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Beyond Realism: Into the Studio

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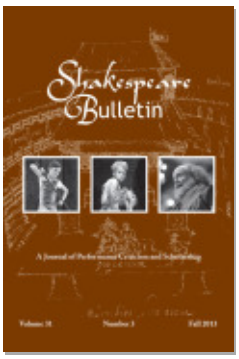

Epilogue
Beyond Realism: Into the Studio

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As a director, a teacher of actors and directors, and—most of all—as an audience member, I am often confounded by the ubiquity of realist aesthetics in the Anglophone theater. The original political force of the idea of showing life-as-it-is-lived has long since drained away, and we have somehow become trapped within its husk.[1] On the other hand, as a scholar of theater practice (and as a theater maker whose practice has been profoundly altered by that scholarship), I cannot help but be aware that the discipline in which I work owes a great debt to realism. That obligation is part of a still-greater debt to the Russian actor, director, and teacher Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavsky, whose "system" is generally acknowledged to be the first comprehensive attempt to extend the widespread understanding of the art of acting and our capacity to teach and explore it further. In these concluding thoughts to this issue, I will explore the roots of Stanislavsky's "system" in his enduring commitment to the Studio as the creative center of theater making. Drawing on this history, I will trace relationships between the principles of Studio practice and Shakespearean performance today, and consider their potential as a guide to theater artists of the future.

Stanislavsky was also, we are often told, the "Father of psychological realism" (Marowitz 57).[2] In fact, it would be more true to say that realism was a godparent to his work. Another of these—not so widely recognized as such, but no less significant—was Shakespeare. When Stanislavsky's fictionalized acting student, Kostya (who is also the bearer of the diminutive form of his author's first name) makes his first enthusiastic and incompetent attempts to impress his teacher, he does so as Othello. His performance is criticized for having neither "real feelings, rooted in

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your own nature," nor "a complete, living image from which to make an external copy," leaving only stereotypes:

> Say to any one of us "Play a savage, without thinking about it, right now." I'll wager that most people will do just what you did during the show, because prowling about, baring one's teeth, rolling the whites of one's eyes have been associated in our imagination since time immemorial with a false representation of a savage. (*An Actor's Work* 32–33)

Kostya's failure is, in part, a fictionalization of Stanislavsky's own failures with Othello in 1896, in a performance in which he found himself to be likewise guilty of empty imitation, though not of quite so crass a kind. The principal objects of Stanislavsky's imitation were Tommaso Salvini's Othello and an Arab he had met during a visit to Paris in 1895 (*My Life in Art* 143–146). The Italian actor Ernesto Rossi told him, after seeing his performance, that what he needed was "artistry" (150).

The goal of the artistry that Stanislavsky would go on to develop was the actor's creativity.[3] He sought to enable the actor's performance and the author's script to be thought of as mutually compatible forms of creative expression. As Stanislavsky put it in a 1902 speech: "the author writes on paper, the actor writes with his body on the stage" (qtd. in Benedetti 124). Stanislavsky's problem with Othello had been that he was not writing creatively with his own body in this manner, but rather following what his confidant, the philosopher I. I. Lapshin, called "vocal and visual *stencils*" (qtd. in Whyman 51). Stanislavsky's response to this problem was to develop a distinction between what he called "representation" (following a previously conceived stencil), and "experiencing," whereby (in Sharon Carnicke's gloss) "the actor creates his role anew at every performance." The latter term describes acting that, "however well planned and well rehearsed, remains essentially active and improvisatory" (Carnicke 217).

For acting to be capable of being both planned and improvisatory required a new way of conceptualizing and notating it, and Stanislavsky gradually developed the "score of action" to serve this purpose. Comparing Stanislavsky's initial failure with *Othello* to his later production plan for the play (1929–1930) reveals the significance of this methodological development. In the production score, Stanislavsky gives detailed instructions to the actors in a form which is nonetheless flexible, telling them to create a "scheme of physical actions" that underpin the text and all other aspects of their performances (152). This technique—in various forms—is still the predominant method for generating nonverbal scores for performance that do not prescriptively describe the action or "block-

ing" of a production.[4] These are intended to enable actors to function as creative artists, negotiating between the imperatives to reproduce a play with a degree of precision and to create it anew.

Such scores of action are, however, almost invariably rooted in the assumptions of realism. The characters are imagined as psychologically coherent entities with consistent narratives driven by their needs and desires, and therefore belong to the conceptual framework of novelistic realism. This framework is clearly visible from the start of Stanislavsky's production plan for *Othello*, where a pause is introduced so that the chaining-up of Iago and Roderigo's gondola does not "interfere with the lines" (14). On the same page, Stanislavsky makes reference to the realist technique of generating backstory, which he calls using "the *past* as justifying the *present* of this scene." This approach runs into obvious difficulties shortly afterwards, when Cassio appears not to know of the marriage of Othello and Desdemona. According to Stanislavsky's backstory this interpretation is "impossible" because Cassio "acted as mediator" for the pair (43), a contradiction that leads to a series of hypothetical explanations to get around a difficulty of which the author had no conception. Finally, and more seriously, the production plan demonstrates realism's tendency tacitly to convert interpretation into reality. When we read that Othello has an "animal outburst" or that Desdemona employs "semi-playfulness and coquetry," Stanislavsky's narrow constructions of racial and gender identity are painfully apparent (196, 144). When these behaviors are persuasively acted and surrounded by the paraphernalia of "reality," it is all too easy for us to allow them to join the ranks of "false representation[s]" whose uncritical acceptance Stanislavsky himself deprecated.

This imagined production exemplifies many ways in which interactions between Shakespeare and realism in the twentieth century were awkward, compromised, and bound to fail. But it also shows that these difficulties were crucial phases in the evolution of techniques which allowed theater makers to ground their work, with Shakespeare and more widely, in the concrete, living medium of performance. Moreover, to depict Stanislavsky unwittingly attempting to force the square peg of Shakespeare into the round hole of realism is to misrepresent him. In fact, despite his capacity to use the apparatus of realism when it suited him, Stanislavsky resisted its aesthetics for most of his career. He could not accept that "stage artists" had to "serve and convey crude reality and nothing more" and not "go further than the realists did in painting" (*My Life* 244). In 1905, this resistance led Stanislavsky to appoint his former colleague Vsevolod Meyerhold as director of a new enterprise for the

Art Theater: the Studio on Povarskaya Street. Meyerhold, Stanislavsky recalled, "had already discovered new ways and techniques" of going beyond an approach grounded in representational realism, and both men realized that these methods "required preliminary laboratory work" (*My Life* 244). It was Meyerhold who coined the term "Theatre Studio" to describe the space in which such work could take place, an environment which would be, he said, "not a proper theatre, certainly not a school, but . . . a laboratory for new ideas" (Leach 51).

The combination of the events of the October Revolution and Stanislavsky's diminishing confidence in the abilities of the actors in Meyerhold's Studio led him to cancel its work before it was shown to the public. Stanislavsky justified this on the grounds that it was too important to be compromised: "to demonstrate an idea badly," he wrote, "is to kill it" (*My Life* 249). Still, after his somewhat abrupt culling of it, the idea of the Studio grew in the back of Stanislavsky's mind with renewed vigor. And it was another attempt to direct Shakespeare (this time the 1911/1912 *Hamlet* on which Stanislavsky collaborated with Edward Gordon Craig) that caused the "fresh impasse, new disappointments," and "momentary despair" that sent Stanislavsky back to the Studio: "I realized that the actors of the Art Theatre had mastered some new inner techniques and had used them with notable success in the contemporary repertoire, but we had not found the appropriate ways and means to communicate plays of heroic stature" (*My Life* 297).

This crisis prompted Stanislavsky to form what came to be known as the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1912. This was a decision that had consequences far beyond the sphere of Stanislavsky's direct influence. The Art Theatre's theater-and-studio served as a model for Jacques Copeau, who referred to Stanislavsky as the "father" of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, which incorporated both a theater and a school. It also profoundly influenced the English theatrical polymath Harley Granville Barker. Barker visited Moscow in 1913, later recalling that "it was when I saw the Moscow people interpreting Chekhov that I fully realized what I had been struggling towards and that I saw how much actors could add to a play" (qtd. in Salmon 102). Barker's visit to Moscow also led him to formulate a theoretical model of practice in his 1922 book *The Exemplary Theatre*, which proposes "a playhouse company for whom performances will not be the one and only goal . . . a theatre as school, part of an institution intended for the study of dramatic art and only incidentally for its exhibition" (144–45).

Despite its debt to Stanislavsky, for Barker the preeminent exponent of such an "exemplary theatre" was Shakespeare. In his 1937 preface to *Hamlet*, he named Shakespeare "the genius of the workshop," who had learned "to think directly in terms of the medium in which he worked; in the movement of the scene, in the humanity of the actors and their acting" (31). Barker's assumptions about the mode of that performance are also colored by realism. He argues, for instance, that "the instinct of the actor is to identify himself with the character he plays, and this instinct Shakespeare the actor would naturally encourage Shakespeare the dramatist to gratify" (31). But despite the numerous practitioners who would take issue with that statement and its implicit attempt to assert as normative the cultural values of the Western post-Enlightenment, we may look profitably beyond it to see a further role played by Shakespeare in the evolution of studio practice. Not only did his plays offer a crucial test case for practitioners by exceeding the capacities of both Stanislavsky's initially realistic approach in one direction and Barker's initially literary attitude in the other, Shakespeare also exemplified studio practice because he contained within one person the twin poles of the studio's creativity: the actor and the writer.

Stanislavsky's articulation of acting—and, by extension, theater—as an artistic medium in its own right, rather than simply a meeting place for a variety of independently-existing means of expression, seems significantly to have influenced Barker's understanding of Shakespeare. But it also offered an opening for theater artists like Barker both to develop their practice according to the Stanislavskian model and to outstrip the particular contexts and assumptions of Stanislavsky's own approach. We only need look as far as Stanislavsky's pupil and assistant Yevgeny Vakhtangov for an example. According to his friend and collaborator Michael Chekhov, Vakhtangov fused Stanislavskian "reality" and Meyerholdian "fantasy" (qtd. in Leonard 43–44), a point that gives historical precedent for Paul Prescott's hunch, elsewhere in this issue, that Sam Wanamaker (whose own training was indebted to Vakhtangov, as Prescott shows) "might have relished" the Stanislavskian-cum-Meyerholdian *Measure for Measure* of the Vakhtangov Theatre in Shakespeare's Globe's 2012 "Globe to Globe" season [619]. Unlike Vakhtangov, Barker never took full advantage of the possibility of using Stanislavsky's model to go beyond Stanislavsky's practice, but the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski exemplifies its achievement more thoroughly even than Vakhtangov, whose work was abruptly curtailed by his early death. Initially, Grotowski embraced Stanislavskian practice to the point of obsession, but subsequently rejected its aesthetic

doctrines one by one, retaining nonetheless "a great, deep, manifold respect for Stanislavsky" based upon "his permanent self-reform, his constant questioning of the previous periods in his work . . . the consistent prolongation of what was essentially the same search for truth" (33). Thus Grotowski learned from Stanislavsky what he called "the technique of creating your own technique" (39).

To theorize that process, we may turn to the American philosopher John Dewey. Dewey's insistence on the basis of art in experience might be thought to confine artistic expression within realistic representation (see *Art as Experience*), but has, in fact, a very different end in mind—the articulation and promotion of artistic (that is, imaginative and practical) intelligence: "Not the use of thought to accomplish purposes already given . . . but the use of intelligence to liberate and liberalize action, is the pragmatic lesson. . . . A pragmatic intelligence is a creative intelligence, not a routine mechanic" (Dewey, *Creative* 63–64). In other words, to be genuinely creative, to bring something into existence of which there had been previously no conception, one must address problems both actively and in an open-ended environment. To do otherwise, says Dewey, is to limit creativity to a process of enacting only what has already been imagined. Formal innovation, Dewey argues, is only possible through constant methodological adaptation.

Returning to Barker's Shakespeare in the light of Dewey's theoretical formulation of "creative intelligence" draws attention to Barker's emphasis on Shakespeare's capacity to innovate without overt originality. For Barker, *Hamlet* represents Shakespeare's "recasting, in all probability, of a ready-made play" in which "the most lifelike and 'original' of his creations was a ready-made character too: the conventional Elizabethan 'melancholy man'" (*Preface* 30). Where most writers, in other words, convert unfamiliar material into familiar forms, Shakespeare's use of familiar material seems to have enabled him to devote his energy to its unfamiliar use. Barker suggests that we will discover the key to Shakespearean innovation if we reconsider the notion of "dramatic poetry" as "not primarily a matter of words, but of the poetic conception of character and action" (37). This redefinition leads Barker to as clear a statement of practical principle as he ever made: a "play's interpretation must be founded upon corporate study by the actors" (*Exemplary Theatre* 216), a statement which was as Stanislavskian as it was Shakespearean (and vice versa).

When Barker and Stanislavsky met in 1913, they devised a scheme for English actors to go and work in Stanislavsky's Studio as apprentices. The outbreak of hostilities the following year prevented this, but, a hundred

years later, two major British companies producing Shakespeare have their own Studios. The National Theatre Studio, established by Peter Gill in 1984, provides "an environment in which writers, actors and practitioners of all kinds can explore, experiment and devise new work free from the pressure of public performance" (National Theatre). The RSC Studio, established by Michael Boyd in 2008 after the example of Michel Saint-Denis's 1962–1965 RSC Studio, describes itself as "a space dedicated to the research and development of work" (Royal Shakespeare Company, "RSC Studio"). Artists are encouraged to apply with a three-page proposal for a project that fulfils the brief of "new takes on Shakespeare and classic texts" ("Studio Guidelines"). The National Theatre Studio offers about twenty-five "attachments" every year "to a variety of artists, including writers, directors, choreographers and designers." The Studio also offers courses and bursaries for directors, and undertakes "project development," mainly for work "intended for the National Theatre's main stages," as well as organizing play readings and acting as a home for the building's staff directors ("What We Do").

However, the relationship between these organizations and the principles of studio practice as developed by Stanislavsky, Copeau, and Granville Barker is questionable. Both bring artists from outside their companies rather than concentrating their efforts on the development of an ensemble from within, neither offers training to their companies (the RSC's training is run separately by its Artist Development Department), and—most strikingly—the word "actor" does not feature at all in the published descriptions of the work of either organization. Neither studio's work is "founded upon corporate study by the actors" (Barker, *Exemplary* 216) but upon the conception of projects to which actors will subsequently be attached, by which time much will already have been decided. This is standard practice in the Anglo-American theater. As Sean Holmes, Artistic Director of the Lyric Hammersmith in London, recently observed: "normally, doing a show, a lot of decisions have been made before the first day of rehearsals begins, even if you don't realize that they have." The actors, then, far from being the foundation of a production, are employed to put flesh onto a skeleton that has been devised prior to their involvement and developed by the play's "creative team."

Writer-performer Tim Crouch elaborated trenchantly upon this practice in a recent interview, recalling his experience of "working on a new play, in the process of being written":

> I never felt that I was anything other than a three-dimensional being who was needed to flesh out the stage space. . . . The writer and director would . . . have their meetings and their discussions—discussions that I was desperate to be involved in, that I had lots of thoughts and ideas about—and at no point did I ever feel my input would have been welcome . . . It was our job to physically manifest the ideas that had been tussled over by the director and the writer. . . . That was the creative team and it's interesting how that phraseology is used; the creative team does not include the actor. (Qtd. in O'Kane 90–91)

Crouch's use of the pluperfect tense to describe the generation of ideas in rehearsal is particularly revealing: the actors were presented with "ideas that *had been* tussled over." The past creates imperatives for the present as a direct consequence of the Cartesian separation of the creative mind from the manifesting body. Crouch's difficulty here is, of course, a version of the problem faced by Stanislavsky before he had developed the technique to go beyond the stenciled performances of "representation." But there is a significant difference: Tim Crouch is not describing the individual crisis of an actor, but an institutional crisis, to which an individual actor's development of technique is an insufficient response. What is required is an institutional or cultural shift.

The legacy of Stanislavsky that I have sketched here proposes a way towards such a cultural reevaluation, namely a studio-led approach to the production of Shakespeare's plays, tempering commercially-driven assumptions with an ethics of creative practice and shunning imperatives from the past in favor of responsibility to the present. Such a studio might seek for ways of scoring the action of Shakespeare's plays within a conceptual framework other than that offered by psychological realism. It might engage in what Bridget Escolme describes, elsewhere in this issue, as "putting plays on floors without first coming to conclusions about them" [704–5]. It might do so with a view to relocating Shakespeare's plays outside the frameworks of historical or contemporary realism—relocating them, in other words, conceptually, and, in doing so, finding ways of representing gender, race, and class that probe their contemporary constructions.

Shakespeare's plays are currently routinely edited and sometimes rewritten for performance, but this process almost always happens silently, beneath the rhetoric of reverence for the text. A studio might creatively reclaim these practices and expose them to audiences. Escolme's analysis of Chris Goode's *Witch of Edmonton* workshop offers a further possibility: of direct audience engagement in the processes of editing, scripting,

and staging. And it may be important to mention in passing that this apparently anti-Stanislavskian practice has a Stanislavskian precedent: there was an auditorium in the Moscow Art Theatre's First Studio, and Stanislavsky's collaborator in that enterprise, Leopold Sulerzhitsky, described the audience as the "third author" of theatrical experience (qtd. in Black 16).[5]

Enabling an audience to fulfil their proportion of the authorial function would inevitably also involve rethinking the ways in which the actors perform. Shakespeare's leading roles are widely assumed to be pinnacles of a performing career, but how might they be played by actors whose conditions of employment enabled their focus to be drawn away from an individualistic focus upon the perceived necessity to achieve "greatness" and towards collective endeavor? Such a studio might begin to discover how audiences respond to a Shakespeare play with their attention diverted from its historical status and towards its capacity to speak directly to the present. These goals are all discernible in Stanislavsky's approach to Shakespeare, even if it did not always live up to them. While it is our responsibility to reflect upon his mistakes, the essays collected in this volume and the history I have sketched here are also a call to action, a spur to us to get on with the business of making our own, living technique.

NOTES

[1]I must add the substantial caveat that, as Prescott, Kidnie and Malague demonstrate elsewhere in this issue, realism has often been used to considerable effect where it has been deliberately chosen and pursued with commitment as a strategy for engaging with early modern playtexts. Nonetheless, the weight of attention given to Katie Mitchell's productions of *A Woman Killed With Kindness* in this issue tells its own story about the rarity of these occasions.

[2]This assertion is cited by Sharon Carnicke ("Stanislavsky and Politics" 15), whose reading of Stanislavsky and his legacy here and elsewhere has done much to correct the misconception for which Marowitz's comment stands.

[3]The name Tortsov, given by Stanislavsky to his fictional teacher, derives from the Russian for "creator" (*An Actor's Work* xxi)

[4]See Malague elsewhere in this issue on Katie Mitchell's rehearsal process for an example of such gradual, collaborative and non-prescriptive scoring of performances.

[5]This quotation is taken from Pavel Markov's *Pervaia studiia MXT* (First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre), which was translated in 1934 by Mark Schmidt for the use of the Group Theatre. A typescript of this translation is held in the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts.

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