

Teaching Philosophy – Theater Studies
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I incorporate the Stanislavsky System into my teaching of academic theater. Originally a tool for actors, the System requires imaginative engagement with the “given conditions” of a make-believe play universe where performers behave based on answers to the question “What would I do if I were in those circumstances?” For encounters with the history of theater and performance as well as dramatic literature, I encourage my students to do what I also tell my actors, “stand with your back to the event,” and thus imagine themselves as participants in the historical process without the benefit of hindsight. This willful blindness to the “future” results in a rich engagement with the material, an experience where imagination and critical thinking skills are valued and honed. What would it have been like to have been there and to have been moved by a production, not as yourself, but as an Athenian veteran of Marathon watching Aeschylus’s *Persians*, for instance, or a Restoration lady watching *The Rover*? This is a heavy responsibility for both teacher and student for it means not just tracing a chronology but understanding and trying to feel the transformative power of important milestones in theater history in their original contexts.

Using the System requires students to enlist imagination, emotions, and empathy and to use these reactions to augment the purely intellectual engagement with the material afforded by consideration of scholars’ critical reflections. Respect for difference, it seems to me, comes from identification with others, or at least sincere attempts to entertain another’s point of view. Along with enabling students’ identification with actors, characters, audiences, the represented, the mis-represented, and the unrepresented in performance throughout history, the application of the System makes it possible to bring the material of theater studies alive, to make it more immediate and engaging.

Therefore a crucial element in my teaching is bringing the past to life and helping students to engage with it directly with their whole beings. Along with engaging students’ eyes and ears through lectures, discussions, pictures, video clips, films and live productions, I also stress the kinetic and somatic engagement that comes from speaking the poetry and realizing bodily the dramatic situations under consideration in class. My approach stresses the development of students’ intellectual and critical faculties but also allows for and presupposes an emotional connection with the material. I feel that the learning, acculturation, and coming of age that takes place during college years happen most felicitously when all aspects of the human mind are engaged: analytical and emotional, contemplative, and dynamic.

Learning terms and techniques of the System, such as an actor’s given conditions, scenic task, and through-line of action, will give students practical tools to approach performance history and dramatic literature. The usefulness of these methods for theater majors—actors and directors, foremost, but also designers and others involved in theater making—is obvious. Even non-majors should all be able to analyze both individual roles from an actor’s perspective and an entire work from a director’s viewpoint. Students will be afforded numerous opportunities to develop and exercise appropriate analytical skills in discussion, written responses, papers, and group projects.

Another element of my treatment of theater history and dramatic literature is the notion that stage action works differently in different times and places. Dramatic conflict can be based on the collision of systems of social organization, such as Antigone’s archaic clan loyalty versus Creon’s emergent sense of civic duty in Sophocles’s play, for instance, which defined the nature of dramatic action in Greek tragedy according to S.V. Vladimirov. Dramatic action, in its subsequent iterations, can also issue from collisions between the individual and society, within an individual, and so on. Only by understanding how the concept and mechanism of “scenic action” has evolved over time can actors, directors, critics, and audiences intelligently and creatively engage the plays of yesterday in the theater of today.

Therefore, a discussion of how dramatic conflict has developed through the ages as a reflection of humankind's changing understanding of the relationship of the individual and the group, forms of social organization, and various philosophical and moral questions will be a "through-line" in my presentation of course material. I stress the connections between art and its societal context and encourage students to begin doing the same.

Thus, students begin to understand the contingent nature of "success" in the performing arts, to see examples of specific productions, performers, and works that resonated with certain audiences at certain times, and why and how this was so. This helps students to see plays and productions, authors and actors, styles and periods from outside of their own, often narrow, tastes and preferences and begin to understand theater and performance history and theory both more objectively and with a deeper appreciation for its diversity. A situated, contingent approach to dramatic literature and performance history gives students not only an understanding of the importance of specific events in theater history, it also gives them a palpable sense of various aspects of historical change, that tastes, beliefs, customs, social relationships, and so on, are not fixed but dynamic, created by people and shaped by historical contexts.

An example of contingency for students to consider is a consideration of the first two productions of Chekhov's *Seagull*: the 1896 disaster at the Aleksandrinskii Theater and the triumph in 1898 at the Moscow Art Theater. What factors doomed the first and made the second an epochal production? By providing details about actors, directors, audiences, the playwright, and their interrelations, students can draw their own informed conclusions, to be measured in written responses and discussion, about how the same play could be received so differently in its second incarnation.

Another assignment to further the understanding of contingency is to have each student choose a play, a style, or a period that does not appeal to them and then have her nonetheless argue a case in favor, perhaps by taking the point of view of an imagined audience member of a contemporaneous production who in that student's "imaginary universe" responds favorably to the spectacle in question.

Evaluation will be based on distance covered: how much and how far the individual student travels from first class to last in learning to apply her whole being to the subject based on regular written responses in the form of journal entries, class participation, discussions, tests and quizzes.

A potential pitfall of my approach, which stresses identification and emotional response to the material, is the distinct possibility that issues of social justice, which are present throughout the history of performance and drama, will surface, sometimes in volatile fashion, and need to be addressed. This necessitates a sensitive, conscientious approach and a commitment to facilitating multi-cultural discussions. Fortunately, I have this commitment and know how to realize this approach in the classroom. Therefore, the tenets of teaching for social justice are an important element in my teaching strategy. I incorporate notions of fairness, inclusiveness, active listening, and multi-partiality in the conduct of my classes and in the approach to materials, introducing these values where possible into course content and our consideration of it.