

Topic Exploration Pack

Practitioners – Stanislavski

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This Topic Exploration Pack supports OCR A Level Drama and Theatre.

Introduction

Konstantin Stanislavski created a system to help actors to work on themselves and to work on a role, this system is a set of exercises and tools that are designed to help the actor to experience and create a character within a circumstance. Stanislavski's system is as vibrant a system for acting today as it was all those years ago in the studios and rehearsal rooms of the Moscow Art Theatre. Today the system is still the most comprehensive method for acting we have and Stanislavski's ideas have dominated theatre for over eighty years.

Stanislavski wanted to create a body of exercises and ideas that would help the actor to experience and explore a character. He wanted to create a system that would combine mind, body and spirit in the pursuit of great art that would fascinate an audience.

This exploration pack will outline the key areas of the system to be explored, and how to go about that, while guiding you in the direction of key resources to help you to teach the unit on Stanislavski and the system.

Stanislavski was working under the cloud of the Soviet authorities and censors; he had to censor his writing to give the impression that it complied with Soviet ideology while he lived with the knowledge that the state was always watching. After his death, Stanislavski's work was selectively remastered by those sympathetic to the state's socialist ideals. This meant much of Stanislavski's ideas and practices were hidden and the world was sold a Soviet interpretation instead. When Stanislavski travelled to the United States his work was seized upon and developed to create what is commonly known as 'the method'. In this pack you will be exploring exercises that paint of a picture of how Stanislavski really worked with actor, allowing you to give your students the opportunity to explore and experience the system as Stanislavski intended.

This exploration pack will explore the exercises and ideas that Stanislavski developed towards the end of his life; these put 'experiencing' at the heart of the system and we will encounter a Stanislavski that was not a 'tyrannical dictator' but an actor, director and teacher whose primary aim was to develop a practical, working system to combine mind, body and spirit.

Stanislavski envisaged his system being passed on from actor to actor, from teacher to student in the form of exercises and improvisations that had evolved and developed in the studios of the Moscow Art Theatre. His system is a flexible guide for the student to explore and experience a character in preparation for a performance. The Stanislavski system was never intended to be rigid and should not be taken as so. The system evolved and developed over the course of Stanislavski's life and this resource pack will draw on exercises that provide us with a real insight into how Stanislavski really worked.

From students that may well have read around the subject you could be asked questions on the importance of emotional memory or 'didn't Stanislavski move to the physical in the end'. The answer to these kinds of questions would be that in this unit they will be exploring the exercises and ideas that Stanislavski used towards the end of his life and ones that best reflect what he did in the studio. We will be putting the Americanised version and the Soviet state's version to one side and exploring Stanislavski's true legacy.

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Stanislovski's purpose and practice

Stanislovski wanted, as an actor, to be able to experience the character, to think and do as the character, within their imagined circumstances. He wanted the actors he taught and directed to explore and develop characters that would bring joy to the audience. As Stanislovski said:

*'Our purpose is not only to create 'the life of the human spirit in a role', but also to communicate it outwardly in an artistic form. So the actor must not only experience the role inwardly, he must embody that inner experience physically. Outer communication relies very strongly on inner experiencing in our school of acting. To be able to reflect a life which is subtle and often subconscious, you must possess an exceptionally responsive and outstandingly well trained voice and body, which must be able to convey hidden, almost imperceptible inner feelings instantly in a distinct and accurate manner'*¹

Artistic intentions

By evolving a system he gave the actor a direction to go in, a path to follow that would lead to truthful acting. Stanislovski wanted us to experience, and through experiencing, we learn.

Stanislovski wanted his actors to experience a role actively and subsequently there is always an element of the experimental to his work. In essence the Stanislovski system is an on-going process to create believable and truthful characters who harness their imaginations actively.

Stanislovski in *'My Life in Art'* offered us some useful advice on how to work.

*'If it cannot be mastered immediately then it has to be done in stages, so to speak, put it all together out of individual elements. If each of them has to be worked on separately, systematically, by a whole range of exercises so be it!'*²

For Stanislovski, the truth on stage was not to recreate life exactly as it is but for the actor to 'be' the character, thinking and doing as the character, experiencing the character on stage.

Innovative nature of Stanislovski's work

If we are to put a label to Stanislovski it would be that of an experimental and experiential practitioner. When exploring his system, we do not view it dogmatically from a historical perspective but as a living breathing body of exercises to be used with our students. So when working on a play, you use the system in today's context very much as Katie Mitchell does today. If Stanislovski was working today he would have embraced technology and how it can add to a performance. As we will see, when we look at an example of Stanislovski's rehearsal technique *Active Analysis*, his ideas and practices are experimental and perfectly suited to creating imaginative and exciting theatre in the 21st Century. Stanislovski's work on using invisible rays and radiation shows the innovative nature of his work and how advanced his ideas were for the time in which he worked.

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Working methods and theatrical style

Stanislavski's working methods developed and changed as he grew as an actor, teacher and director. By a system of trial and error he developed ideas and exercise with the primary aim of helping the actor. Within this unit you will be exploring exercises that Stanislavski used with the actor and with text, many of which represent those he used towards the end of his life. Ultimately Stanislavski realised that the key question an actor needs to answer is 'What does my character do within the circumstance they are in'. This 'do' their action drives them through each bit of the play.

Stanislavski's influence

Theatre practice since Stanislavski has either been a development of his ideas or a reaction to them. His ideas and practice pervade every area of drama and theatre. Contemporary practitioners that claim new and experimental working methods often are mirroring Stanislavski's experiments while at the Opera-Dramatic Studio. Due to a number of factors already outlined, Stanislavski's work for many years was misinterpreted and mistaught. Now we begin an exciting chapter where students can start to explore and experience the exercises and ideas that are Stanislavski's true legacy.

Preparing to teach: Resources

There are numerous Stanislavski resources available today. This section outlines the resources that support the specification content and will offer you guidance in the delivery of this topic. Each text is hyperlinked so you can view inside the book on the publisher website.

Your primary resource for this work would be *Stanislavski in Practice - Exercises for Students*. There is a book version and a film version in two parts.

1. [Stanislavski in Practice - view the book here](#) This resource has all the exercises and areas of the system you will need to explore as part of this unit with a range of follow on exercises to challenge your students.
2. [Stanislavski in Practice The Film Part 1](#) Part 1 and Part 2 of this film brings to life the exercises you would need to explore with your students giving you a powerful visual resource to support studio exploration. [Stanislavski in Practice Film Trailer](#)
3. The Stanislavski text to use with this unit is [An Actor's Work K Stanislavski](#) the new translation by J Benedetti that paints a truer picture of Stanislavski's work than previous translations.
4. [Stanislavsky in Focus](#) is a wonderful resource for teachers to use in preparation of teaching this unit. It sets out to demystify the lore surrounding Stanislavski and identifies the key social, cultural and historic factors that influenced Stanislavski's work.

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Teacher Instructions

These resources will help you in the delivery of this topic; the exercises you will need to complete are all laid out in *Stanislavski in Practice* for your students to work through as they progress through this work. You can use the film version of the book as a teacher tool before you start and to show to students as you work. It is envisaged students will read and analyse the relevant chapters in *An Actor's Work* after they have completed an area of the system. *Stanislavsky in Focus* will help you as teachers with understanding the evolution of Stanislavski's ideas.

When you come to the exercises on invisible rays when communicating you will find the film invaluable in showing how these exercises work in practice and will help you with any students that may find it difficult in grasping this key concept to the system.

Suitable texts

Due to the experimental nature of the Stanislavski system you can use his system effectively with any text. Plays by Chekhov, Strindberg, Ibsen, Gogol, Williams, O'Casey, Coward or Sartre would allow your students to effectively put the system into practice in the first instance.

Suggested activities

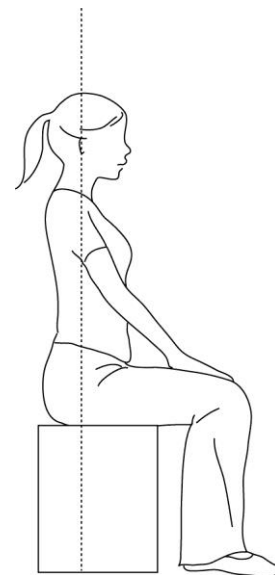
In this section there are three examples of exercises to use with your students. The first will be for your students to explore how to use their imaginations and how to move from passive imagination to active imagination. The second is an exercise on using actions and the third exploring Active Analysis as a rehearsal technique.

The most effective way of exploring Stanislavski and the system is practically. By running a series of exercises with students, you will give them an in depth knowledge of an area of the system that can then be used as a basis for a more theoretical understanding. The three exercises featured here are based on exercises you will find in *Stanislavski in Practice* the book and the film versions. The system should be tackled practically moving from exercise to exercise building towards working on a role. Once students have a clear practical understanding of an area of the system they then look at reading and evaluating the relevant chapter in *An Actor's Work*.

1. Imagination exercise – The Beach

Prior to doing this exercise it is recommended that students explore some visualisation exercises and a 'Life in Art' exercise to help them to start exploring their imagination.

Ask your students to sit in a chair pulling themselves up by the strings.



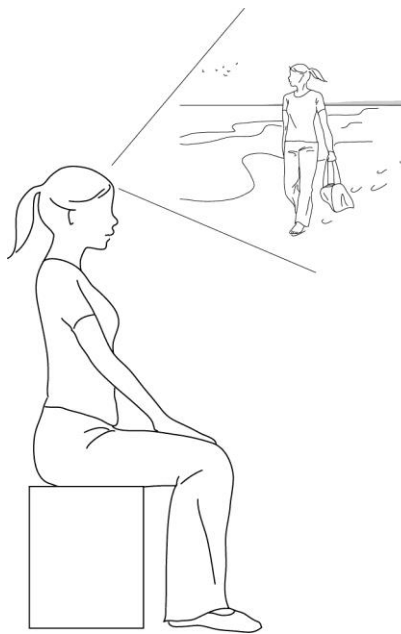
DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Ask them to shut their eyes; you will now walk them through using their imagination in two different ways.

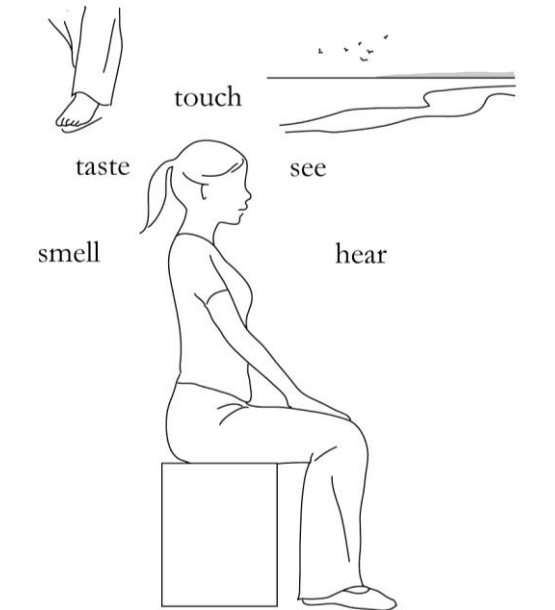
You say:

'You see yourself standing in a room, you see yourself bending to pick up a bag, you see yourself walking towards the door, you see yourself opening the door, you see yourself walking outside, you see yourself walking down the road, you see yourself looking out to sea, you see yourself walking on the sand, you see yourself putting down your bag, you see yourself taking out a towel, you see yourself lie down on the towel, you see yourself open your book and you see yourself starting to read.'



Ask your students to keep an impression of what that felt like they will now use their imagination a different way:

'You bend down and slowly pick up your yellow beach bag; you slide the bag on to your shoulder as you turn towards the glass door. Opening the door you're hit by a wave of heat as you start to walk down the path. At the road you turn left and you can feel the sun on your shoulders, you hear the hum of traffic and the smell of salt in the air. After a while you stop and wait for a gap in the traffic before crossing the road, you look out at the gorgeous blue expanse of sea, you see a tanker in the distance and hear birds circling above. At the beach you stop and flick off your flip flops, feeling the warm sand in between your toes as you search for a spot to put your towel down. You hear a radio in the distance and the sound of children playing happily. You stop, put down your bag and take out your red beach towel. Lying down you take out your book and start to read where you last left off.'



Once the students have completed the exercise you can ask them these questions:

1. Comparing the first and second time was there any difference in the way you were using your imagination?
2. Did it feel different when you were 'seeing yourself' do something from when you were imagining what you could see, hear, touch, taste and smell?
3. Which was the easier for you to imagine the first or second?
4. Stanislavski said 'We need an active not a passive imagination.' Did the first one or the second one make you use your imagination actively?

Active imagination is where we see things through our character's eyes using the senses. Passive is where we imagine what the audience thinks about what we are doing on stage. For example, Hamlet in active imagination looking at Gertrude his mother may think 'when I look at her I feel nothing but anger at how she betrayed my father's memory' or with passive imagination 'If I frown deeply then the audience will definitely know I'm not happy with my mother'.

This exercise is to give students an understanding of when they are using their imagination actively as the character and when they are not. If there is one thing you can guarantee before your student's go onstage it's that they have every chance of slipping into using their imaginations passively and worrying about what the audience will think of them. As actors we need to be able to gently start to use our imaginations actively, so we imagine our character within the circumstances of the play with an objective and an action.

It's when we are using our imaginations actively that we start to really experience the character in a combination of the mind, body and spirit.

Student reactions

Students often react in different ways to this exercise with some saying they found the first easiest, some the second. The purpose of the exercise is really for them to see how they use their imagination and that by imagining watching themselves do something it will become passive and to make it more active you need to imagine things through the character's eyes.

2. Action exercise – Action Corners

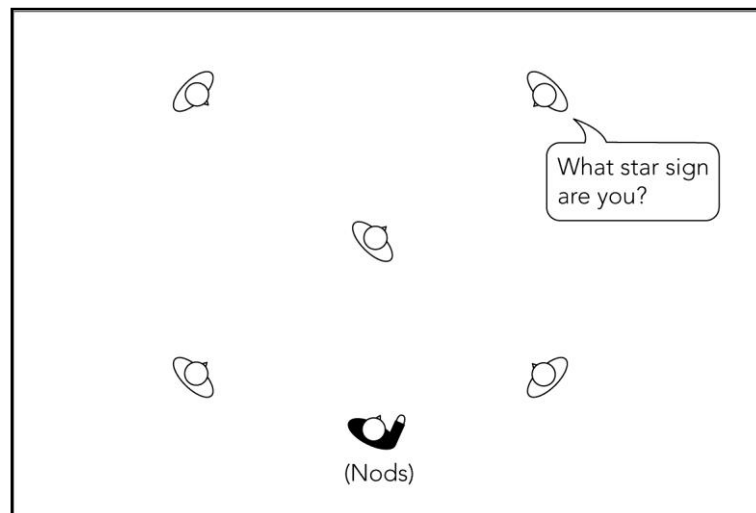
Our second suggested activity is an actions exercise. This exercise works best once students have explored a number of action improvisations and have a grasp of the psychophysical nature of actions.

The aim of this exercise is to examine how psychophysical actions work in practice.

- One student is standing in the middle of the room with one student seated in each of the four corners. The other students and the teacher fill in the gaps. Each of the students in the four corners prepares a simple question to ask the student in the middle.

1. How old are you?
2. What star sign are you?
3. Where were you born?
4. Do you have any brothers and sisters?

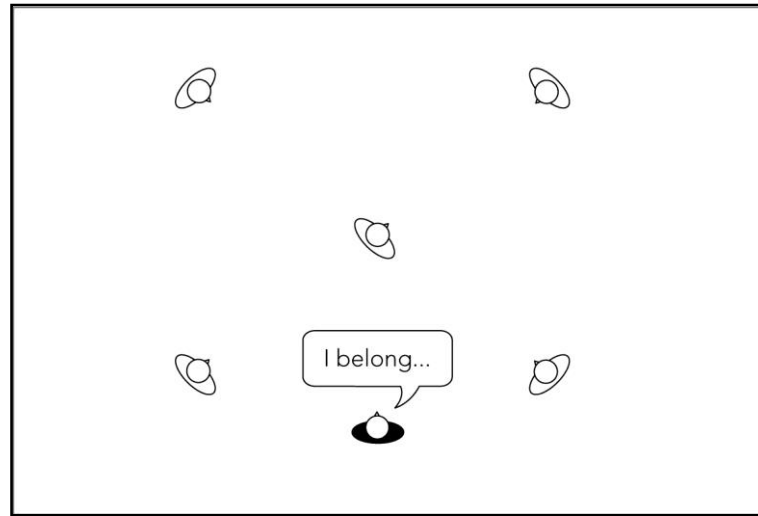
- The teacher nods to one of the students in the corner; they then ask their question.



DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

- Before the student answers, the teacher gives the student in the middle an action and the student answers with that action.



- The rest of the class observes to see if the student has the action given by the teacher. The teacher then nods to the next student in the corner they ask a question and the teacher gives another action and so on.
- To start do one action at a time and then comment and evaluate. You can then go around four times as the students gain in confidence. After each student has gone, evaluate each set of four actions and decide if the student had the actions decided upon. The student can comment on what actions they found it easy to have and what actions they need to practice.

This exercise enables the student to begin to observe how they use actions and understand the internal and external process of using actions. Allow students to really examine the process of having an action and how it affected them mentally and physically. It's a good idea to video the class and then in the next lesson play it back so students can see what actions they had and how they worked and looked from the outside. As students get better at this exercise you can start speeding up so the student will practice moving quickly from one action to the next as they would do in a play.

Rehearsal technique – Active Analysis

Stanislavski believed that the best way to rehearse a play was to get it 'up on its feet' and to start actively exploring the text and the characters. Active Analysis will form the basis for your rehearsal technique for this unit and there is a student sheet to guide your students through this process. Active Analysis puts the action within a circumstance at the heart of rehearsing; it puts the focus on the actor to explore and experience their character actively and is designed to organically create theatre. This technique can be used with any play and is testament to Stanislavski's experimental outlook.

You should start to use Active Analysis once you have explored all the key areas of the system as outlined within the specification. Active Analysis brings together all the different areas of the system enabling the actor to combine mind, body and spirit.

Within this exercise there are areas of the system not covered in this pack. In the resources section of this pack all the resources you would need to teach these areas of the system are outlined. An excellent example of Active Analysis can be found on the DVD *Stanislavski in Practice Part 2* with students exploring and experiencing bits from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This can be shown to your students as an example of how to effectively structure the rehearsal process.

Active Analysis

The aim of this rehearsal technique is for the student to use Active Analysis as a springboard to experiencing their character within a circumstance.

- Read a bit of the play and discuss what should be the main event for that bit.
- Discuss each character's main action for the bit.
- Discuss the given circumstances of the bit.
- Put your scripts down and improvise the bit using the given circumstance and action as your guide.
- Discuss how the scene went and if you felt the action fitted the scene. If it did not change the action and re read the scene.
- Start to discuss your objective, the relationship, the super objective etc. at this point. Your improvisations are the spark to ignite and bring together all the elements of the system.
- Improvise the scene again – don't try to remember the text but concentrate on the action, objective and the given circumstance.
- Discuss the scene again and then read over the text. This process will start to see you combining the thoughts and actions of the character with the text. Each time you improvise you will come closer to the text.

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Active Analysis means you are free to explore the action of the play and then add the text as you go. It frees you as the actor and means you do not have to walk the stage script in hand. By the time you sit down to 'learn your lines' you will realise you already know most of them. Because you understand what the character is doing and thinking, remembering the lines becomes a much easier task. The gelling of action and the text means that when you start to think and move, the words will be there.

In his early days, Stanislavski analysed the play, in depth, often around a table with the students visualizing the events of the play. Active Analysis saw Stanislavski getting the students up on their feet exploring and experiencing their characters actively. A long analysis stage can often soak up the actor's inspiration for the role, so getting straight in and working on your feet, is a good way to harness your inspiration. In rehearsal you explore and experience, and at home you evaluate and prepare for the next day.

Student homework sheets

The following exercise sheets can be given to students as homework to test their practical knowledge and understanding of the areas of the system you have covered. This exercise would combine a number of different areas of the system and can then be used in preparation for the written examination after all the relevant areas have been practically explored. Once students have rehearsed the exercise and shown the exercise in class they are given this question.

How as an actor did you use the different areas of Stanislavski's system to create, develop and perform your chosen animal/chosen act?

The Animal

Aim

To create the character of the animal and rehearse a short scene from the animal's life.

- Choose a wild animal. It can be any animal that lives in the wild.
- Research as much as you can about the animal. Where the animal lives, what it eats, is it solitary or a pack animal etc.
- Find a few photos of your animal and watch a wildlife program that features your animal.
- If possible go to the zoo and observe your animal.
- Actively imagine the animals past.
- Create your before-time as the animal.
- Decide on the plot of your short scene.
- Decide on the current given circumstances for the plot of your scene.
- Give yourself an objective and an action within that given circumstance and rehearse a short scene of about a minute long.
- Keep the plot, objectives and action simple. If you are a leopard you may be stalking a prey, or an elephant keeping an eye on your calf.
- Think about how the animal moves and the tensions it uses.
- Imagine that your limbs are the animals so you start to move like the animal and adopt the same physical characteristics.
- Remember any physical characteristics must be linked to the inner actions of the character. If you, as a leopard, hunch your shoulders as you stalk, you need to decide why you, as the leopard, would do that. When doing your research analyse why the animal you have chosen makes each movement.
- Rehearse the short scene a few times working on the movement and keeping your objective and action in mind.
- Show the scene to your class or a friend to get their feedback. You can always film the exercise, watch it back and self-evaluate.

This exercise tests your ability to combine the mental and physical. You will need to rehearse the movements of your animal thoroughly to get them right. The best way to do this is put yourselves on all fours, think about how the muscles work as you move each limb and combine this with the physical characteristics of the animal. As you move think about why you are moving, what you want to achieve and what you are doing to achieve it. If I am a leopard my objective could be 'I want to bring down and kill the gazelle' and the action 'I stalk'. In this case I would need to know exactly how the leopard hunts and kills their prey. Remember if you don't do your research properly, it will be evident when you show the exercise.

The Circus Performer

Aim

To create the character of a circus performer and design and perform a circus act.

- Choose a character that performs in the circus.
- Create the before time for your character. Where you grew up, how you ended up with the circus, include a few childhood memories that led your character to joining the circus. If your character is a knife thrower, you could imagine that your father collected knives and on Sundays he would practise throwing them at a tree. Your character would watch with fascination as the knife flew through the air before imbedding itself in the tree.
- Research your character and the skills and training needed for your act.
- Decide on your character's super objective, through action and germ.
- Start to rehearse your act, decide on an objective and action, creating the given circumstances. You will need to design an impressive act to satisfy the audience, hungry to be amazed.
- Imagine what you can hear, touch, taste, smell and see. The circus big top will have very distinctive smells; you will hear music, children and families laughing.
- For this exercise you will imagine you are performing in front of a packed house. Imagine the audience all around you and how you want them to react to your show.
- Rehearse your act several times; build in the interaction with the audience and others in the ring. If you are a lion tamer you will need to imagine the lions and your relationship with them. You would train with them nearly every day and have a good understanding of their behaviour.
- You can start to think about your costume and if you are showing your circus performer to the class you can design and wear a costume.
- If you are showing your circus act to an audience remember that in the Big Top there would be hundreds in the audience and music and clowns etc.

Be creative with this exercise and really use your imagination. You could imagine the circus is in Turkey and you are a Sicilian knife thrower. As the character imagine an eventful past that led you to the circus. Create an impressive act that will thrill the audience. Think about how your character would use movement and voice to fill the whole big top. Enjoy the performance and enjoy the character, it's not every day you get to join the circus!

Glossary of Stanislavski terms

Action	What we do, as the character, to fulfill our objective.
Active analysis	A rehearsal technique where actors analyse a bit of the play 'on their feet'. The actors decide on the main event, an action for each character then improvise that bit.
Active imagination	Seeing things through our character's eyes using the five senses.
Before-time	The events leading up to the start of the play or before each new entrance your character makes. Your character's life imagined actively from your first memory up to the start of the play.
Bit	A play is divided up into manageable sections or units by the actors and director. A bit starts when there is an event on stage; the character's objectives change or a character enters / exits.
Communication	Sending out and receiving of signals between two living beings.
Event	Something that happens that affects what you are thinking and doing.
Experiencing	The state where you leave the actor behind and find the character, with everything you do being the product of your character's thoughts and actions.
Free body	The desired state for an actor, a body free from tension that can be used to create and experience a role.
Germ	The essence or seed of a character.
Given circumstance	The situation the character is in within a particular bit of the play.
Imagination	The ability to treat fictional circumstances as if they were real.
Inner monologue	The thoughts going through our character's mind.

Objective	What we as the character want to achieve within a given set of circumstances.
Magic If	The question 'what if' that the actor asks themselves to trigger of the imagination within a given set of circumstances.
Passive imagination	Seeing ourselves from the audiences point of view while on stage.
Psychophysical	The combination of what we are thinking and doing that works across the system. What we think and do working together in harmony.
Rays	An invisible current that flows between us all the time.
Relationships	The thoughts we have about others.
Subconscious	The part of the mind that influences our thoughts and actions without us being aware of it.
Super objective	<p>The theme of the play, the sum of all the objectives of the characters, it's what the play is really about.</p> <p>For a character, the super objective is what they want over the course of the play.</p>
Tempo-rhythm	Is our pace, both mental and physical, the pace of everything around us and everything we do.
Through action	What the character does to achieve their super objective.
Truthful	Acting is truthful when based on a set of given circumstances, you are thinking and doing as the character, imagining actively with a free body and a clearly walked through before time.
Visualisations	The pictures we see in our mind's eye.

Actions**Notes**

1 K Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, Routledge, translated by Jean Benedetti, 2008, Page 20

2 K Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, Routledge, 2008, Page 257

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