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Stanislavsky's Threshold: Tracking a Historical Paradigm Shift in Acting

By Ben Spatz

Toward the end of his life, Konstantin Stanislavsky gathered together a small number of actors to work on Molière's *Tartuffe*.¹ According to Vasili Toporkov, a member of that group, Stanislavki chose this play for its small cast and because it would allow him to prove that the acting technique he had spent a lifetime developing was not limited to the genre of realism.² This project had a different goal from that of most rehearsals: it was to be a period of "work on technique, on the re-education of the actor and the acquisition of a new method of working on oneself." Stanislavsky had no intention of premiering *Tartuffe*, and indeed the production was not mounted until after his death in 1938. Toporkov explains: "Stanislavski had undertaken his work on *Tartuffe* purely for teaching purposes, and it was accordingly conducted with great rigour and purity of method. No concessions were made to the usual, traditional rehearsal procedures."³ In addition to being an important site for the transmission of knowledge and a foundational moment in the history of actor training, this special period of Stanislavsky's work can be seen as continuation of his lifelong research in acting technique. In Toporkov's memoir, we therefore have not only an important historical document, but also one that can be used to test the notion of relatively pure research in acting technique—distinct from the more common occurrence of applied research in the context of theatrical production.

In this article, I reread Stanislavsky's work from a specifically epistemological perspective. The idea that Stanislavsky conducted research in acting is commonplace, but its implications have not yet been thoroughly explored. If the work of the Russian master teacher and director can indeed be understood as research in a rigorous sense, then we should be able to: 1) articulate the results of that research in concrete terms; 2) identify the points at which it branched off from previous knowledge; and 3) compare the new knowledge Stanislavsky discovered with that produced by others before and since. I take the position that Stanislavsky's research can be understood in relation to acting technique as a field of knowledge. This premise allows us to assess his work in terms of the development of new technique, which would then constitute a contribution to knowledge in exactly the same way as research

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in other fields. A full theorization of technique as knowledge is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to recognize that the idea of acting technique as a field of knowledge is not intended as a metaphor. Rather, I argue that embodied technique (in this case, that of acting) can be understood as a field of knowledge in the same way that history or mathematics can be. Stanislavsky's discoveries about the embodied possibilities of acting can thus be seen as heralding an epistemic paradigm shift in the sense established by Thomas Kuhn.⁴



Stanislavsky directing *Tartuffe* (1938).⁵

As Sharon Marie Carnicke observes, Stanislavsky “never envisioned his System as complete. He suggested no final answers, only various experiments. As he cautioned, ‘There is no system. There is only nature.’”⁶ In referring to nature, Stanislavsky points to a quasi-scientific dimension of his work, namely its thick engagement with material existence and in particular the materiality of the human body. This is realism not in the literary sense of a close resemblance between life and art (also called naturalism), but rather in the philosophical sense as an affirmation of the grounding of human thought and action in a necessary relationship with a world beyond the human. According to sociologist Laurent Thévenot the “realism” of any practice refers to “the relationship between human agency and material environment.”⁷ In the case of Stanislavsky’s work the relevant materiality is less that of external objects and forces than of human embodiment itself. However, I argue that the subtle tracking of reliabilities involved in embodied research is no less rigorous than that of material sciences, even if the patterns identified in the former are more complex and less constant.⁸

In searching for relatively reliable pathways for the actor—pathways that in aggregate constitute technique—Stanislavsky took on the attitude and approach of a researcher. If there is “no system” for Stanislavsky, as Carnicke suggests, this is

partly because the differences and variations between individual actors mean that no technique can ever be universally valid. For this reason, research in a field like acting technique cannot produce natural laws of the kind set forth by the sciences. But there is also “no system” because if the goal is to explore possibilities and discover new territories then the search is never-ending. As in other fields, one may encounter important and even revolutionary findings—as I will argue Stanislavsky did—but one can never produce a full account of all possible knowledge. There is always more to be known, more areas to explore. Carnicke and others have recently highlighted the diversity of Stanislavsky’s interests and the fact that he focused on different areas of acting technique in different parts of his life. Each time a generation of Stanislavsky’s students began to transform his most recent discoveries into routines, he would start up a new studio or group with which to continue his research.⁹ Thus, rather than seeing Stanislavsky’s work as a successive progression toward some ultimate acting technique, we might better theorize it as a series of related but distinct research projects in particular subfields.

Nowhere in Jean Benedetti’s translation of *Stanislavski in Rehearsal* does Toporkov use the word “research” to describe Stanislavsky’s work. It could be that the notion of research in acting was simply not available to him at the time. Yet the absence of this concept also tends to suggest a kind of finality and completeness in Stanislavsky’s findings. There is a kind of epistemology at work in Toporkov’s memoir, but it is not the one I have just proposed. Toporkov grounds his analysis of Stanislavsky’s work in the assumption that knowledge progresses from one hypothesis to another until it arrives at final, superior truths. He describes Stanislavsky’s approach as a “new, improved, more effective acting technique” and dismisses other approaches as mistakes, dead ends, or failures.¹⁰ This naïvely positivist epistemology ignores the social dimension of knowledge production, which determines the aims and uses to which knowledge is put and therefore the relative priority accorded to different kinds of investigations. Toporkov’s is precisely not a social epistemology in the sense that Wray identifies with Kuhn’s work on paradigm shifts and other recent work in the sociology of scientific knowledge.¹¹ Moreover, Toporkov’s insistence on the universal superiority of Stanislavsky’s technique is tied to the cultural context in which he wrote. As Benedetti notes, a progressive model was the required framework for art production under Stalin. Writing in the 1940s after the assassination of Meyerhold and the rise of Socialist Realism, Toporkov is “toeing the party line” when he extols Stanislavsky’s technique as uniquely valid.¹² In this context, Toporkov’s epistemological claim—“Stanislavski achieved results that were unprecedented in the history of world theatre”—should be distinguished from his parallel assertion that these results constitute a “most perfect weapon in our struggle for great ideas on the cultural front.”¹³ I argue here that Stanislavsky did in fact discover historically unprecedented areas of embodied technique. This statement has nothing to do with the claim that

what he discovered was superior to all previous technique. As Carnicke warns, we should avoid “investing the System with linear and teleological development.”¹⁴ Instead, we should see Stanislavsky’s legacy as a series of research outcomes that enrich and enlarge the field of acting technique in ways that open up new lines of investigation rather than offering final conclusions.

By the time Toporkov went to work with him, Stanislavsky was already well known for his “bizarre methods” and the “new kind of acting” he promoted.¹⁵ As Benedetti explains elsewhere, acting pedagogy at that time “consisted mainly in students preparing scenes that were then reworked by the tutor. Sometimes a student would prepare one or two scenes throughout his entire studies and would merely learn to copy his master’s tricks.”¹⁶ Benedetti further notes that in Stanislavsky’s time there was “no available language or terminology to which he could turn. Many concepts which we now take for granted such as nonverbal communication or body language did not exist. Even the notion of comprehensive, systematic training did not exist.” Toporkov’s description of his own substantial acting career prior to joining the Moscow Art Theatre adds detail to this picture, as he describes some of the greatest actors struggling to pass their own abilities along to their students. One great actor named Davydov, we are told, would regale his pupils with inspiring stories and provide insightful analysis of dramatic scripts. When he was done, his “students would rush onstage and start rehearsing, only to realise that they could not do what had seemed so simple, clear and easy a moment before. Their technique was inadequate. They couldn’t achieve even a hundredth of what their beloved teacher had so clearly explained.” Other teachers faced the same limitations. As Toporkov writes, they “could not explain to their pupils” the secrets of acting technique, “although they tried to do so with all their heart and soul.”¹⁷ These actors knew the “secrets” of acting in that they had found relatively reliable pathways through their own personal embodiment. But they had not undertaken the systematic research necessary to generalize these pathways as more widely transmissible knowledge in the form of technique. That is, they had not rigorously investigated the difference between what they actually did onstage, in order to produce strong performances on a regular basis, and what they were having their students do.

A radically new area of research is often one that branches off close to the roots of previously existing knowledge. Instead of taking existing knowledge for granted and seeking to discover new possibilities at the edges of what is known, radically new research may locate a hidden doorway or threshold and dive through it into hitherto unexplored territory. Quite often the starting point for important new research is a more thorough investigation of something that had previously been dismissed as trivial or unimportant. In the case of Stanislavsky, the crucial branching point has to do with the relationship between what actors do and what audiences see. In much of what we call performing arts, performers practice and rehearse what they intend to do later in front of an audience of some kind. This is

a direct approach to performance, insofar as the development of the performer's score works directly on perceptible dimensions of performance such as movement, gesture, and vocal quality. In contrast, Stanislavsky's most significant research begins from a recognition of the potential value of indirect technique in developing and preparing a performance. That is, acting technique for Stanislavsky came to include not just the rehearsal of that which the audience would directly perceive, but also much that would become perceptible to the audience only indirectly—for example, as Toporkov describes, through extensive improvisations of scenes that never occur in the play itself.

I borrow the notion of “indirect” technique from British sociologist Nick Crossley, who uses it to describe a kind of bodily or embodied technique that achieves its ends via the stimulation of unconscious processes. One of Crossley's central examples is the act of falling asleep, described at length by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. As Crossley observes, we cannot simply “go to sleep by deciding to do so.” This is because both falling asleep and waking up “belong to the pre-volitional aspect of subjectivity which subtends choice and decision. They are transformations of one's state of being affected by bodily processes beyond one's conscious awareness or control.”¹⁸ To reach the intended goal of sleep one must instead make indirect maneuvers that point in that direction, so to speak. In Merleau-Ponty's words: “I lie down in bed, on my left side, with my knees drawn up; I close my eyes and breathe slowly, putting my plans out of my mind... I call up the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper.”¹⁹ Outward shaping of the body in order to bring about a desired but not directly accessible inner state already recalls the actor's task and points us toward Stanislavsky's basic discovery. A second example from Crossley involving political protests offers further illumination:

Protesters may be moved to protest by very immediately felt emotional responses to events. However, whatever emotions have stirred an individual to decide to protest in the first place will have had considerable time to ‘cool’ by the time of the protest... Modern protests are not, generally speaking, spontaneous expressions of immediately felt reactions. Thus, feelings need to be rekindled or regenerated.

According to Crossley, protest rituals like singing and marching together do not simply express or represent political outrage. They are also “body techniques by and through which protesters practically understand and manipulate their collective emotional state.”²⁰ This example makes the connection to Stanislavskian acting even clearer as bodily technique is now being used to stimulate emotion and collective affect.

The distinction between direct and indirect uses of technique is more precise than that which is commonly drawn between internal and external acting technique. While the latter requires us to distinguish between the inside and outside of the actor's being, thereby reinscribing a counterproductive mind/body split, the former allows us to think in terms of the dynamic gap between a repeatable score and its intended effects. In describing how he approaches sleep, Merleau-Ponty mentions several aspects of his technique: the posture of the body, closure of the eyes, regulation of the breath, and conscious manipulation of thought. There is no need to dichotomize these by sorting them into the categories of mental and physical or internal and external. Rather, the important point is that these are all things that can be accomplished at will. In order to do them, one simply does them. The same can be said of the songs, marches, and gestures of protesters. On the other hand, falling asleep or rousing genuine feelings of outrage cannot—according to many—be directly accomplished in this way. To achieve these aims requires a more subtle orchestration of technique, one that works indirectly on and through embodiment to achieve its goals. Thus, the important distinction is not between internal and external technique but between direct and indirect uses of technique. In the context of performing arts the intended effects of the technique occur within dimensions of embodiment that are perceptible to an audience. However, the technique itself need not be directly perceptible.

There is ample historical precedent for indirect acting technique in a limited sense. Mel Gordon offers two examples of what he calls “substitution as an acting strategy,” suggesting that this technique may have a history as old as acting itself. The first example dates from classical Greek theatre. During an ancient Athenian performance of *Electra*, Gordon tells us, “the tragic actor Polus placed the actual ashes of his dead son in an urn that was supposed to contain the remains of Orestes.” In another example, from 1814, we are told that Edmund Kean “reflected upon his deceased adopted uncle when he held up the skull of ‘Poor Yorick’ in *Hamlet*.”²¹ These are both plausible, pre-Stanislavskian precedents for indirect acting technique. In them, actors do things that are unknown to the audience in order to achieve perceptible results indirectly. The audience does not know what the actor is actually doing and cannot perceive the technique directly, but instead witnesses its indirect effects. As with the summoning of sleep or rousing of emotions, the practitioner uses certain actions indirectly to stimulate embodied reactions that are not consciously accessible. Many more such examples could probably be found. Indeed, it is hard to doubt that countless performers throughout history have structured their performances in ways that were only indirectly perceptible to the audience. But how many of them treated this as a fundamental aspect of their profession? How many taught “substitution as an acting strategy” to their apprentices and disciples, not merely as a trick of the trade but as a substantial area of technique alongside movement, gesture, and vocal production?

From an epistemological perspective, there is a vast difference between using something as *a* technique and treating it as a starting point, gateway, or threshold that opens onto an entire *area* of technique. This is where Stanislavsky made a profound epistemic contribution to acting craft as a field of knowledge: he realized that the perceptible dimension of an actor's performance can be, to a great extent, an indirect effect or byproduct of an actor's largely imperceptible score. In most theatrical traditions, including those of dance and opera, it is assumed that what one rehearses should coincide with what one intends to do during the performance itself. This is a reasonable assumption, but Stanislavsky broke from it radically by developing the indirect use of technique as a major or even primary dimension of acting. Rather than seeing the indirect use of technique as a single idea, exercise, or trick he treated it as a threshold to a whole new area of technique. Stanislavsky was not satisfied to acknowledge indirect technique as a useful secondary resource or to encourage acting teachers to pay more attention to it in their teachings. He wanted to thoroughly map this new territory—to chart the previously underexplored zone between actor's score and perceptible performance—and to make this new technique widely available. The depth and rigor of Stanislavsky's inquiry into this area of technique is what made him a great researcher as well as a great teacher of acting. Grasping the fundamentally epistemic nature of his project is an essential part of understanding why his work departed so radically from prior acting pedagogy that it changed the very definition of acting.

Stanislavsky drove a wedge in between the actor's score and those aspects of performance that are directly perceptible to an audience. This was the first major problem Toporkov encountered when he joined the Moscow Art Theatre, where he found himself continually admonished by Stanislavsky for thinking too much and too early about what an eventual audience would perceive. The borderline of the perceptible is clearly at issue when Stanislavsky scolds Toporkov for trying to set (make repeatable) his movements and vocal production too early in the rehearsal process: "At best you were trying to find ways of saying the dialogue, how you would deliver your first line, when you open the window to your office, when *the part of your role the audience can see* begins. You didn't put down roots through which to feed your role."²² In this passage the metaphor of putting down roots illustrates the notion of indirectly perceptible acting technique. One perceives the roots of a tree only indirectly, through the flourishing of what is visible above ground. In such exchanges Toporkov seeks to grow the branches of the tree directly, while Stanislavsky insists that only the roots can be cultivated directly, leaving the fruit of that labor to develop naturally as an indirect byproduct.

Time and again, Stanislavsky exhorts Toporkov to explore what lies beyond the threshold of audience perception. This was a radically counterintuitive step for an actor at that time, as Toporkov recalls: "It was absorbing, fascinating, but, it seemed to me, had nothing to do with the practicalities. Of course, I can achieve certain

limited results by doing as he says, but *that's not what the audience is going to see.*" It is no wonder Stanislavsky's methods were considered bizarre since they seemed to be predicated on ignoring the audience. Toporkov was shocked to observe: "During an intensive, active rehearsal period, nobody appeared to give a thought to the end result—the performance—they *seemed to ignore the audience* who would come to see them, and, very strange indeed, they paid far greater attention to *things the audience wouldn't see.*" Instead of practicing movements and line-readings that would be directly perceived by future audiences, Stanislavsky's actors worked on various kinds of technique that Toporkov only retrospectively understood to have profound indirect effects on what the audience saw. At the time, Toporkov's confusion stemmed from the fact that he had previously conceptualized the indirect use of technique merely as a trick of the trade that could "achieve certain limited results."²³ He saw it as something that could add spice to an actor's score, but which did not deserve the kind of extensive attention Stanislavsky gave it. Toporkov had not yet realized that for Stanislavsky the indirect use of technique was the largest, most important, and most valuable dimension of acting. Far from being secondary, Stanislavsky came to see this as the only genuine approach to art, with all other pathways being merely artificial.

Stanislavsky's turn away from the audience marks a significant branching off point in the embodied technique of acting. By postponing the question of what the audience would eventually see, Stanislavsky opened the door to a territory of embodied technique that in the history of theatre as public spectacle in Europe (and the United States) had perhaps never been thoroughly explored. In the early stages of his research Stanislavsky had turned to psychology and yoga, two contemporary areas of embodied technique that he suspected might indirectly bring depth and power to an actor's performance. The best known of these experiments are those relating to "affective memory," a concept Stanislavsky borrowed from French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot (1839-1916) and which became central to the understanding of Stanislavsky in the United States. During the same period Stanislavsky worked with what he knew of yoga, drawing on sources that included the writings of Yogi Ramacharaka (the assumed name of Chicago lawyer William Walker Atkinson, 1862-1932) and the experiences of his colleague Leopold Sulerzhitsky at a Canadian commune.²⁴ Later he shifted toward what he called the "Method of Physical Actions" and then to "Active Analysis."²⁵ What remained consistent throughout these phases was Stanislavsky's emphasis on the indirect use of technique. Ultimately, what was essential for Stanislavsky was not the direct composition of a performance, or even the development of a performance through indirect means, but the interplay between different kinds of technique within the complex embodiment of the performer. In the vital gap between the actor's score and the audience's perception, "organic" reaction could unfold.

Benedetti tells us that Stanislavsky used the word organic “in its original sense as relating to the human organism, its natural functioning.”²⁶ Crossley’s examples of indirect technique illustrate this point. The person who lies down with closed eyes and calm breathing waits for sleep to arrive organically from these actions. The protesters who sing and march likewise wait for emotions—rage, love, sorrow—to be kindled through the natural functioning of the human organism. Like the sleeper and the protesters, Stanislavsky’s actor is less engaged in the composition of a perceptible performance score than in the coaxing and inviting of organic developments through indirect means. Indeed, Stanislavsky came to understand the study of acting as nothing less than a sustained investigation of the relationship between embodied technique and its indirect, organic effects. To approach acting in this way requires a significant degree of surrender on the part of the actor, who must relinquish responsibility for shaping what the audience will see. To whatever extent the actor’s performance arises organically out of an imperceptible score, it is beyond the direct control of the actor. From a political perspective this could be seen as disempowering to the actor, who is no longer in direct communication with the audience.²⁷ It is certainly very different from what is usually characterized as a Brechtian approach, in which the actor is fully conscious of the role as a medium for communication with the spectators. However, it may be more appropriate to view Stanislavsky’s focus on indirect technique as a shift in the ontology of performance toward a different kind of event that need not be any less politically astute or personally empowering. Here, instead of making a direct presentation to the audience, the actor undertakes a kind of public investigation, within which some elements necessarily remain open and unknown in each performance.

A clear example can be found in the creation of a score composed of tasks or short-term goals, a common enough technique in contemporary acting. In Toporkov’s book *Stanislavsky* gives the following instructions to an actor in *Tartuffe*: “You must hide Marianne from her cruel father. That’s what you have to do. So, how? If you use the usual actors’ clichés, you will hide her by putting out your hands behind your back and looking anxious, etc., but if you are creative, *I don’t know how you will do it*. But the main thing is ‘to hide’ her.”²⁸ The repeatable score in this example is the task of hiding Marianne. It is repeatable in the sense that the actor can try to hide Marianne again and again throughout the scene, as well as each time the scene is repeated. However, the perceptible manifestation of this task—how it is visibly accomplished—may be different every time. Thus, the score becomes perceptible only indirectly, and a degree of genuine spontaneity is introduced in the gap between the repeatable and the perceptible. This spontaneity is not fictional but absolutely genuine. For Stanislavsky, the actor should honestly not know how the task will be accomplished each time: “If you are creative, *I don’t know how you will do it*.” The degree to which the accomplishment of the task

is truly left open-ended is the degree to which one witnesses indirect rather than direct technique in action.

We might question, from this perspective, Joseph Roach's description of Stanislavskian acting technique as "a means of manipulating levels of consciousness to achieve certain specific effects on the body, especially the illusion of spontaneity."²⁹ The actor's spontaneity in Stanislavsky's approach is ideally no more or less illusory than that of anyone else. We can of course point out that the way in which an actor fulfills a task can never be entirely free or spontaneous since it arises out of a complex layering of embodied technique. Yet much of this technique has nothing to do with professional training and could better be theorized in terms of deeply sedimented bodily habits or *habitus*—for example, those of class or gender—that may affect how a given person goes about accomplishing a given task. The "illusion" of spontaneity therefore applies just as well offstage, for actors and non-actors alike. In any case, we need not think of the actor's reactions as arising from pure agency or free will in order to be fascinated by the organic unfolding that occurs between the task and its perceptible manifestation. The question of how a given task will be enacted (for example, how exactly "to hide her" will manifest physically) then becomes a genuine exploration of identity and being through the embodiment of a specific performer. Ultimately, such spontaneous and organic developments in performance were of such interest and value to Stanislavsky that he was willing to dismiss all other approaches to acting as irrelevant to the pursuit of art.

The degree to which control is surrendered and unpredictability introduced into the actor's process can vary tremendously. In the example just given Stanislavsky seems to imply that there are countless ways to accomplish the task, all of which are permissible. Yet in the work on *Tartuffe*, and in his own work as director and actor, Stanislavsky did not leave such enormous room for unpredictability in performance. Although he worked extensively with open-ended improvisation, he also continually returned to a desire for structure, precision, and craft. Stanislavsky was not interested in presenting truly improvised performances, in which the entire score is subterranean and what the audience sees is left radically open. Rather, Stanislavsky looked for ways to weave together the perceptible and the imperceptible in an actor's score, so that what the audience saw could be reliably composed and at the same time involve a certain degree of genuine spontaneity. I mentioned above that the difference between external and internal or perceptible and imperceptible technique is not the same as that between direct and indirect uses of technique. This point becomes crucial when we reach the heart of Toporkov's memoir, in which Stanislavsky makes a fascinating turn back toward perceptible technique that is nonetheless used indirectly to stimulate the actor. This is the "Method of Physical Actions."

Following the epistemological framework established above, I do not argue

that the method of physical actions is the final result or greatest achievement of Stanislavsky's research.³⁰ Rather, I make the more constrained and epistemologically rigorous argument that this technique constitutes a clearly framed and historically unprecedented research outcome. As Toporkov describes it, the method of physical actions is a way of developing a performance score based on the relationship between the imperceptible thoughts, intentions, and feelings of the actor and their perceptible movements and vocal utterances. Unlike the embodied technique of affective memory or yogic "rays of energy," which Stanislavsky had previously investigated, the technique of physical actions does not proceed only in one direction, from the imperceptible to the perceptible. Instead, it works in both directions at once, or alternates quickly between them. At all times, however, the goal in this approach is to use technique indirectly to stimulate organic responses rather than directly to compose a performance.

We can see how this might work in the case of the task mentioned above: "to hide her." During the course of successive improvisations this task will give rise to different physical movements, different possible ways of executing it, each of which will be visible to an observer. At a certain point, one of those ways (one particular "choice") will be selected and set as part of the actor's score. The next time the scene is done it will not be the imperceptible task "to hide her" that is repeated but the chosen and perceptible movement sequence. However—this is the crucial point—in Stanislavsky's method of physical actions, the question of which movement choice to set will be determined by reference not to a future audience but to the organic reactions of the actor. In other words, when a perceptible movement is eventually set, this will not be because it worked in the sense of fitting into an overall audience-oriented composition (for example, by conveying the meaning of the story or creating a strong stage image), but only because it is expected to provoke a fuller organic engagement on the part of the actor. Only when the physical movement is deemed more deeply engaging for the performer than the previously assigned imperceptible task will it be inducted into the repeatable score. On this basis, Toporkov draws a distinction between "expressive movement representing action," which is set because of its perceptible qualities, and "genuine" psychophysical "action," which is set because of how it affects the actor.³¹ Understood in this way, that is a clear-cut technical distinction.

If my description is accurate, then the method of physical actions is defined neither by painstaking work on highly detailed, perceptible movements, nor by the open-ended commitment of the actor to accomplish certain tasks, but by the relationship between these two and the organic reactions that take place in the gap between them.³² Functionally this means that the actor continually weaves and layers multiple kinds of technique in creating the repeatable score: movement technique, tasks that can be accomplished in various ways, imaginative associations, and more. Some of this layering may be directly perceptible to the audience, but

much appears only indirectly through the unfolding, unconscious reactions that Stanislavsky called organic and which he prized as the highest achievement of acting craft. The purest version of the method of physical actions would include only two kinds of perceptible movements: those intended to provoke organic reaction and those resulting from organic reaction. Both aim to accomplish something indirectly. In the first case, perceptible (“external”) movements are intended to indirectly provoke an emotional, imaginative, or energetic engagement in the actor. In the second, imperceptible (“internal”) technique manifests organically as perceptible movement through a spontaneity that is not illusory. For Stanislavsky, setting up feedback loops between perceptible and imperceptible technique was ultimately more interesting than composing for an audience. This does not mean that Stanislavsky never asked his actors to incorporate movements simply because they looked right or “worked” from the outside. But it does seem that, during the work on *Tartuffe*, he strove to go as far as possible in the opposite direction, to the point where even the rooms in the rehearsal space “were not to be allocated with the performance of a dramatic episode in mind, but in response to a genuine, real-life question of how to divide up a house with twenty rooms.”³³ In this case, even the marked location of a potential future audience was erased so as to avoid influencing the movement of the actors and ensure that they developed their scores as purely as possible through the method of physical actions.

I have elaborated this technically dense example in order to clarify the importance of conceptualizing technique as a network of branching pathways through the materiality of embodiment rather than as a flat array of choices.³⁴ In choosing to study how imperceptible technique can give rise to perceptible performances, Stanislavsky opened up what had previously seemed like a single trick (or *a* technique) and discovered inside it a vast territory worthy of sustained exploration. This is research: not metaphorically but literally the exploration of a clearly framed area of knowledge and the discovery of relatively reliable pathways through a zone of material existence. In addition, my discussion of Stanislavsky’s approach to physical action has aimed to show how an epistemological perspective can explicate the value of one kind of technique without implying that it is universally superior to other kinds. For Stanislavsky (and for many who followed, from Strasberg to Grotowski), the search for organic or indirect uses of technique came to exceed its epistemological significance—the discovery that such things are possible—and take on much greater aesthetic, moral, and even spiritual meaning. Rather than seeing physical actions as a new and fascinating area of technique, Stanislavsky heralded it as the only honest and legitimate way of acting. He rejected what Toporkov calls “expressive movement representing action” as if it had nothing to offer actors, a dead end in the branching networks of technique. This amounts to a policing of disciplinary lines, in this case between acting and dance, mime, or any other area of embodied practice that works extensively with the

direct perceptibility of the body. In effect, Stanislavsky redrew the border around acting even as he expanded the field, by defining true acting in opposition to the structuring of movement and voice with spectator perception in mind.

From this perspective, Stanislavsky's radical turn away from what had previously been understood as the craft of acting—the direct composition of what the audience saw and heard—may offer a key to understanding the development of acting and actor training in the twentieth century more generally. For in focusing on the gap between the repeatable and the perceptible, teachers of acting have since begun to include yoga, martial arts, meditation, and many other kinds of embodied technique that previously would not have been associated with acting (at least in European-influenced contexts). Arguably, everything that one has experienced in life, from childhood to adulthood to just five seconds ago, may be indirectly perceptible in one's actions. The repeatable, if it is not required to be directly perceptible, is synonymous with technique itself, and so every kind of embodied technique can now theoretically be seen as preparation for acting. Psychology, physical culture, religious ritual, and even the technique of everyday life are part of what an actor brings to performance. This recognition heralds the “paradigm shift” that I have claimed Stanislavsky's work provoked. Stanislavsky's discovery that performances can be developed indirectly—for example, by practicing scenes, actions, and exercises that may never be directly witnessed by spectators—separates modern acting from more directly composed forms like dance, opera, and melodrama. For Stanislavsky genuine art begins to resemble yoga, therapy, and ritual in the sense that the fruit of its labor is a kind of organic flowering that cannot be directly rehearsed. The repeatable score, as Toporkov emphasizes, is only a “means to an end.”³⁵ Acting in this sense is not at all a composition of perceptible forms. It is rather an investigation of the relationship between the repeatable and the perceptible, and therefore of the phenomenon of performance itself.

While the perceptible is the specific issue of the performing arts—their domain, their definition, their problem (as in a research problem)—Stanislavsky discovered that it need not constitute the boundary of performance technique. Even as he policed the borders between acting and other more “artificial” genres of performance, Stanislavsky reconnected acting to the much larger field of embodied technique that exists outside theatre. “This is no longer theatre,” he declared. “Don't think about the audience, there isn't one, it does not exist as far as you are concerned.”³⁶ Far from being tied to an aesthetics of realism, Stanislavsky's work should be understood in the context of a radical expansion of acting technique in the twentieth century. His passage through the threshold of indirect technique laid the necessary groundwork for subsequent developments and investigations, from Strasberg to Grotowski and beyond. We must therefore not see Stanislavsky's achievement as a single technique or method that can be practiced. Instead, we should recognize in his legacy a body of research, at the root of which is a basic discovery about

the possibilities of human embodiment that sparked what eventually became a significant paradigm shift in the performing arts. For this reason his work remains extremely valuable for any attempt to understand acting technique as an area of knowledge and ongoing research.

Notes

1. In this essay I use the more commonly accepted spelling *Stanislavsky*—which was preferred by the man himself—except where it appears as *Stanislavski* in the translations of Jean Benedetti. See Lawrence Senelick, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters* (New York: Routledge, 2014) xiv; R. Andrew White, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Stanislavsky* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 6.

2. Vasily Toporkov, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, trans. Jean Benedetti (New York: Routledge, 2004) 104.

3. 154, 114.

4. While Kuhn's ideas of "paradigm change" and "theory change" developed over the course of his life and writings, I use the concept of paradigm here to refer to a basic model or set of assumptions that allows for increasingly specialized research. A shift in paradigm may discredit or render obsolete previously existing specializations, while simultaneously opening the door to new ones. For a treatment of Kuhn's work, see K. Brad Wray, *Kuhn's Evolutionary Social Epistemology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 48-64, 118-127. For an expanded application of social epistemology to embodied practice, see Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* (Routledge, forthcoming). Joseph Roach also draws on Kuhn's notion of the paradigm in *The Player's Passion* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) 13-15, 113-14. Roach is primarily concerned with how paradigm shifts in science affected how theorists and practitioners of different eras understood the acting technique of their times. In contrast, I apply social epistemology directly to acting technique as a field of knowledge in its own right.

5. Still from a film of Stanislavski Directing *Tartuffe* (Moscow, 1938), "una edicion Hugo Omar Viggiano" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARe_ZZ-wqZE> (accessed 11 August 2014). The grainy quality of the image is suggestive of the archival distance that separates us from Stanislavsky's practice, yet something of the director's character is evident in this old recording.

6. Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2009) 66.

7. Laurent Thévenot, "Pragmatic regimes governing the engagement with the world," in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, eds. Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (New York: Routledge, 2001) 64.

8. Manuel De Landa uses "tracking" to describe the subtle artisan work of metalsmiths in *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 1998) 26. The term "tracking" in the title of this essay has two meanings: I am tracking a historical paradigm shift through a close reading of Toporkov. Stanislavsky was tracking a new paradigm of embodied possibility in the work of his actors.

9. Carnicke 51.

10. Toporkov 101.

11. Wray 170-72.

12. Benedetti in Toporkov 41n2.

13. Toporkov 162-63.

14. Carnicke 188.

15. Toporkov 8-9.

16. Benedetti in Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, trans. Jean Benedetti (New York: Routledge, 2008) xvii.

17. Toporkov 2-3.

18. Nick Crossley, "Ritual, body technique, and (inter)subjectivity," in *Thinking Through Rituals*, ed. Kevin Schilbrack (New York: Routledge, 2004) 42.

19. Cited in Crossley 42.

20. 48.

21. Mel Gordon, *Stanislavsky in America* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 54. Gordon does not provide the sources of these stories. The earlier anecdote can be found in Eric Csapo and William J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995) 264. According to Aulus Gellius (ca. 180 AD), the ancient actor "took his son's urn from the grave and, embracing it

as the urn of Orestes, filled everything about him not with representations and imitations, but with real living grief and lamentation. The audience was deeply moved to see the play acted this way.” Thanks to Judith Milhous for locating this source.

22. Toporkov 18; italics added.

23. Toporkov 19, 20-21; italics added.

24. Carnicke 167-84; Gordon 9.

25. Carnicke 189-202. Carnicke includes the work on *Tartuffe* as part of Active Analysis. I am less concerned here with the (contested) distinction between these two phases or labels than with their technical and epistemic content as it appears in Toporkov’s book.

26. Benedetti in Toporkov xi.

27. For examples of actors dealing with the effects of this potential disempowerment, see the essays by Derek Mudd, Micha Espinosa and Antonio Ocampo-Guzman, and Victoria Anne Lewis in Ellen Margolis and Lissa Tyler Renaud, eds. *The Politics of American Actor Training* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

28. Toporkov 111; italics added.

29. Roach 206.

30. I choose not to capitalize “method of physical actions” in order to reiterate that it is an area of knowledge, with porous boundaries, rather than a singular product.

31. Toporkov 110.

32. For a related discussion of physical actions in the Stanislavsky-Grotowski lineage, see Mario Biagini, “Meeting at La Sapienza or, On the Cultivation of Onions,” *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies* 52.2 (Summer 2008) 158–64.

33. Toporkov 116.

34. The idea of technique as a depthless set of options or choices might be called the “toolbox” approach to acting pedagogy, in contrast to an epistemology of technique that acknowledges both breadth and depth (or horizontal and vertical) dimensions. I further develop the metaphor of branching pathways in Spatz, *What a Body Can Do*. For two diagrammatic illustrations of this metaphor, one from social epistemology and the other from theatre history, see Wray 125 and Jonathan Pitches, *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting* (New York: Routledge, 2006) frontispiece.

35. Toporkov 110.

36. Toporkov 122.