

Laurence Senelick

Stanislavsky's Second Thoughts on 'The Seagull'

Stanislavsky's first production of *The Seagull* is well documented in English, in *The Seagull Produced by Stanislavsky*, edited by S. D. Balukhaty in 1952. But little is known of his exploratory work on an intended second production almost two decades later amidst the turmoil of the revolutionary period, and the rehearsal notes made by Stanislavsky's assistant Pyotr Sharov remained unpublished even in Russian until 1987. Here, Laurence Senelick provides the first English translation of these notes, contextualizing them with an account of the difficulties under which Stanislavsky and the Art Theatre were working at the time. Laurence Senelick is Fletcher Professor of Drama and Oratory at Tufts University, and a long-time contributor to TQ and NTQ, which published his articles on the Craig–Stanislavsky *Hamlet*, serf theatre in Russia, and Wedekind and Lenin at the music hall. His last book, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*, won the George Jean Nathan award as the best work of dramatic criticism of 2000–01, and his previous book, *The Chekhov Theatre: a Century of Plays in Production*, won the Barnard Hewitt award of the American Society of Theatre Research. He is currently translating and editing the complete plays and dramatic fragments of Anton Chekhov for Norton Publishers.

FOR THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE 1916 was a disastrous year. Its participation in the First World War had been calamitous, with four million men killed over the twelve-month period. Ill-equipped and incompetently commanded, the regular army evaporated, and the Germans overran Russian Poland. The government was in disarray: Rasputin, whose interference had exacerbated the tensions between the Imperial family and the administration, was finally assassinated in December. Refugees were streaming into Moscow and St Petersburg; food queues lengthened, leading to bread riots; the suicide rate tripled.

Much as it tried to keep itself above the fray, the Moscow Art Theatre vibrated to the uncertainty and anxiety of the times. The usually strained relations between Stanislavsky and his partner Nemirovich-Danchenko came near to breaking point, and new productions were few. In 1915, an evening of Pushkin one-acts had been poorly received by the critics, and over the next season two plays of contemporary life, Surguchev's *Autumn Violins* and Merezhkovsky's *Let There Be Joy*, failed to engage theatregoers. For the first time in twelve years, the theatre did not tour

to St Petersburg. In the 1916–17 season, the First Studio, where young actors were experimenting with Stanislavsky's system of acting, confined its public presentation to an evening of Chekhov sketches.

In January 1916 Stanislavsky had proposed that *The Seagull* – which had received only sixty-three performances between its opening in 1898 and its excision from the repertory in 1905 – be revived, employing many members of the original cast. The idea had to be postponed when, that same month, he began directing Nemirovich's adaptation of Dostoevsky's novella *The Village of Stepanchikovo*. Stanislavsky was also to play the leading role of Rostanov, the landowner victimized by a hypocritical hanger-on.

At this stage in his thinking, he was beginning to emphasize action over emotion as the driving force in an actor's creativity. He regarded the rehearsals for *Stepanchikovo* as an opportunity to explore these new ideas about creative technique, an approach which would enable the actor to interpret a character more fully and to penetrate the 'artist's paradise' of living-through a part. In addition to these duties, however, he was also

playing such leading roles as Vershinin, Gaev, and Satin in the regular repertory, doing sporadic work on Aleksandr Blok's verse drama *The Rose and the Cross*, and occasionally visiting rehearsals of the Second Studio's opening production, Zinaida Gippius's play of modern youth, *The Green Ring*.

Meanwhile, political events had caused an industrial dispute at his factory and a walk-out of stagehands at the theatre. And in December Stanislavsky's close associate and disciple, Leopold Sulerzhitsky, who was chiefly responsible for the work of the First Studio, died of tuberculosis.

Amidst this turmoil – political, professional, emotional – work on *Stepanchikovo* dragged on through 150 rehearsals, and while those who saw Stanislavsky's passive, even Christ-like Rostanev, were impressed, he could not come to closure. February 1917 saw two revolutions: one took place in the streets and overturned the monarchy; the other occurred when Nemirovich-Danchenko took over as director of the Dostoevsky play. The two partners immediately locked horns over the interpretation of the leading role. On 28 March 1917, after the dress rehearsal, Stanislavsky gave up the part.

What he had experienced with Rostanev he would later call his 'tragedy'. It deeply shook his self-confidence as an actor, and from that time on he refrained from taking on new roles (except to play the secondary part of Prince Shuisky in *Tsar Fyodor* on tour). When *The Village of Stepanchikovo* opened the theatre's twentieth season on 26 September 1917, the directors' names were not on the programme.

The Cast of the Production

Such were the circumstances under which Stanislavsky set out to re-direct *The Seagull*. By the late August of 1917, when he began to schedule work on the play, he was still reeling not only from the *Stepanchikovo* trauma but from political events – Kerensky's Provisional Government was now shakily installed. With his factories and even his house taken over by the state, Stanislavsky was dependent on his private resources. He determined

to concentrate on the 'aesthetic realm', and to use art to educate 'the people's sensibility, their souls'. *The Seagull*, he now believed, was about devotion to art. Submersion in Chekhov's play seems to have been a kind of refuge, in which nostalgia for one of the Art Theatre's great successes was overshadowed by his desire to create something fresh, youthful, and vigorous.

Of the original cast, only Olga Knipper was enlisted into the new production. When she had first played Arkadina in 1898, she had been only thirty, a recent graduate of the Moscow Philharmonic, too young and inexperienced for the part. Now forty-nine, the widow of Anton Chekhov, and an established 'star' of the Art Theatre, she could serve as an anchor for the company.

The rest of the new cast was deliberately made up either of very young actors, seasoned only by work in the studios, or relatively minor players, who had yet to be entrusted with major assignments in the parent company. Nina, considered by Stanislavsky to be the central role, was to be doubled by Alla Tarasova and Olga Baklanova. Tarasova, a plump, dark-eyed brunette, had caught Stanislavsky's eye in the Second Studio's *Green Ring*. In the Soviet period, she would become a leading actress of the MAT and a favourite of Stalin's; but at this point she was still a raw tyro.

Baklanova, a svelte blonde, had played nothing but servant-girls on the main stage, until entrusted with Luisa in *The Feast in Plaguetime* and Laura in *The Stone Guest* in the Pushkin evening. Her best performance, however, had been in the First Studio, as the streetwalker Lizzie in Berger's *The Flood*. She too would come into her own after the Revolution, as the leading actress in Nemirovich's Musical Studio; she would remain in the US after a tour, gravitate to Hollywood, and win enduring notoriety as the venal acrobat in Todd Browning's *Freaks*.

Responsibility for Treplyov was invested in Mikhail (Michael) Chekhov, partnered by the newcomer Grigory Yudin. Chekhov, a nephew of the writer, had entered the Art Theatre in 1912, and from the start Stanislavsky had tried to instil in him the principles

of his system. In the intimate surroundings of the First Studio, Chekhov's performances as Caleb Plummer in *Cricket on the Hearth* and Frazer in *The Flood* had been outstanding. Stanislavsky entrusted him with playing Epikhodov in *The Cherry Orchard*, encouraging him to make the character idiosyncratic to himself. He regarded Chekhov primarily as a comic talent, and doubted his abilities in tragedy, a doubt which was confirmed in the 1920s, when Chekhov played Hamlet. In rehearsing the young actor as Treplov, Stanislavsky tried to encourage him, through the character, to believe in himself.

Of the other characters, Masha was assigned to Mariya Kryzhanovskaya, a recent arrival in the Art Theatre, whose main responsibility so far had been as Rostanev's daughter Nastenka in *The Village of Stepanchikovo*. Trigorin, which had been Stanislavsky's part, was to be played by Konstantin Khokhlov, a character actor of some range, who had been seen as the moronic Greek Purikes in *Anathema*, the district prosecutor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Horatio in the Gordon Craig *Hamlet*. Pyotr Baksheev, the new Shamraev, had been a useful character man since 1911, but was rarely entrusted with substantial roles.

Dr Dorn was to be Aleksey Stakhovich, a former major-general and adjutant to the Governor General of Moscow, who had, after his retirement, become a stockholder and a patron of the Art Theatre. The starchy, be-monocled officer began as a standby for Stanislavsky and worked in the Second Studio. Vladimir Neronov, the new Sorin, had joined the Art Theatre only in 1916, and was untested. Vera Pavlova, the new Polina Andreevna, though she had been a charter member of the Art Theatre since 1898, rarely played anything but small, nameless roles.

Hatching a New Gull

In other words, the cast, for the most part, was inexperienced or, as Stanislavsky saw it, unspoiled either by routine or by exposure to conventional methods of acting. All of them had received their training or their stage skills within the Art Theatre. The vitality and vigour

of such promising talents as Tarasova and Mikhail Chekhov would aid Stanislavsky in bringing out the theme of devotion to art.

Work on *The Seagull* proceeded over the course of five months, from September of that year to June 1918, the very period when the October Revolution put the Bolsheviks in power, the seeds of Civil War were sown, and famine began to be felt in the cities.¹ None of these outside events finds a place in Stanislavsky's comments, for, typically, he used his absorption in rehearsals to block out the unpleasant realities of everyday life. His new vision of Chekhov and the play emphasized high spirits, activity, and courage. It was to serve as a therapeutic remedy for the woes he and his society were suffering. Hence the stress on youth and youthful feelings and the repeated emphasis on moments of joy, humour, and faith.

There is a world of difference between Stanislavsky's work on *The Seagull* in 1898 and that of 1917. In 1898, faced with a troupe of novices and amateurs, he left nothing to the actor's imagination, but laid down everything in his marginal glosses. As I have written elsewhere, 'Stanislavsky "through-composed" the text, setting it to details of mood.' The 'score' for the first Art Theatre production (which is available in an English translation of Sergey Balukhaty's edition published in 1952) is compendious: every gesture, from lighting a cigarette to moving a lamp, is prescribed, atmospheric effects are heavily laid on, pauses are inlaid, and intonations are described. As is well known, Stanislavsky confessed that he did not understand the play, and so, to make it a success in a failing season, he used it as a pretext for directorial invention.

In 1917, it was another story. *The Seagull* was now part of the Art Theatre legend and served as its emblem and mascot. A 'Chekhovian' style of acting had accreted, and a lamentable tendency to indulge in 'moaning and groaning' (*nytyo*) had set in. Stanislavsky was eager to clear away all the preconceptions about how to play Chekhov. To this end, he insisted on highly energized, buoyant acting, and, most important, on the actors' discovering for themselves their characters'

states of mind. The behavioural details that dominated in the earlier production are now abandoned in favour of psychological states and their nuances. He even urges Neronov to ignore Sorin's illness, lest details of physical degeneration vitiate the main traits of the character.

Similarly, he downplays the romantic aspect of the play. Nina, he tells Tarasova, is not in love with Kostya but with the stage. Their love scene in the first act is the result of circumstance and awkwardness. Five years later, in his memoir *My Life in Art*, written for an American audience he considered naive, Stanislavsky would describe *The Seagull* in terms of a love story. Within the Russian context, however, he insisted that love for art trumps personal relations.

Even as he insists that the actors must identify and 'treasure' the 'salient word' at every moment, Stanislavsky points out that

Chekhov is not Ostrovsky, and the lines alone cannot convey the meaning of what is going on. The words designate underlying meanings, and it is these inner meanings – the characters' mental states – which have to be ascertained and conveyed to the spectator. Each scene, episode, or line has to be examined to decipher the concealed *leitmotifs* of each role and the play in general.

In applying his system in rehearsals, Stanislavsky used a vocabulary which is familiar to us now, but at the time was newly minted. He has the actors break the play down into *kuski* (literally, pieces). Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood's widely disseminated version of his writings renders this as 'units', but I have chosen to translate it as *segments*. At times he metaphorized small segments as *beads (busy)*, which have to be strung together.² He regularly refers to the *zadacha*, which I translate as *problem* (like a sum in

The Rehearsal Notes³

10 September 1917

Analysis of Act Three

Analyzes Nina's attitude to Treplyov's recent suicide attempt.

Then K. S. in passing addresses all the performers: that after the last rehearsal they were 'warming up' to their roles.

Popov as Medvedenko has a somewhat pessimistic mood.

Tarasova is getting stronger in the role and is eager to rehearse.

[Mikhail] Chekhov does not want to get bogged down in a detailed breakdown of the role, because he has not yet had time to grasp the role as a whole.

Neronov is still unclear about Sorin's attitude to his sister.

K. S. advises [Neronov] to forget about [Sorin's] illness. All this has to be pushed into the background. It interferes with the major, basic lines of the role. It's very detrimental to steer a characterization in the direction of infirmity.

K. S. talks about how Treplyov, though nervous, is not a neurotic. We have to show his courage, the strength of his convictions about his ideas. He is

a fighter. His characterization is to be a man firm in his convictions.

The previous rehearsal achieved a great deal for Baksheev. His role came closer.

K. S. asks them not to forget, to analyze the nature of their feelings. They must not forget the silent moments, when others are speaking, and they only listen.

Stakhovich is somewhat embarrassed by his personal tendency to speak with a kind of sneer. Private rehearsals with V. L. Mchedelov⁴ have been a great help in this regard.

Pavlova continues to be perplexed and cannot find the essence of 'sloppy sentimentality'.

O. L. Knipper is trying for a frivolous 'actor's tone'.

K. S. advises her [to base herself] on real-life observations of old performers, their way of speaking.

They have begun to read the first act from the entrance of Treplyov and Sorin.

Sorin's first line is not right. He has to speak it as *usual*, and not as if for the first time. It follows that even Kostya must restrain [his uncle's] usual 'maundering'. Otherwise it will come across as the beginning of a scene. It has to be the continuation of a scene, and not the beginning. Even here one has to pick the salient word to be

mathematics), to be solved in each phase of the action. (Hapgood popularized the term *objective* in this regard; Jean Benedetti translates it more literally as *task*.)

Given circumstances (*predlagaemye obstoyatelsta*) represent the situation in which the characters find themselves. *Through-action* (*skvoznoe deystvie*, or what Hapgood calls the 'through line of action') connects all the actions of a character and progresses towards the character's ultimate goal. He also makes a distinction between 'activity' (*aktivnost*) and 'action' (*deystvie*). At this point he is asking the actors to try to find the *key* (*klyuch*) to a segment, but later abandoned that term.

Unfortunately, the 'given circumstances' surrounding the rehearsals were not propitious. Material living conditions in Moscow grew worse. Mikhail Chekhov fell ill, as did Tarasova. In May 1918 she took a leave of absence and left famine-ridden Moscow to

recover in the well-provisioned Ukraine; in August she informed the administration that she would not be back in time for the beginning of the fall season. Rehearsals of *The Seagull* were discontinued. In January 1919, Tarasova wrote to Stanislavsky that it was 'the dream of my life' to play Nina, and that she had every intention of doing so 'without fail, at any cost'. It was not to be. In the event, the Art Theatre was not to re-stage *The Seagull* until Oleg Efremov completely rethought the play in 1980.

Of the rehearsals Stanislavsky held for the *Seagull* revival, only four sets of notes have survived. They were made by the assistant director Pyotr Sharov, who, later, as Peter Sharoff, became a prominent Chekhov director in Italy and the Netherlands. They were first published by the chronicler of Stanislavsky's life I. N. Vinogradskaya in 1987, and appear here in English for the first time.

stressed. 'Somehow's *not the thing?*' You mustn't make automatic emphases.

With time you have to attain a high level of temperament in this role [Treplov]. You must restrain your gestures. Especially [Mikhail] Chekhov's tiny gestures, which appear to be his sole inadequacy for this role.

The more restrained the gestures, the more powerful the temperament.

'Underacting' simplicity always comes about when people don't appreciate the precious, salient words. That is the old Art Theatre – to act simplicity is the worst, most appalling cliché.

Without kindness there is no Sorin. He is not *calm*, but kindly, lively, interested in everything.

K. S. Stanislavsky's remarks.

[Mikhail] Chekhov's seriousness was evident, but his high spirits disappeared. There was no joy, no faith. They have begun to 'act' [Anton] Chekhov. That's awful. They turned a performance into a funeral.

Shamraev has to be even more serious, authoritative. The stage of the old theatre is his 'holy of holies'. He has to talk with the 'feelings' of a theatre buff, and not illustrate the words.

Neronov still doesn't have enough merriment and kindness.

Pavlova has nothing but sloppy sentimentality. In her joys, her jealousies, everything – sloppy sentimentality.

Dorn is always inwardly cheerful, wise. His eyes are joyful. Without any strain. He even regards her affectionately, cheerfully.

Tarasova has forgotten about [Treplov's] play, the house has very much polluted her. Today this is a plus.

The first act went up to [the beginning of Treplov's] play. Everyone is looking for the right direction, many new things happened and earlier discoveries have been set aside; and this is very good. In the end everything will coalesce: all the 'beads' will be strung.

They went on to the second act. They read as far as Nina's soliloquy. Then they begin to analyze what's been read.

Arkadina is the only one who isn't depressed. She's all energy. Taken up with herself. Other people's attention still gets her worked up. Masha is struggling with what is dragging her down; she is suffering, but takes herself in hand. Dorn is living his own life. He hums – that's the nicest thing about the role.

Arkadina's energy is analogous to Savina's energy and liveliness. K. S. tells a story about a

performance at his home at Red Gates. How everyone left [worn out and how Fedotova] was high-spirited and merry.⁵ She's a firecracker.

Sorin has a joyful smile, and not the 'routine' actor's smile, which does not admit seriousness. Sorin is very fond of Nina. He is happy when she's happy. Is he attracted to Nina? More accurately, it's a fondness for youth.

'I'm happy' – this line [of Nina's] contains both sadness and happiness. How quickly it has come, how soon it will pass. Youth is dust.

Is Arkadina jealous of Nina on account of Trigorin? Arkadina notices her outburst. She is jealous. Nina's arrival upsets her.

Her son interested her. [Arkadina] thinks about him seriously.

Masha warns Arkadina about Kostya: 'He's very downhearted.'

'Recite his poetry or something from his play' – this is connected with her torment over the last few days. She's all about Kostya, and all her lines connect to her love for Kostya. And then once more she 'dons her toga'.

'All that is so uninteresting' – it's a betrayal of Kostya. How can she do it? She, so young, so noble? She does it very delicately, gently: 'Do I have to recite?' can be heard in [Nina's] refusal.

Here Masha is full of bravado. She wants to show that he [Treplyov] is a genius, a poet.

Why does she ask 'timidly'? K. S. thinks that it is, rather, thoughtfulness, and, perhaps, the result of their strained relations. A bit of jealousy.

Shamraev arrives 'to relax' among actors, at whom he immediately starts to yell. A kind of emotional outburst that can take place only in a heat wave.

Arkadina here reveals all that's worst in her actress's nature. Nina, affected by the scandal, the general agitation – gets excited herself and is genuinely outraged by Shamraev. Sorin starts to shout at the end of the scene because he's been frightened, like an 'old biddy'.

Nina goes into utter despair over what's happening in the house.

Polina's jealousy.

Nina alone. She is completely defeated. Her great naivety. You have to reveal her assumptions about life. Treplyov enters [with the killed seagull].

They read the third act.

Remarks.

Chekhovian moaning and groaning.

Arkadina's stinginess. She clutches at whatever's cheapest and gradually refuses everything. The psychology of stinginess in Arkadina. One rouble for three servants. Sorin [talking to her about money] is very candid, not chiding Arkadina. She joyously launches into memories of her youth. In the quarrel with her son she hams it up, and then immediately turns into a cook. An instant more – and she is transformed into the kindest of women. It's all very sincere, with an actor's temperament, it's all overblown, and therefore all the feelings are exaggerated.

Trigorin? A bit of a coward. In Nina and Trigorin there's a reticence and a hope that something will delay the departure. In the whole scene there's great activity.

In the scene of Arkadina and Trigorin some scene from a tragedy is being played out, and with such effrontery, flattery, that it goes right to Trigorin's head and he cannot struggle.

12 September 1917

V. L. Mchedelov reports on the last rehearsal, specific concerns.

K. S. analyzes the third act, the scene between Treplyov and his mother, makes an analogy between Hamlet and Treplyov. Both are at a time of life when they have nothing in their life except their mother. The dearer she is to them at this moment, the more they want to reform her. The more they will restrain themselves. He decided to commit suicide not because he didn't want to live, but because he passionately wants to live, he grasps at everything that offers a foothold in life, but everything collapses. For him, an aesthete, there is nothing in life that could hold him. His through-action is *to live*, to live beautifully – to aspire to Moscow, to Moscow.⁶

Chekhov is always active. He is not a pessimist – life in the 'eighties was the way that Chekhov's characters created it. He himself loves life, strives for a better life, as do all his characters.

A question for Trigorin/Khokhlov. In order to ascertain the correct problem, one must recall the correct state of mind. The better, the more smoothly the rehearsals proceed, the more profoundly one must consider and ascertain the problem 'by means of the salient word'.

A question for Arkadina/Knipper. The scene with Treplyov and Trigorin. All her psychology is very complicated.

About Tarasova

Is there something getting in the way of the role?

Do you want to rehearse the first act?

What is there about it that frightens the actors?

This is a terrible thing to work with. One must come up with a serious attitude to circumstances, to a mother, to art.

You mustn't reinforce the role with 'gimmicks'. It's a natural habit for performers, which they have to break themselves of.

You have to get excited by the clash of passions. Forget about the external form, if you need something to hold on to, then for the time being you have to say that he is courageous, and how does this show itself now?

The main problem for the performer (Mikhail Chekhov) of the role has to be self-confidence.

With Sorin (Neronov) for some reason nothing new is developing.

With Shamraev (Baksheev) things are doubtful. An agonizing period for Baksheev's talent – it's getting swallowed up by clichés. You have to go back to your original condition (before *Wandering Minstrels*),⁷ when there were no clichés.

With Dorn the work is going in an interesting way in the sense of finding the inner essence of the role. A. A. Stakhovich is gradually pulling away from his own personal characteristics, which interfere with the work.

Of Krizhanovskaya

You have to find a 'pose', but not literally. Krizhanovskaya objects, stating that [Masha] is always sincere, really likes taking snuff.

After short discussions we moved from the third act to the second act.

Act II

There's something of Astrov in Dorn. He somehow lives wholly within himself. Sees everything, understands everything. What is Dorn living off of in the second act? To create stage action, we have to find an activity. There's no way to live the 'heat' of the second act. That's not an activity, only a mood.

Sorin has an activity in Act II, 'thirsting for life', which is why he's so happy around Nina.

For Baksheev: he [Shamraev] has come to make trouble either because he's cross, or an oppressive 'life' is eating away at him, and he comes to talk about 'art' . . .

They begin to read the second act.

After reading the act K. S. poses them all a question: 'Where who how did you feel?'

Baksheev could not control himself and got excited.

[Mikhail] Chekhov did not feel the truth.

Tarasova at the start of the act felt bad, but then it became easy and by the end she was quite in control of herself.

Khokhlov felt comfortable.

K.S. The basic problem of the act?

KHOKHLOV. To please Nina.

K.S. Did you succeed?

[KHOKHLOV]. At moments. The joke, the talk about youth.

KRIZHANOVSKAYA – doesn't feel the role. She was reading lines.

K. S. Aren't [we winding up with] two Ninas?

Masha [in contradistinction to Nina] doesn't reveal her feelings, her lyricism. Maybe, somewhere alone in the moonlight she will open her heart to herself, but immediately gets embarrassed. She is very homely, with a vast fund of feminine lyricism.

A hot summer's day. The residents sit around in a sour mood. In this stagnant society [unexpectedly there appears] a sophisticated actress, 'M. G. Savina'.⁸ She makes merry, which is easy for her.

This is the picture you have to come to love, to delineate. No feminine image, the subtlety of competing with young people.

K. S. suggests they 'shape' this scene.

Are they bored or not? They're bored. The eternal Chekhovian theme. People want to leave this boredom of life. In order to strive towards life, there has to be 'boredom', which should make one pull away from this tedious, uninteresting life.

To express lyricism one must give [?] and use the whole range of the voice. A general fault of the theatre is to express lyricism only by a certain lowering and raising of the voice. That's boring.

K.S. suggests they simply do an exercise, he wants to get them on stage. We have lost life. We all need to find it. Meanwhile this pressure, actor's temperament, but no artistic depiction.

Nina is a young girl, whose excitement at meeting Trigorin is almost comic.

To create naivety, one needs a naive frame of mind. For her Trigorin is Shakespeare. Nina respects Trigorin the way A. K. Tarasova respects Shakespeare.

We should [along with Nina] smile at meeting Trigorin. It's all so naive, so overwrought.

It has to be clear to us that she is taking what glitters to be gold, and we should want to shout at her: 'You're making a mistake. You are worth more than any of these celebrities!'

Her coming to this house of celebrities – it's Tytyl and Mylyll coming to the 'kingdom of unborn souls'.⁹

Treplov: does he have to go right out and shoot himself or not?

We have to create the picture: a happy young girl, and enter a suicide. Why did he come here, why did he kill the seagull? A man without any reins to steer by. His soul has been emptied out. Nina instinctively feels something tragic in this dramatic figure, and when such individual artistic segments are created along the line of life, the result is tragedy.

We don't have to come up with the result of the whole scene.

We have to come up with a series of life-like phases, otherwise there will [only] be the result, it won't be interesting. In Chekhov the words are the last thing – he's not Ostrovsky. We have to look for original feelings.

Heat. In exercises we might find the true nature of feelings in a heat wave. At first find what external adjustments there are.

K.S. himself plays an exercise without words: 'Heat.' We immediately know the results only too well.

Everyone comes on stage and plays the exercise, improvisations on 'heat'.

K.S. advises they seek the truth not with actors' devices: if you have to portray boredom, then the actor spends the whole scene 'down in the mouth'; if the scene is high-spirited, the actor is bound to 'jump up and down' and be constantly in motion. In fact it could just as readily be the complete opposite.

From the exercises they gradually move into rehearsing the second act. Getting as far as Shamraev's entrance, the rehearsal breaks off, and K.S. suggests he deal only with Tarasova, [Mikhail] Chekhov, and Khokhlov.

The whole rehearsal ends with an analysis of Nina's first line after Trigorin's exit, when she is alone: 'How strange this is, a famous writer . . . ' etc.

14 September 1917

Individual work with Tarasova, [Mikhail] Chekhov and Trigorin [Khokhlov]. Act II.

They start by going over the first act.

What is the best way to clarify Nina's attitude to Treplov and Trigorin?

It has to be broken down into small segments.

Once the segments become clearly understood, one has to 'model' segment by segment. And this will clarify the attitude. And to 'model' a segment accurately, one has to know the precise problem in the segment.

Let's take the biggest segment in the first act – Treplov's meeting with Nina. The closest through-action for Nina is to act on stage, to be a success, etc. Connected with this through-action at the very beginning, Nina wants to know the truth: is she late or not? Which means, there's a moment of enquiry, she is seeking, she wants to find out whether it's all over or not. You have to experience the 'physical truth' of the enquiry. After: 'Of course, you're not late' – she is convinced. To reinforce this, you have to fit the keys to this scene: arriving, looking around, calming down – relaxing.

These keys may change over the course of the work. It's the internal modelling of the segment.

(Next segment.) Treplov: 'No, no!'

Which is more important for Treplov at that moment – his play or Nina?

Nina, because he loves her. She has destroyed his mental equilibrium.

What is the nature of this feeling of love? 'The key?' 'You hear her footsteps?' – 'Even the sound of her footsteps is pleasant!' The greater the love, the greater the attention. The greater the attention, the fewer smiles. Maybe a smile may come, but a mile of strained attention, tension. He wants to share his attention with his uncle. To infect him, to persuade him of his feelings.

Keys [Treplevov]: (1) to listen to the footsteps, (2) to infect his uncle with his attention, to persuade him.

You have to find the salient word for this, to come to love it. This word cannot be found with the mind – it turns things cold, but you will find this word, and come to love it from frequent repetition.

She arrives. The nature of his feeling, *the key – to welcome her* (to express to her all his sensations, his joy).

Now the next phase.

When you want to tell someone something important, you don't begin by saying it, yet you don't calm down, you don't relax after fatigue. Which means, for Nina it's *preparation*, to say something important, to prepare the ground.

To depict one's inner feeling, one has to draw a whole series of little pictures, in order to achieve the overall big picture. What kind of feeling leads to 'There are tears in your little eyes'? It's all offensive, annoying, inauthentic. Which means, the picture will be painted with a feeling of offence, annoyance, inauthenticity.

In an exercise Tarasova tries out Nina's first entrance, using K.S.'s directions, his 'keys'. The experiment is a *wonderful* success.

At this point Treplevov needs not a smile, but high spirits, great energy, activity. This is the sequence: activity, hence energy, high spirits, and high spirits may even lead to a smile.

In the next segment the salient word to choose is 'father': '*Father* knows nothing [about her leaving home]. This is not emphasis, but choice.

One must remember the 'given circumstances': 'What will happen to her if she doesn't get home in half an hour?' The circumstance is very important, and the colours must be laid on thick.

To convince people one needs calm, not electrical shocks, pressure.

One has to play psychological turning-points the way Duse, Kommissarzhevskaja [did].

For Treplevov 'the given circumstances' are also important: they are: in order for the play to go on, it will be illustrated by a word: where is this salient word?

Hence Treplevov's great activity, his desire to act quickly.

Nina is confused.

The love scene does not occur by chance. At any other time Nina would probably never say such a

thing ['My heart is full of you']. She is afraid of the feeling of love and [love for] the stage. Thanks to their activity a love scene evolved. Love in Nina would come somewhat unconsciously.

You have to determine the exact way to solve all these problems in Nina: all joyously, all fearfully, all youthfully, which means, all expansively, rapidly. So you can weep as easily as you burst into laughter unconfined.

You have to lay a general colour over all the problems.

'Father and stepmother won't allow me. . . .' The key: she is *drawn* here. In the words: 'My heart is full of you' – she shows how she's drawn here. What she sees in him is art, Bohemia, but *not himself*.

The kiss is accidental, 'stupid'. He goes first. He is enthralled, absurd. People act foolishly at moments like this. They've lost their heads. Hence her question: 'What kind of tree is that?' His 'lecture' about how evening darkens all objects – that's also the result of awkwardness.

Their fright at Yakov's voice.

Would it be interesting, artistic, if all sincere, authentic feelings were *honestly* put on stage? *No*. You have [to add] a certain amount of acting, that is, a loving enjoyment of the role, of *acting the role*, but *acting the role* is not true stage art. All our psycho-physical work is necessary to mastering a role so that one can play the role and lovingly have fun with it.

Whenever the mind has gone through the psycho-physical process in a role, one can begin to enjoy the role, to play it.

Nina does not believe in [Trigorin] Treplevov as a writer. She doesn't understand him.

Again 'they play the whole scene.' K. S. says that [Treplevov] does not have to touch Nina. No physical intimacy. It's as if in the first scene [of Nina and Treplevov] there is no joyousness, merriment, hope, high spirits. . . . They have to ascend to heaven, so that [Treplevov's] fall in the second act will be tragic. Her excitement, fear, worship of Trigorin make sense of the second act. One has to select salient words for this: 'Trigorin', 'a famous writer,' 'it's dreadful for Mama (Arkadina)', and it goes without saying it's all about Trigorin.

Then K. S. makes a few remarks about Treplevov and Trigorin.

17 September 1917

Analysis of Act III. The scene of Treplov and his mother.

Grounds for reconciliation with his mother are found, and only Trigorin, their type of theatre divides them again. And at the end of the quarrel he, Treplov, immediately loses self-control, consciousness. The breaking point began with Trigorin; in the lines about theatre Treplov is defending all art. 'Decadent' is the complete break.

'Skinflint!' The end of the anger, the culminating point. After this scene an enormous pause.

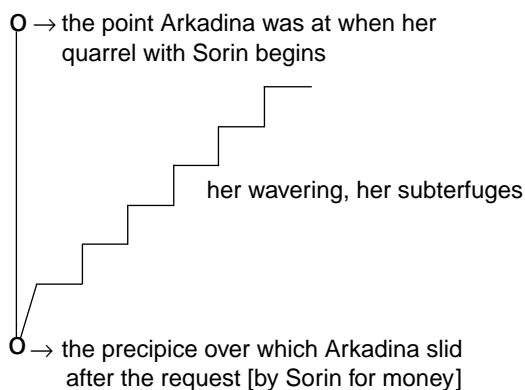
The nature of Arkadina's feelings here are all depicted through frivolity (with Sorin).

Arkadina is very stingy.

Sorin's request [that she give] money for Kostya's trip abroad puts Arkadina in a panic.

You have to validate this feeling by an example from life: at first there will be a moment of intense attention, 'probing' the heart of the person making the request. Self-defence. 'My costumes alone . . . ' is at first a way of protecting herself from the 'trip abroad'. And then when she sees that the request is not especially insistent, she drops the costumes. The salient word in this scene is '*all the same*'. When this word is to be played, you must find for yourself further on.

You mustn't confuse the problem with the way in which the problem will be resolved.



There is a great moment of entreaty in the scene. The stingier she is, the greater the entreaty. She turns pale with horror. Therefore, when Kostya asks on Sorin's behalf, without knowing that Sorin had already asked on his behalf, she falls

into even greater horror, and Kostya's request for a bandage is a request to change the subject, and she does so joyfully, for her it's a bridge for crossing over to another theme.

'You won't do any more click-click?' – 'No, Mama, it won't happen again.'

Here there is a certain fear of committing suicide. He is examining his feelings. To understand him properly, you must find the salient word, the key. 'That was a moment of *insane despair*, when I could not get control of myself. It won't happen again.' Analyzing himself, Kostya persuades himself not to do it again.

The key is auto-suggestion.

Pause. He kisses her hand. This connects with the auto-suggestion. That kiss connects him physically with life. It is a straw he grasps at. Hence the tenderness to his mother.

Kostya's memories of his mother's kindness are important in characterizing Arkadina. She does not remember her own kind deeds, but she does remember the ballerinas, who drank coffee at her place. His memories provide him some foundation for a future life.

What's the reason he remembers: does he actually recall it or is he painting a picture of a blissful life? He is *painting*, because the pictures of a blissful life connect him with life, hence the salient words: '*golden hands*', 'you remember', 'how can you not remember', 'these last few days, these days I love you as tenderly and uninhibitedly as in childhood'. Pause. This line consolidates the relationship.

When he goes on to mention Trigorin, he speaks very carefully, at first continuing to consolidate the relationship. If the whole previous dialogue was a mutual desire for peace and quiet, based on certain compromises, her line 'I respect that man' will be very restrained, and the whole scene will be restrained. And the more restrained, the more powerful and tense it is, and if there's an outburst, it will be a real one.

The scene has to accumulate. Both of them plead not to destroy the relationship that's going so well. A compromise isn't found.

'Go back to your darling theatre . . . ' – he has exploded once and for all.

'I am more talented than the lot of you . . . ' is very modest, but convinced.

If this whole little scene contains three huge psychological 'phases', so that everything is exhausted, the pause will be huge.

Phases:

(1) You have to calm yourself physically (he walks around, he calms down).

(2) He understands, he appreciates what is happening.

(3) Isolation.

This is only a hint. The actor's personal temperament can alter this logical division of a pause into phases.

So it is with Arkadina:

(1) She calms down.

(2) She justifies herself ('Nonentity'), has understood.

(3) Watches furtively, imperceptibly gropes for his situation.

(4) Asks forgiveness; contrition.

'If you only knew: I've lost all hope.'

Again a straw, but not because he loves her again, he's simply holding on to her physically. Here again he is in the despair of the second act. Activity, seeking a way out, for otherwise the actor will play despair.

Here: 'Save me! Help!'

A scene of reconciliation. She pleads with all her blandishments for forgiveness, while he, burrowing into his soul, can hardly find a reason to embrace her again. He seeks support, he wants to be understood. And his embrace comes not from love, but from entreaty. She senses his condition and wants to help him.

The next segment: 'We're reconciled now?' – 'Yes, Mama.'

K.S. suggests going on stage and physically verifying the truth. Knipper and [Mikhail] Chekhov play an exercise from the scene.

Clichés prevailed, especially in [Mikhail] Chekhov, where he wants to show his affection, love for his mother. Both make many automatic emphases.

It works best without words – finding the physical truth.

Moreover one must live according to the ultimate problems (actions), and not by moving from problem to problem.

One must think not about how to do something, but what to do. Then something integral will result, physical truth will be freshly minted.

K. S. plays an exercise – the search for a lost pin.

In all the twists and turns of the acting one must sense that one exists: *I am*.

19 September 1917

Owing to Tarasova's illness the rehearsal takes on the character of a lecture. K. S. talks a lot about Nina in Acts II and III.

Translation © L. P. Senelick 2004

Notes and References

1. A vivid depiction of Moscow and the Art Theatre at this period appears in Richard Boleslavski and Helen Woodward, *Lances Down: Between the Fires in Moscow* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1932).

2. There is a legend that when Richard Boleslavski taught Stanislavsky's ideas at the American Laboratory Theatre in the 1920s, his Polish accent pronounced 'beads' as 'beats', hence the common practice of breaking a scene down into 'beats'. Another version has Maria Ouspenskaya's Russian accent mispronouncing 'bits' to the same effect.

3. From I. N. Vinogradskaya, ed., *Stanislavskii repetiuet. Zapisi i stenogrammy repetitsy* [*Stanislavsky Rehearses: Rehearsal Notes and Transcripts*], 2nd ed. (Moscow: Moskovsky Khudozhestvenny teatr, 2002).

4. Mchedelov served as one of the assistant directors on the production.

5. A charity performance of Nemirovich-Danchenko's *The Lucky Devil* with the participation of the Maly actors took place on 27 March 1892. Stanislavsky played the artist Bogucharov and the excellent actress Glikeriya Fedotova his wife.

6. The leitmotiv of the heroines of *Three Sisters*.

7. In the First Studio's production of *Wandering Minstrels* by V. M. Vol'kenshtein (1914), Baksheev played the boyar Yavolod.

8. Mariya Savina (1854–1915), imperious prima donna of the Alexandra Theatre in St Petersburg; no great admirer of Chekhov, she played Arkadina a couple of times in 1902.

9. A reference to the scene 'The Kingdom of the Future' in Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird*, where the boy and girl Tyltyl and Mytyl are guided by the Soul of the World into the realm of the unborn.