera-Dramatic Studio: Part 1,' *Stanislavski Studies*, VIII, No. 2 (2020), p. 223–36, and 'Approaching Stanislavsky's Work at the Opera-Dramatic Studio: Part 2,' *Stanislavski Studies*, IX, No. 1 (2021), p. 65–79. A broad and new overview of the Opera-Dramatic Studio is also given in Maria Shevtsova's *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 169–79. Shevtsova rightly inscribes the Opera-Dramatic Studio in the wider context of Stanislavsky's experiments with opera from the late 1920s to 1938.

12. There are indeed two more stenographic transcripts dating to after this class. They are like his usual

classes with all of the Studio's students, and here Stanislavsky checks on the work done with *Hamlet* and *Madama Butterfly*. Nonetheless, he does not talk much about theory in them and, what is more important, he does not try to elaborate on the technical issues of working on the material. This is why I call the class of 25 May his last class, since it is the last class held only with his pedagogues, and thus earns its theoretical importance.

13. KS21179.

14. As early as 1935 (that is, at the very beginning of the work with the assistant-pedagogues), Stanislavsky says the following: 'We are at work, we are searching. I am not a prophet. . . . Keep on doing everything you did the way you did it, while you don't tell yourselves: "I am not going to do it like that any more"' (KS21138).

15. Maria Lilina's work on *The Cherry Orchard* was published as an appendix to both the first and second editions of the third volume of Stanislavsky's Collected Works. See also Maria Ignatieva, 'Stanislavski's Best Student Directs: Maria Lilina's First and Last Production', *Stanislavski Studies*, IV, No. 11 (2016), p. 3–12.

16. KS21179.

17. Following Novitskaya's account in *Uroki vdokhnovenia* (Moscow: VTO, 1984), after being away ill for almost all of 1936, Stanislavsky returned to class in 1937 with a series of positions with which he wanted to experiment. One of them was what he called 'organic actions'. Here is how he defined this new kind of action on 27 April: 'When you perform actions without objects . . . for instance: when you take off your jacket, you must first unbutton it and then slide your arms through the sleeves. These actions are mandatory, no matter what the proposed circumstances are. In other words, there are physical actions that are organic, regardless of the proposed circumstances. What we need now is the line of organic action' (KS21162).

18. KS21179.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Maria Shevtsova rightly argues in her *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* that due to Stanislavsky's deeply orthodox worldview, the word *obschenie* should be translated into English as 'communion', and not 'communication', as it usually is. Considering the nature of the organic bonds that Stanislavsky seeks between actor and material, I too find it essential to give 'communion'. Throughout 1937–38 Stanislavsky treated the 'organic process of communion' as the first step towards the work on a performance. He explicitly notes this factor in a series of classes, but especially in the class of 6 June, where he states: 'The work has several stages. First, the *organic process* [of communion], then its elaboration, action, and thoughts. It is necessary to run through all of them' (KS21168).

22. KS21179.

23. Ibid.

24. The idea of a third, shared realm appeared a year before, in 1936, as Stanislavsky was ill and away from the work at the Studio but nevertheless writing down notes for his books. In one of these drafts, we can read that he talks about the process of experiencing a role as the creation of 'a new life inside another life, a shared life' (KS595).

25. KS21179.

26. Ibid.

27. Veniamin Filshinsky seems to reach a similar conclusion in his new book, *Teatralnaya Pedagogika: Dni I Gody* (St Petersburg: RGISI, 2022). The main difference is that Filshinsky, writing only from the already published material, is led into minor inaccuracies, such as the one in which he states that Stanislavsky never worked with *études* on the material of the play itself and so they were preparatory exercises all along. What we can see in the archival material is that, on the contrary, *études* were the main and all-encompassing devices not only for rehearsals, but also for performing a play itself.