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'Yoga and Stanislavski: reflections on the past and applications for the present and future.'

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Abstract

Stanislavski's interest in yoga and the influence of the discipline on the creation of the System have been illuminatingly acknowledged and examined by a number of scholars. Nonetheless, an aspect that has gone largely unnoticed is that Stanislavski drew from a kind of yoga that in some crucial respects is very different from the kinds of contemporary yoga that are practised internationally today. The most important difference is the absence of established yoga postures in the manuals that Stanislavski used in his day, and the centrality of yoga postures in the practice of the discipline today. Based on this crucial difference, this paper will propose ways in which understandings of contemporary yoga can be brought into relationship with key aspects of the System. It begins by summarising the historical background to the relationship between yoga and actor training with particular reference to the position of yoga postures within 19th century literature on yoga. It then considers how ideas and practices within Stanislavski's system – such as those related to 'purposeful action', 'inner action', 'inner life', 'active imagination' and the idea of the 'monitor' - can be illuminated, accessed and challenged by approaches to the yoga postures as they have been developed in the last one hundred years. In so doing, the article, as a whole, takes as a premise the increasing demands on the young actor for performer flexibility and range, rather than specialisation, and in its conclusion will touch on ways in which yoga can act as a bridge for the contemporary actor between different models of actor training and thereby affect a shift towards possible future models.

Keywords

Yoga, Modern Postural Yoga, the System, performer training

Bios

[Dorinda Hulton](#) is Honorary Senior Research Fellow in Drama at the University of Exeter. She qualified as an Intermediate Senior Iyengar Yoga teacher directly under B.K.S. Iyengar in Pune, India in the 1970s, and has explored applications of that discipline to actor training in a variety of ways. Her research through written publication has focused on actor training as well as the creation of 'new work'; and her publication through professional practice includes the direction and dramaturgy of a series of bi-communal, interdisciplinary pieces of 'new work' with creative artists from both sides of the military border in Cyprus.

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Introduction

Stanislavski's interest in yoga and the influence of the discipline on the creation of the System have been illuminatingly acknowledged and examined by a number of scholars (Carnicke 2009, White 2013, Tcherkasski 2013). On the basis of fundamental developments in yoga practice (De Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010) as well as the ongoing evolution of the System as a form of lived practice, the question that warrants further investigation is whether contemporary practices of yoga have a place in the teaching of the System today.¹ This article begins by summarising the historical background to the ideological and pedagogical currents that shaped the development of the System and contemporary yoga respectively. It then goes on to consider how ideas and practices within Stanislavski's system can be illuminated, accessed and challenged by applications and adaptations of the yoga postures as they have been developed in the last 50 years. In so doing, it takes as a premise the increasing demands on the young actor for performer flexibility and range, rather than specialisation. In its conclusion, it touches on ways in which yoga can act as a bridge between different models of actor training and thereby affect a shift towards possible future models.²

Stanislavski's interest in yoga and the historical influence the discipline exerted on his work have been extensively researched and traced to William Atkinson, a North American lawyer, known as 'Yogi Ramacharaka', who was particularly influential in the development of New Age thought at the end of the nineteenth century. Since the similarities between Stanislavski's work and Ramacharaka's books have already been recognised, we will not rehearse these arguments here. Instead we would like to bring attention to one of the main differences between the kind of yoga that Stanislavski encountered in the nineteenth century and the kind of yoga that is widely practised today. One of the main differences, and the one we would like to concentrate on, is that practice in the postures is virtually absent in nineteenth-century formulations of yoga, whereas today, as historian Elizabeth De Michelis

observes, 'in common English usage "yoga" is "postural yoga"'.³ Indeed, at the end of the nineteenth century, yoga was presented to Western audiences as an ancient form of mind control and was very consciously distanced from the tales of yogis "hanging head down over fires and in other excruciating postures".⁴ Within this formulation, Mark Singleton observes that 'the body', 'was seen in essence to be a malleable and perfectible instrument, which through rigorous mental control, could be brought into the thrall of mind and spirit.'⁵

Yogi Ramacharaka's position in relation to this late nineteenth century ideological milieu is very interesting. On the one hand, he claimed that his teaching cultivated a 'perception of the "I" as independent from the body, the latter merely being an instrument for use'.⁶ On the other hand, as Katherine Albanese recognises 'what was new about Ramacharaka's American yoga was the body'. Nevertheless, Albanese hastens to add that 'the claims Ramacharaka made for hatha yoga seem strikingly spare and his description of asanas [yoga postures] suggests instead their continuity with simple callisthenics'.⁷ What Albanese is describing here, and what other scholars after her examined in greater detail, was the very cusp of yoga's assimilation into modernity, its development as a secular, psychophysical practice and Atkinson's central position within those developments.⁸ In a study published three years later, in 2010, Singleton persuasively argues that the curricula of yoga postures we identify and practise today are an eclectic mix of various aspects of nineteenth-century physical culture movements, such as Swedish Gymnastics, callisthenics, and bodybuilding techniques, introduced into India through the military and the YMCA, and 'various discourses of "modern" Hindu yoga' that emerged out of the Bengali intelligentsia and were then exported to the West (and reached Atkinson and his contemporaries).⁹ Whereas in North America, at the end of the nineteenth/beginning of the twentieth century, yoga was gaining ground as a universal system of mind control, in India, yoga was being re-configured as an athletic system – albeit one rooted in Hindu traditions - that could contribute to the country's struggle for independence.

An important figure in the modernization of yoga in India was T. Krishnamacharya (1888-1989), who combined ‘western and Indian modes of physical culture’ with the philosophy of Orthodox Hinduism.¹⁰ The achievement of Krishnamacharya, as well as the work of other yoga reformists, lies not only in the creation and systematisation of a curriculum, but in the development of a definitive psycho-somatic orientation that has defined the practice of yoga ever since. In the technical accomplishment that has gradually begun to characterise the practice of yoga postures, we can trace a number of developments that have since become the cornerstone of contemporary yoga pedagogy: an analysis of the postures in terms of their anatomical processes, an attendant vocabulary of terms and instructions, and an investigation into their therapeutic potential and application. In light of these origins of contemporary yoga in western systems of physical education, and in view of Stanislavski’s interest in, and use of, such systems, we would like to propose that the relationship between the System and the practice of yoga today could be seen as one of common ancestry. In other words, we would like to bring attention to the fact that Stanislavski was not only aware of Ramacharaka’s texts on yoga that were in circulation at the time; he also encountered and used the physical culture systems and their attendant pedagogies that have since formed the basis of the global yoga canon. An example of such cross over is J.P. Mueller’s *My System*, a widely read book on callisthenics published in 1904 and reprinted consecutively until the 1950s. According to Rose Whyman, Stanislavski read the book in 1907 and began to practise the exercises included in Mueller’s manual.¹¹ Equally, Mark Singleton observes the resemblance between the exercises that figured in Mueller’s system and yoga curricula that were developed at the beginning of the 20th century.¹² Based on this perspective, we would like to propose that a number of correspondences can be drawn between certain body-mind dialogues that we have identified within the contemporary practice of yoga postures, and key terms used by Stanislavski. We would also argue that these correspondences are not accidental but a result of ideological and pedagogical currents that shaped the development of the System and contemporary yoga respectively.

The System and Three Body-Mind Dialogues

Here we are concerned with three such body-mind dialogues: firstly, one that we call 'a clear order' which has a correspondence with Stanislavski's concept of 'purposeful action'; secondly, a dialogue to do with the embodiment of imagery which resonates with terms such as 'inner action', 'inner life' and 'active imagination'; and thirdly, a body-mind dialogue that we call 'double consciousness' which relates to Stanislavski's idea of the 'monitor'. Starting with 'a clear order', we use the word 'order' because of its multiple resonances: to begin with, there is a strong sense of 'order', or sequence, within the practice of the yoga postures that corresponds to the 'well founded' and 'proper logical sequence' within the System. Tortsov sums up: 'today's class has taught you that stage action must be inwardly well founded, in proper logical sequence and possible in the real world'.¹³ Then, there is also a strong sense of purpose associated with the practice of the yoga postures beyond the development of mere physical virtuosity. That is, they are invariably performed '*in order to*', and this conscious sense of purpose corresponds to the emphasis on '*reason*' within the System, i.e. Stanislavski's emphasis 'that everything that happens on stage must occur for some reason or other'.¹⁴ And finally, the yoga postures have within them a clear set of 'orders' or instructions that arise out of what might be termed a 'cognitive analysis'¹⁵ of each posture; and we would argue that practice in following these 'orders' through facilitates a key aspect of Stanislavski's principle of 'purposeful action'.¹⁶

For instance, whilst moving into the standing posture Virabhadrasana 2 (Figure 1)¹⁷ an instruction is to extend the trunk backwards in precise co-ordination with the opposite action of bending the knee forwards; and then, within the posture, to concentrate on expanding the inner body, not the outer.¹⁸ Each of these instructions needs, in the first place, to be cognitively grasped, as well as imaginatively visualised, and only then followed through at a body-mind level by the practitioner. In other words, if the intellect, together with the imagination, is clear, the body responds accordingly, as best it can, without intellectual interference. Correspondingly, as Carnicke observes in her summary of the System -- a

cognitively grasped 'objective' is used to solve a 'problem'¹⁹ and there is a consequent psychophysical effect: 'the results take care of themselves.'^{20 21}



Figure 1: Alison Hahlo in Virabhadrasana II, Photograph Peter Hulton

A second body-mind dialogue we would like to draw attention to, is encapsulated in an understanding of the term 'image' which allows for a constant toing and froing between embodiment and imagination within the practice of the yoga postures, each informing the other.²² This body-mind dialogue infuses both the detail of each posture, as well as the wholeness of each, with a kind of energy: for example, in Virabhadrasana II the action of spreading the arms can be embodied as if they are the wings of a bird,²³ and the interplay of balance between them can be experienced as if they hold the scales of justice.²⁴ This dialogue has within it, a correspondence with Stanislavski's concept of 'inner action':²⁵ the body is outwardly 'still' but at the same time, it is resonant with 'inner life'.

Further to this, Stanislavski encourages - through the figure of Tortsov - a process of giving depth and breadth to the 'inner life' of a role through developing what he terms an 'active'

imagination, that is, one which 'works on its own' without 'forcing';^{26 27} and related to this, we would like to propose that an adaptation of the lying down posture, Savasana, can be used as a basis for accessing the kind of 'active' imagination Stanislavski is asking for. Ongoing practice in the posture can ultimately lead the practitioner towards a state that is both deeply relaxed and at the same time receptively aware; and it is in this state of 'alert receptivity' that the imagination of the student actor can be guided, for instance, towards a focus on images related to the 'inner life' of a role or the development of a new character.²⁸ Within such an application, then, the process of 'guided imagination' takes place in a deeply relaxed state, and because it is accompanied by an awareness of the body that is at a literally deeper level²⁹ than the processes of 'visualisation' 'in the mind's eye', or 'aural imagination' suggested by Stanislavski,³⁰ we would argue that it potentially strengthens the actor's capacity to sustain 'concentration', through binding the imagination to a kind of deep bodily awareness.³¹

The third body-mind dialogue within the yoga postures that we would like to attend to is encapsulated in an understanding of the term 'double consciousness', which allows for a kind of 'objectivity' to be maintained whilst undertaking any action. We use the term 'double consciousness' to refer to an ability to observe or 'monitor' different aspects of embodiment, such as alignment, state of mind, breath, etc. whilst engaged in 'doing' a yoga posture.³² Correspondingly, the capacity to stand outside of a process, at the same time as being engaged within it, is central to the nexus of skills that Stanislavski refers to in his chapter on 'muscular release'. In both cases, the skill of the 'monitor' is consciously developed, but with continuous practice, it becomes 'second nature'.³³ The language that Stanislavski uses to describe this process suggests that the monitor can ultimately be experienced as a form of psychophysical awareness that seeps into and penetrates the body-mind,³⁴ just as the intention within a contemporary approach to the yoga postures is to 'spread the intelligence to each and every part of the body'.³⁵

The figures that follow depict a series of postures that can be performed in a continuous way.³⁶ In such a sequence, the practitioner is slowly attending to – monitoring if you like – the precise placement of her body, ‘the centre of gravity in each position’, the co-ordination of her breath with her movement, ‘the relaxation and tension necessary to maintain a specific position’, as well to move into and out of each posture.³⁷ The function of the ‘monitor’, then, as the term suggests is to ‘listen’, correct and adjust. It alerts the yoga practitioner, as well as the actor, to things when they go wrong and can be used to trace tension and discourage the habits that might cause it, and in so doing, as Stanislavski notes, it can facilitate the ‘creative process’ for an actor.³⁸ As such, we would argue, the monitor can be seen as a link between the execution of a physical task and the embodiment/affects/psychophysical state that the task produces. In relation to the ‘inner creative state’, for example, Stanislavski observes:

a slight hitch occurs and the actor immediately “turns his eyes on himself” to see which of the Elements isn’t working properly. Having found the mistake he corrects it. In doing so he has no difficulty in splitting himself in two, i.e. on one hand he corrects something which is wrong and on the other, he continues to live his role. The actor lives, weeps, laughs onstage but weeping or laughing he observes his laughter and tears. And it is in that double life, the balance between life and the role that art lies.³⁹



Figure 2 Alison Hahlo in Bhujangasana Photograph Peter Hulton

Figure 3 Alison Hahlo in Urdva Mukha Svanasana Photograph Peter Hulton



Figure 4 Alison Hahlo in Ustrasana Photograph Peter Hulton



Figure 5 Alison Hahlo in Adho Mukha Svanasana Photograph Peter Hulton

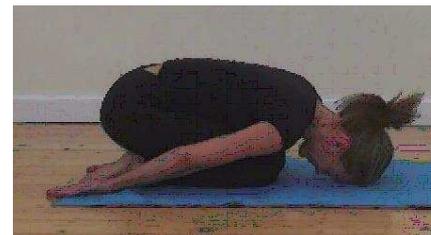


Figure 6 Alison Hahlo in Child's Pose Photograph Peter Hulton

Conclusion

One of the key areas addressed by contemporary performer training is the relationship between physicality and affect, and within studio practices this is often explored or achieved through various combinations between different models of training. In light of this, we propose that applications, as well as adaptations, of the contemporary canon of yoga postures can offer pathways towards a cultivation of action and imagination that are rooted in the body. We would further argue that within a potential future model, yoga postures could act as a bridge between different approaches, which, through a historical or discursive perspective, may be seen as contrasting or incompatible. For example, as we have already noted, a continuous sequence of yoga postures, such as the ones demonstrated in the series of photographs, could be used as a ground for training the kind of observation and monitoring proposed by Stanislavski. The sequence however also echoes with some of the yoga based sequence developed by Grotowski with the aim to train the actor's impulse and embodied imagination. As such, such a sequence could also be used as a starting point for a variety of structured improvisations, for example the 'sound and movement transformation' exercises devised by the Open Theater.⁴⁰ In other words, our proposition is that yoga postures can accommodate different inflections and thus serve as pathways into aspects or conceptualisations of the actor's work that are historically or culturally discreet. We propose this, not in order to erase these differences but in attempt to offer an embodied common ground that allows students and trainers alike to experiment with the alignments and intersections between different training approaches and thus equip the actor with the flexibility and breadth that is required by contemporary performance, as well as affect a shift towards possible future models.

Notes

¹ This article draws on, and extends, the authors' recently published DVD/booklet *Yoga and Actor Training*.

² Our primary reference is to Jean Benedetti's *An Actor's Work* (2008). The reasons we are using *An Actor's Work* as our main source are multiple. To begin with Benedetti's translation and editing work is by far the most comprehensible, accessible and accurate rendition of Stanislavski's System, which has been previously been presented in 3 separate volumes. The other reason is that we do not speak Russian and as a result we do not have access to the Russian archives from which other scholars have very productively drawn. Most importantly, however, since this paper addresses the use of the system in the studio today, we thus assume that other practitioners, like us, are most likely to use *An Actor's Work*.

³ De Michelis, *A history of*, 8.

⁴ Albanese, *A Republic of*, 350.

⁵ Singleton, 'Suggestive Therapeutics', 76.

⁶ Ramacharaka, *Raja Yoga*, 30.

⁷ Albanese, *A Republic of*, 360.

⁸ Albanese is right in pointing out that despite Atkinson's intention to provide guidance and instruction in a physical form of practice, his books provide very little information on yoga postures. It can equally be argued that the hypothesis, put forward by Rose Whyman, that Stanislavski did not practise yoga postures is historically accurate (Whyman, *The Stanislavski System*, 85). Where Albanese goes wrong, however, is in suggesting that Atkinson's resort to callisthenic exercises is an aberration from yoga practice, which presumably was already in existence.

⁹ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 5, 22

¹⁰ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 23

¹¹ Whyman, 'The Actor's Second Nature', 116.

¹² Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 118, 140.

¹³ Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 48.

¹⁴ Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 39 emphasis in the original.

¹⁵ The term 'cognitive analysis' is used synonymously with the term 'affective cognition' by Carnicke: both engage the actor with intellectual analysis and imaginative visualisation (Carnicke, 'Stanislavsky's System' 13, 14). Both these processes -- 'analysis' and 'visualisation' -- have their correspondence within practice in the yoga postures. Cognitive analysis of the postures has largely been the work of BKS Iyengar. It relates to the dynamics and alignments within them, which are inextricably bound to their sense of purpose. Iyengar also utilises the element of 'visualisation' in the yoga postures through the introduction of imagery, in order to bring 'inner life' to parts of the body, or to the whole posture.

¹⁶ These instructions provide a 'way in' to what might be referred to in the System as the postures' 'inner life'. (Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 62). We are using the term 'inner life' here because both body and mind are involved in performing the yoga postures. Stanislavski also uses the term 'inner action' to describe 'intense mental action' which may be occurring in a 'physically motionless' body (Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 40, 41,). As noted previously, 'action' is always linked to its 'inner, motivating causes' (Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 46), that is, 'action' is always purposeful.

¹⁷ Virabhadrasana 2 is from amongst the first group of postures that we propose as being helpful within an actor training context. As a group, these standing postures comprise: Tadasana, the mountain posture, Trikonasana and Parsvakonasana, two of the angled postures, and then a partner to Virabhadrasana 2, that is Virabhadrasana 1. These postures might appear deceptively simple at first glance, but for beginners the dynamics within them can be complex and challenging. Above all, the discrimination, balance and flexibility that such postures develop, require the practitioner to focus on the processes or 'body-mind dialogues' that operate within them, and avoid the temptation of forcing towards end results.

¹⁸ B.K.S .Iyengar, *Yoga Darsana*, 77, 78. There are 42 notes for this posture listed in this source.

¹⁹ Carnicke gives an example of a 'problem' that a character might have: Lady Macbeth is 'embarrassed' by her husband's behaviour in public. This 'problem' needs to be solved by 'action'. Lady Macbeth's 'action' is to 'cover up' (Carnicke, 'Stanislavsky's System' 15, 16).

²⁰ Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 43.

²¹ Stanislavski speaks of feelings (emotions) appearing 'of their own accord'. He urges his students to 'think hard about what has gone before and re-create it. Don't be concerned with the result' (Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 43). As noted previously, he speaks also of 'inner, motivating causes'

(Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 46). Carnicke summarises the process: 'the actor places full attention on carrying out the required action, with the character's emotions arising as a natural result' (Carnicke, 'Stanislavsky's System' 16).

²² It is exemplified in one of Iyengar's lesser known publications, *The Art of Yoga*.

²³ The bird image is taken from notes recorded by Dona Holleman during lessons given by B.K.S. Iyengar. The unpublished collection is entitled *Yoga Darsana London 1970-1974*. Vol. 1: *Asanas*.

²⁴ Iyengar, *The Art of Yoga*, 37.

²⁵ Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 40

²⁶ Benedetti *An Actor's Work* 64, 65, 66

²⁷ Stanislavski tells the story of his niece's favourite game 'and what if?' in order to illustrate 'dynamic action' and the need for the actor to develop an 'active' not a 'passive' imagination (Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 65).

²⁸ An extract from a workshop that examined this technique can be viewed here: <http://theatredanceperformancetraining.org/2016/03/yoga-and-actor-training-imagining-and-writing-a-character-by-dorinda-hulton-from-the-dvdbooklet-yoga-and-actor-training-by-dorinda-hulton-and-maria-kapsali-routledge-2016-dvd-filmed-and-edit/>.

²⁹ Within the posture, the focus is located at the bottom of the breast bone and just above the solar plexus. It is an interior place in the body where different psychophysical responses such as excitement, or fear, are experienced, and referred to in yoga as the body-mind's 'centre of emotions'. (Iyengar, *The Art of Relaxation*, 5). Focussing on it whilst 'actively' imagining -- for example, in relation to a set of 'given circumstances' -- encourages a connection between imagination and feeling.

³⁰ Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 79.

³¹ If the trees in a dark forest, for example, are sensed, not so much in the mind's eye, but lower down in the body, and the imagined sounds in the forest are registered in the same interior place, the psychophysical responses become arguably more 'engrossing,' and easier to retain. The 'circles of attention' become simultaneously interior and exterior: deep inside at the same time as out there, in imaginative space.

³² An ability to observe the doing in the doing is central in Indian thought and best exemplified in the image of the two birds in the Upanishads: 'two birds, inseparable friends, cling to the same tree. One

of them eats the sweet fruit; the other looks on without eating' (Mundaka Upanishad, 3.1.1 - 3.1.2). The image has primarily existential and philosophical connotations and illustrates the sense of detachment that is also pervasive in Patanjali's formulation of yoga. It has clear echoes with Stanislavski's formulation of acting as a split between full embodied experience (laughing, weeping) and its observation.

³³ Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 123.

³⁴ 'All these positions [the ones tried by Kostya and his classmate] required constant release of this or that group of muscles and an increase in the control exercised by the monitor. For that we need well trained powers of concentration, which would quickly find their way around, distinguish our physical sensations and investigate them' (Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 126).

³⁵ This is an image often used by B.K.S Iyengar and other teachers of this school of yoga.

³⁶ The proposed sequence is a shortened version of an adaptation of the hybrid sequence devised by Grotowski, known as the 'cat' (Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 154). The adaptation differs from that historic sequence in the following ways: the number of the postures has been reduced; an emphasis is placed on the 'emotional centre' of the body; text and sound can be used; and an improvisatory phase is included in the middle, sandwiched between preparatory and concluding phases.

³⁷ In this paragraph, the phrasing marked by quotations is taken from Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 127. The same instructions could well have been used in a yoga class. The similarities in the content and tone of the instructions suggest further the pedagogical links between Stanislavski's system and modern postural yoga.

³⁸ Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 120.

³⁹ Benedetti, *An Actor's Work*, 302.

⁴⁰ Here we are thinking about the potential use of yoga to allow ideas and forms from other models of actor training to come into contact with, and cross fertilise, each other. For example, Approach 6 in *Yoga and Actor Training*, combines ideas from Stanislavski (subtext, intention/objective) with ideas

from Grotowski (the sequence itself is an adaptation of Grotowski's, and so is the idea of performing it with a partner), with ideas from Chaikin ('movement action sequences' are part of the Open Theater repertoire and, in turn, surely came to the Open Theater via a Laban teacher).

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