**Innovative Practices: Stanislavsky Directs Chekhov and Gorky**

Maria Shevtsova

Stanislavsky was an amateur, although anything but a novice, when Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko contacted him to discuss the possibility of founding a new type of theatre.[[1]](#endnote-1) He had a considerable number of acting and directing achievements behind him with the Society of Art and Literature, which he had established in Moscow in 1888.[[2]](#endnote-2) Nemirovich-Danchenko was an esteemed playwright whose now forgotten *The Worth of Life* won the prestigious Griboyedov prize in 1896 over *The Seagull* by his friend Anton Chekhov; and while he prided himself on being a literary man, he was also a teacher of acting at the Moscow Philharmonic School. As is well known, the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) was born from their eighteen-hour deliberations in 1897 on what, exactly, they would expect of a new professional theatre without the clichés, posturing and rhetoric dominating professional Russian theatre practice.[[3]](#endnote-3)

**Two Opposing Approaches to Directing**

Nemirovich-Danchenko had persuaded Chekhov to allow the Art Theatre to stage *The Seagull* after its humiliating flop at the Aleksandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. In fact, its failure was due to a misunderstanding in that the play had been billed for a benefit and, since such occasions generally anticipated lightness of tone, it was performed as an outright comedy. This did not sit well with Chekhov’s subtle composition, and the actors overacted, caught in their uncertainly as to what kind of play it was and how it was to be performed. Chekhov was loath to repeat the experience, especially in a fledgling venture like the Art Theatre, despite Nemirovich-Danchenko’s reassurances as to *The Seagull*’s literary merits, on the one hand, and Stanislavsky’s experience as a director, on the other. *The Seagull* was the last production of the Art Theatre’s first season in 1898, and its novelty was evident. The play was of an unclassifiable genre, and the stage work was nothing like anything audiences had seen before. Irrespective of the production’s various weaknesses­ – including Stanislavsky’s and Maria Roksanova’s performances as Trigorin and Nina Zarechnaya ­­­– the actors were less forced and more natural, and they worked towards a harmonious whole in which the stage design and all other scenic elements were integrated.

*Uncle Vanya* (1899), followed by *The Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), both of which Chekhov wrote especially for the Art Theatre, obliged Stanislavsky and the actors to work in unaccustomed ways even more. Chekhov’s story lines were not clear-cut, links between causes, effects and consequences were tenuous, and dialogue appeared fragmented – at times inconsequential and, at others, simply disconnected. His revolutionary dramaturgy relied on mood rather than event; on impression and association rather than firmly etched action; on the ambiguity of emotions rather than explicit passions. Furthermore, its social and historical markers were allusive and so a far cry from the accurately detailed *Tsar Fyodor Ioannich* by Alexey Tolstoy, which inaugurated the Art Theatre, or the no less explicit *The Sunken Bell*, reprised from Stanislavsky’s earlier production of Gerhart Hauptmann’s play for his Society to close the MAT’s first season. It is smallwonder that, faced with Chekhov’s innovations in *The Seagull* for the very first time, Stanislavsky did not know by which end to begin.[[4]](#endnote-4)

It is not that Stanislavsky’s theatre experience had deserted him, but that it was challenged, and his initial bewilderment fed Nemirovich-Danchenko’s belief that Stanislavsky had little knowledge of literature. Indeed, this was the assumption on which the two men had agreed their division of labour for the MAT, which was to cause friction in the near future: Nemirovich was in charge of literary decisions­ – the choice and interpretation of plays and discussion of them with the company – and, in the event of Stanislavsky’s disagreement, he had the veto on them; Stanislavsky had the upper hand on matters of staging, on which he had a corresponding veto. In actual practice, their blueprint did not work out quite so neatly, especially as Nemirovich–Danchenko began to overstep the boundaries of his remit.

Stanislavsky had gone along with Nemirovich-Danchenko’s assessment of his alleged literary deficit, but his production plan for *The Seagull*, as later for the remaining plays of the Chekhov quartet, showed a fine instinct for textual analysis when it was to be put to use on the stage. Nemirovich-Danchenko was suitably impressed, writing to Chekhov that the blocking was ‘very bold’;[[5]](#endnote-5) later, he extolled Stanislavsky’s ‘fiery and highly gifted imagination’.[[6]](#endnote-6) In the meantime, when rehearsing the play while Stanislavsky continued to work on the ‘score’ – the term Stanislavsky used rather than ‘plan’ – he tempered anything that might interfere with the half tones he deemed to be quintessentially Chekhovian.

*The Seagull*, then, was an initiation into a dimension that *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* were to expand but which Stanislavsky had not previously encountered; that, in fact, no one at the MAT had met before, not even Nemirovich-Danchenko who may well have seen the literary value of *The Seagull* immediately (as he was to see it in all of Chekhov’s plays, with marked reservations about *The Cherry Orchard*) but whose full scenic potential he had not grasped, unlike Stanislavsky who had, and quickly, while he was writing the score. In other words, embedded in the MAT’s deep engagement with Chekhov were two opposing directorial approaches that would soon encompass Maksim Gorky’s very first plays *The Petty Bourgeois* (*Meshchanye*) and *The Lower* *Depths*, both mounted in 1902.[[7]](#endnote-7) By the end of the Chekhov and Gorky period – Chekhov died in 1904, while the last MAT Gorky première was *Children of the Sun* in 1905 ­– the divergence between the two directorial approaches was more than clear.

Their divergence can be put simply. Stanislavsky’s premises were those of an actor–director while Nemirovich-Danchenko’s, for all his hands-on work with the MAT actors as a director, were those of a writer–director for whom the word as such, the author’s word, pre-empted and determined staging. As a consequence, the author’s word had priority over any scenic needs perceived by a director or, for that matter, by an actor. Stanislavsky’s croaking frogs during Treplev’s play-within-the-play in *The Seagull*, for instance, or the scraping sound of a mouse during Masha and Vershinin’s unspoken avowals of love in *The Three Sisters* irritated Nemirovich-Danchenko beyond measure: they were Stanislavsky’s fanciful additions to the author’s texts – ‘caprices’ was Nemirovich-Danchenko’s word. For Stanislavsky, by contrast, invented details like these, much like cuts in dialogue or repetitions of phrases, were devised by and for the theatre, which had to be identified by its integrity as a unique, separate but not autonomous, art.[[8]](#endnote-8)

This did not mean that Stanislavsky downgraded the text and its precisions and complexities as such. On the contrary, as his scores show, he paid close attention to dramatic texts, developing his scenic vision from them. What Stanislavsky’s approach indicates is his concern with the non-said beneath and beyond the words on the page (he was to call it the ‘subtext’) and how this could be communicated through body language ­– stance, gesture, movement – and through sound, light, colour and other sonic and visual means. The latter group also materialized the words on the page by denoting (or only implying), time, place, situations, circumstances and social conditions, all of which provided more than a stage setting: they suggested the feeling, atmosphere and innuendos of the not-said, and, too, of the not-done, like the invisible love affair between Masha and Vershinin. The strongest outward sign of their love was the sound of ‘tram-tam-tam’, made joyfully in Stanislavsky’s production. Stanislavsky’s appeal to the sensory expression of meanings that were generated by performance, however excessive this expression may have been (Chekhov famously derided the abundant sound effects of *The Cherry Orchard*), was always motivated by his sense – a sixth sense – of the stage.

In the case of *Uncle Vanya*, both Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko put the production before their differences. Stanislavsky’s actor-and-performance perspective and Nemirovich-Danchenko’s author-oriented one converged in *Uncle Vanya,* creating such a unison of mood and tone not only between the actors’ performances but also between them and the entire stage composition that even Aleksandr Kugel, the MAT’s harshest critic, barely found fault with it.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Stanislavsky had contributed to the success of *Uncle Vanya* by his sterling performance of Astrov, but he had also resorted to his ‘caprices’ by writing vignettes into the production that were not to be found in Chekhov’s text. Take this one, for example. When Serebryakov and his wife prepare to leave the estate in Act IV, he kisses everyone including his wife, forgetting that she was going with him. No sooner does he realize his mistake than he waves it away with his hand. Stanislavsky saw possibilities for humour in a situation that, in the closing scene of Act III, was fraught with tension, and he had suggested these actions to the actor in the role. As Marianna Stroyeva observes, embroidered moments such as these had introduced a comic tone not obvious in *The Seagull*, and this brought a new awareness that Chekhov’s characters were capable of stoic resistance against their suffering instead of submitting to it.[[10]](#endnote-10) Stanislavsky’s insight allowed him to heighten the resilience and hope filtering through Sonya’s closing speech.

Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchehko’s respective positions on directing throw into relief the seminal practices of the MAT’s Chekhov–Gorky period and just how much they had overturned the theatre conventions of their time; and they were to affect world theatre throughout the twentieth century and the twenty-first. These two factors, the one internal to the MAT’s definition of itself in Russia and the other external in its inspiration, impact and influence outside Russia, need to be recalled since, having made history, the MAT’s pioneering actions for the modern era can all too easily subside into history, and be taken for granted, or forgotten.

What were these innnovative practices? First of all, the MAT established the principle of a theatre’s close artistic collaboration with writers. This new theatre understood that it could not sustain its claims to newness without contemporary material; nor could its box office survive on classics alone. It found a contemporary playwright in Chekhov, as it was to do in Gorky, a popular prose writer whom Chekhov had convinced to write plays for the company. Second, the MAT fostered its relationship with these writers to ensure that it received a succession of fresh scripts capable of encouraging the company’s creative growth – a model that the MAT attempted to maintain during the turbulent 1920s and 1930s, with mixed results. Chekhov quickly became the house playwright, which the MAT hoped Gorky would also do (this did not eventuate), and the bond between the company and its dramatist, who wrote parts in *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry* *Orchard* with specific actors in mind, had a twofold effect: it stimulated the MAT’s commitment to ensemble acting, as well as its efforts to perform in that seamless, free flow which, in several years to come, Stanislavsky would define as ‘organic’. Gorky’s plays for the MAT, although of a different character to Chekhov’s by their plebian milieu and front-on depiction of social reality, as Gorky knew it, sustained these goals.

The third innovative practice, then, of the Chekhov­–Gorky years concerns acting. A new theatre required new actors, and Stanislavsky looked to the development of the MAT actors as he questioned his own way of acting whilehe came to grips with the vanguard drama of his day. The process for Stanislavsky, as he went from Astrov among the intelligentsia of *Uncle Vanya* to Satin among the disenfranchised, the poor, the outcast, and the homeless of *The Lower Depths,* was one of learning how to embody the everyday life (*byt*) appropriate to given protagonists and endow them with believable emotion. The everyday was peculiar to the new drama ­– also in other countries of Europe, Henryk Ibsen’s version being particularly familiar to Stanislavsky ­– and the theatrical ‘tricks’ that, to Stanislavsky’s mind, were nothing but cheap tricks were wholly inadequate for the unassuming tasks of truthfulness set for the stage when everyday life appeared on it.

It is from Stanislavsky’s search for a transparent theatre that emerged the fourth decisive practice ­– that of the modern director, the orchestrator–conductor who pulled all the strands of a production together, as in a symphony, necessarily involving all the players at work. Stanislavsky had garnered his directorial experience at the Society for Art and Literature, largely in the tyrannical style of Ludwig Chronegk, who had commanded the company of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen.[[11]](#endnote-11) His vision of the MAT as an ensemble company called such antecedents into question. Further, his encounter with Chekhov’s and Gorky’s plays gradually forced him to reassess the very nature and purpose of his production plans, which, essentially, told actors what to do and when to do it. He began to ascribe to the director the role of equal responsibility, above all with actors, for the work they generated together. And this reversed the old prototype of the potent individual who, alone, made and answered for a production.

Meanwhile, Nemirovich-Danchenko had learned how to write production plans from Stanislavsky, and he was convinced that they were indispensible. But Stanislavsky rebelled – openly in 1903 during rehearsals of Ibsen’s *The Pillars of Society*, which followed Nemirovich-Danchenko’s plan. He argued that he did not want the ‘tone and tempi of the whole act’ to fill the actors’ head before they went on to the stage, and that some plays, at least, could do without decisions being made by a director beforehand.[[12]](#endnote-12) The actor in Stanislavsky had already ‘intuitively felt’, when he wrote his own production plans, that they ‘constrained an actor’s creativity because everything was given in advance’.[[13]](#endnote-13) In 1905, he came into conflict once again over production plans, as much with himself as with Nemirovich-Danchenko, and let the problem drag on until 1908, after which he generally wrote only notes and reflections of varying length on the productions he had in mind, or which he already had in hand with the actors. Crucially, the actual directing developed in conjunction with the actors on their feet, playing. This was the basis of his method of *etudes*, which Stanislavsky developed continually over the years for actors, finely connecting it to the processes of directing for directors, especially in the 1930s through his Method of Physical Action.

It took Stanislavsky his confrontations with Nemirovich-Danchenko to turn himself into a new type of director, but, until then, he followed the straightforward procedures that they had adopted. While Stanislavsky was busy writing production plans, Nemirovich-Danchenko rehearsed the Acts he had already received, anticipating the next ones to appear. Stanislavsky, when freed from acting, also took rehearsals, readjusting scenes that his partner, when in disagreement with him, had adjusted. This arrangement meant that the distribution of rehearsals was uneven: for instance, in December 1898, shortly before the opening night, Nemirovich- Danchenko ran fifteen rehearsals for *The Seagull* while Stanislavsky only had nine.[[14]](#endnote-14) There had been preparatory rehearsals in the summer, and there were coaching sessions with individual actors, as happened when Nemirovich-Danchenko monitored Stanislavsky in the role of Astrov to make sure that, having played Trigorin tepidly, he do not repeat his mistake. None of Stanislavsky’s chorus of critics, least of all Chekhov, who disliked his interpretation of Trigorin, appeared to have considered that Stanislavsky had taken the character’s own words about his lack of will to the letter. Ironically, he had paid *too* much attention to Chekhov’s literary precisions. He was to learn as a director–actor, with the accent now falling on ‘director’, that, call it ‘mirror-performance’ – a listless character played listlessly ­– was not necessarily viable theatrically.

The two men’s direction by relay was pragmatic, but it was not tuned in collaboratively, as it was originally meant to be, precisely because of the discord between them regarding directing. However, what Stanislavsky had lost in Nemirovich-Danchenko, he had gained in his designer Viktor Simov, his veritable production collaborator throughout these intensive years of discovery. It was with Simov that he showed part of the lake in *The Seagull*, opposing Chekhov’s opening stage direction, where the lake is out of sight. Again, he and Simov rejected Chekhov’s symmetrically placed shrubbery and generally symmetrical view, choosing, instead, a multi-layered design that suggested the simultaneous occurrence of disparate actions in which the spectators of the-play-within-the play could have their back to the audience and, at the same time, appear to be an extension of that audience while being actors on a stage. Laurence Senelick comments with amusement on the ‘crude daubs of Simov’s landscape’ and cites Chekhov’s quip about the lake (‘Well, it’s wet’.).[[15]](#endnote-15) Even so, Simov’s design facilitated the work of the actors in a daring scene that exposed Chekov and the MAT to an audience that was testing both of them.

Stanislavsky’s continuing collaboration with Simov was the fifth innovatory practice of the MAT’s early years, foreshadowing the cooperative director-and-designer model of the theatre of the future. In Russia, that model was to be taken to a higher level by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Treplev in *The Seagull* and Tuzenbach in *The Three Sisters.* Meyerhold, it could be said, was a born director. Stanislavsky, by contrast, learned to be a director and did so through being an actor: he saw directing with the eyes of an actor; he directed actors through his intimate knowledge of acting and actors. This may go some way to explaining why he never trained directors formally, but only ’trained’ them by example as he guided them as actors, passing to them the practice of theatre through his practice, as a grand master does to his pupils in instrumental music or the martial arts.

**Scores*: The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard***

The example below from the score of *The Seagull* shows how Stanislavsky visualized the play in performance: visualization made his scores imaginative extrapolations from plays rather than mere illustrations of them.[[16]](#endnote-16) Stanislavsky places Chekhov’s text beside his own adumbrations, in parallel, on separate but adjacent pages. Here they are placed in adjacent columns. Numbers are in bold to facilitate cross-referencing for the reader.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The extract comes from towards the end of Act III, when Arkadina and Trigorin are about to depart. In the preceding piece of dialogue, Trigorin had entreated her to stay another day and then rapturously declared his love for Nina. After a short exchange, Arkadina asserts, ‘You are the last page of my life!, and goes down on her knees to him. This is what follows.

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| **Chekhov’s text**  TRIGORIN: **106** Someone may come in! (*Helps her to get up.*)  ARKADINA: **107** Let them come. I’m not ashamed of my love for you! (*Kisses his hands.*) My dearest treasure, why do such a desperate thing? You want to behave like a madman, but I don’t want you to. I won’t let you… (*Laughs.*) **108** You’re mine – mine!... This forehead is mine, these eyes are mine, this lovely silky hair is mine! ... You’re all mine. Oh, you’re so gifted, so clever. You’re the greatest of all our modern writers. You’re Russia’s only hope… You have so much sincerity. Simplicity, freshness, healthy humour… With one stroke of your pen you can express what is most significant and typical of any person and place. Your characters are wonderfully alive. One can’t read you without delight. You think I’m exaggerating? Flattering you? **109** Well, look into my eyes!... Please, please!... Do I look as if I’m telling you lies? Well, you see! I alone know how to appreciate you, I alone am telling you the truth! Oh my darling, my precious darling!... **110** You will come with me, won’t you? You won’t leave me, will you?  TRIGORIN: I have no will of my own… I never had one… Listless, flabby, always submissive. No! No woman can possibly care for a man like me! Take me away with you, carry me off, only for heaven’s sake don’t let me out of your sight for a single moment! **111**  ARKADINA (*to herself*): **112** Now he’s mine! (*Cheerfully, as though nothing had happened.*) **113** But of course if you like, you can stay. I’ll go by myself and you can join me later. In a week perhaps. Why, indeed, should you be in such a hurry?  TRIGORIN: **114** No, we had better go together. | **Stanislavsky**  **106.** Trigorin tries to free himself from her embrace, but Arkadina holds onto him more firmly than ever.  **107.** Speaks in the tone with the sort of pathos usually employed in melodrama.  **108.** Trigorin collapses helplessly in a chair. Arkadina drives home her advantage with still greater force. Trigorin sits like a dummy, without even attempting to defend himself.  **109.** Arkadina flings herself on her knees before him, holding up her face to him to force him to look at her.  **110.** Searches for Trigorin’s eyes. Arkadina has now turned completely with her back to the audience, while Trigorin, sitting in a chair, faces the audience.  **111.** Arkadina throws herself on his neck, a long kiss, then she gets up.  **112.** Arkadina (as I see it) having got up, passes her hand through his hair, i.e. tousles his hair, and while doing so, she says in an aside, ‘Now he’s mine’.  **113.** Gazes at him triumphantly from above and holds out her hand to him to be kissed.  **114.** Trigorin shakes his head silently, staring motionlessly in front of him: he has now entirely gone to pieces.[[18]](#endnote-18) |

First – a warning. All the exclamation marks in this extract, all *thirteen* of them, have been inserted by the translator, which suggests that he has taken Stanislavsky’s ‘melodrama’ above literally, allowing punctuation to imply that the scene is melodramatic. Moreover, the translator has deleted Chekhov’s only exclamation mark (‘One can’t read you without delight!’), which ‘justifies’, in Stanislavsky’s sense of the word to actors, Arkadina’s disclaimer to Trigorin that she is flattering him. Apart from justifying Arkadina’s words and emotions, the exclamation mark draws attention to her sincere admiration for Trigorin’s talent: the dialogue in Russian, which is far more sobre because it is without exclamation marks, allows this interpretation. Then, to boot, the translator adds the line, ‘Please, please!’(with an exclamation mark), which does not exist in Chekhov’s text but which, again, slants the scene towards melodrama and imposes the translator’s view on the reader. The suspension points above are Chekhov’s.

Such problems of prejudicial translation aside, Stanislavsky’s visualized body language for Arkadina and Trigorin (Stanislavsky’s glossaries 109-11) echoes the exaggerations not only of melodrama, but also of the farces he had enjoyed performing as a youth, before his ten years with the Society. Stanislavsky further accentuates this perspective by his shift of sequence at 112, when he turns Arkadina’s ‘Now he’s mine’ (the Russian without an exclamation mark) into ‘an aside’­– an old melodramatic trick. In this way, he counters Chekhov’s ‘*to herself’*, which indicates that Arkadina makes a quiet comment under her breath. In addition, Stanislavsky’ s invented intimate gesture for Arkadina (she ‘tousles his hair’), while she utters her aside, brings down her great emotional crescendo.

This very same moment clinches the image built up of her as a manipulative woman: note ‘triumphantly’ and how she gazes, in a position of domination, ‘from above’. Yet, at the same time, her manipulative manoeuvers go hand in glove with her genuine love for Trigorin. The physicality of the scene also shows a collapsed Trigorin. Observe how Stanislavsky implies Trigorin’s traumatic sense of loss, expressed ‘silently’, inwardly, ‘entirely in pieces’. Stanislavsky sees whatever may be melodramatic, comic or farcical about Arkadina in relation to a serious crisis worthy of high drama. With this drama – deadly, by the end of his score – he creates a melodic base line for his entire composition.

There are no records to show how far the actual production deviated from the envisaged one on paper, but it is certain that, in rehearsals, both Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky adjusted playing according to how it worked among living actors in real time.[[19]](#endnote-19)

**Exercises**

Keep in mind that Stanislavsky subsequently repudiated production plans. The purpose here is to go through the discipline of writing one so as to gather your thoughts as you stimulate your imagination by visualization. How you, as a director, share your intuitions, guesses and ideas with your actors depends on how you work with them and how they shape and share their own visualizations with the acting group. The aim is not to imitate Stanislavsky but to take some cues of perception and method from him so that you are observing Stanislavsky and learning skills from him, as did the directors and directors-to-be by his side.

It would be interesting to start with the selected extract before you choose your own. The questions below may be useful prompts. Chekhov’s suspension points are mini-pauses, consonant with the gaps he marks by the word ‘pause’. It is well known that Stanislavsky sought musicality in outer *and* inner action and that he composed tempi-rhythms by amalgamating the silence of pauses ­– ­counted precisely throughout *The* *Seagull* in seconds, each having its own duration ­– with spoken and other sounds. The whole, in its musicality, functioned like a score (hence this term for his production plans).

1.Write the score of suspension points in Arkadina’s speech, articulating her inner states of being. Can her love for Trigorin be heard together with ­– in counterpoint with? in tension with? in contradiction with? – her determination to win him? How would your notation of her varied emotions form (musical) themes for this scene and for your envisaged production as a whole?

2.What are the dynamics between Arkadina and Trigorin? Is the actor obliged to be guided by Trigorin’s account of himself as ‘flabby’ and always submissive? Stanislavsky was attacked for playing Trigorin in a ‘flabby’ way. What kind of Trigorin would not collapse in his chair? How would you direct your actor to ‘go entirely to pieces’ differently from Stanislavsky’s solution?

3. The extract goes into a diminuendo at Chekhov’s stage direction, which says ‘a pause’. During this pause, which allows Trigorin and Arkadina to calm down, Trigorin writes something in his notebook. Dialogue resumes for a few more lines. It shifts gear when Shamrayev enters, announcing that he has provided horses for the carriage. Chekhov’s stage direction right here is sparse, but Stanislavsky, by contrast, imagines the hustle and bustle of a crowd of servants gathering at the bottom of the stairs: Yakov brings down the last suitcases, the servants begin to line up, and so on.

Direct this shift with less motion and noise, perhaps with none at all. How and why does your alternative change the atmosphere of the preceding ‘bits’ (*kuski* ­–­ Stanislavsky’s habitual term), where Trigorin is first in ‘pieces’ and then pulls himself together by writing a note? Does your alternative affect the sequence that starts with Trigorin’s ‘Someone may come in’? That ‘someone’ could have been Shamrayev.

Stanislavsky may initially have been unsure of *The Seagull*, but he had no qualms whatsoever about *The Cherry Orchard*. For various reasons, Nemirovich – Danchenko left him to direct it virtually on his own. Rehearsals, however, did not come easily, especially those of Act II, which seemed to be monotonous, devoid of any action that could excite spectators. Yet the company must have found their cue to the second act in Stanislavsky’s long account of its landscape – titled ‘mood’ in his production plan ­– given how lyrically one critic, a regular at the MAT, spoke of there being ‘something wonderful, aromatic, charming, musical and thoughtful about this marvelous picture of a summer evening’.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Below is the shortest of fragments from Act II. The sun is about to set on this ‘summer evening’. Charlotta, Yepikhodov, and Dunyasha, have gone off, one by one. Enter Ranyevskaya, Gayev and Lopakhin. Yasha is told to leave shortly before this fragment. Lopakhin tells Ranyevskaya to lease her cherry orchard for ‘summer cottages… and you will be saved’. He has told her this ‘every day’.

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| **Chekhov’s text**  RANYEVSKAYA: **46** Summer cottages and summer people – forgive me but that is common.  GAYEV: **47** I completely agree with you.  LOPHAKIN: **48** I will weep, or scream, or have a fainting fit… **49** I can’t stand it any more…You have worn me out (*to Gayev*) **50** You’re an old woman! **51**  GAYEV: **52.** Who?  LOPHAKIN: You. You’re an old woman. **53** (*starts to go*.) **54** | **Stanislavsky**  **46.** Uncertain, timid.  **47.** Quickly and confidently. He is even happy.  **48.** He spits uncouthly on the ground in despair. Here his peasant origins are suddenly evident. He is standing on his knees, pulls at his hair, beats his breast, his voice even chokes. In short, this is some sort of very powerful but ridiculous display of temperament.  **49.** Gets up quickly, throws his head back nervously. Goes and picks up his hat (where he was sitting, that is, to the left of Gayev).  **50.** Has picked up his hat.  **51.** Walks across.  **52.** He is now going to be hurt.  **53.** Even more harshly, having stopped by Gayev’s right side.  **54.** Goes off. [[21]](#endnote-21) |

Note Stanislavsky’s extrapolations from Chekhov for charting movement, which provide a meticulous choreography for Lopakhin.

**Exercises**

1. Stanislavsky elaborates Chekhov’s description of setting considerably for the sake of ‘mood’. Visualize your setting (and discuss with your designer) so that it is not just a static backdrop against which the actors sit (as they all do at specific moments during this short ‘bit’), but is an environment to help them to act, and their characters to interact with each other.

2. Direct this fragment, keeping in mind Chekhov’s reminder to Stanislavsky that Lopakhin had ‘fine hands’ (Trofimov’s words in Act IV).

**Gorky: Focus on *The Lower Depths***

Lopakhin, upwardly mobile, is closer, in terms of social origins, to Gorky’s characters than to Ranyevskaya; and Stanislavsky, on recognizing the great difference of social milieu in *The Petty Bourgeois* looked for the signs of a different dramaturgical organization to guide his directing. He found several in the openly noisy squabbles and unrestrained violence of the Bessemenov household, as well as in Gorky’s affirmative vision of Nils, who, although not gentrified, was definitely not coarse or vulgar. Nils was not socially mobile, nor had he found freedom. He was a presentiment of freedom, of that new human being whom Gorky was to evoke in *The Lower Depths*. Stanislavsky perceived Gorky’s sentiment and, in both his score and production, highlighted the good buried in the narrow-minded and mean-spirited majority of Gorky’s universe. With this, he did away with evil villains in one stroke, while not quite espousing the ‘tramp romanticism’ for which Gorky had become known through his prose and was now transposing to his drama.

Such drama was uncommon in the Russian theatre, and Stanislavsky appears to have implemented a new, two-tiered directorial approach for *The Petty Bourgeois*. On one level, he merged the particular and the general`: the production foregrounded *this* human being but invoked humanity at large. On the other, secondary level, he indicated, but did not explore, the conflict between contradictory social and moral forces of profound interest to Gorky.[[22]](#endnote-22) Stanislavsky’s usual impulse was to soften sharp edges, so he did not delve into Gorky’s revolutionary pursuits. The authorities feared otherwise. As a result, when the MATpremiered *The Petty Bourgeois* in St Petersburg, as part of its tour to the city, the police manned the theatre, expecting sedition. Tension was high. Students called for revolution from the gods, but revolution waited for 1905. In any case, Stanislavsky was averse to tendentiousness in art, leaving even the staid critics of Moscow dissatisfied with his focus on *byt*, which, to their mind, was overburdened with picturesque detail at the expense of the play’s serious concerns.

*The Petty Bourgeois* was a critical and public failure. *The Lower Depths*, following nine months later, was a success. However, it suffered from a similar disjunction between social life reduced to the mundane and social life understood as a struggle in which the dispossessed were mired and dehumanized. There was no exit from these conditions other than death (the Actor) or *ex machina* disappearance (Luka); and Gorky saw Luka as a ‘swindler’. [[23]](#endnote-23) Neither Stanislavsky nor Nemirovich-Danchenko was prepared to take up Gorky’s advocacy of radical social change. As a consequence, neither fully grasped the political drive behind Satin’s monologue-like speeches (Stanislavsky played the role), which come in Act IV, after Luka vanishes. Here, waiting for maximum impact towards the end of the act, Gorky provides a revolutionary counterpart to Luka’s benevolent humanism, quashing this humanism with its rhetorical power. Gorky’s theatrical strategy appealed to Stanislavsky the director as much as the aria-like structure in Act III between two separate voices – first Luka’s perorations, then Satin’s long replies. Even so, Stanislavsky toned down the debate incipient in this structure, subsuming it under the measured cadences of philosophical reflection.

Gorky’s play asks what it is to be human, and several lines of Satin’s first would-be monologue respond to the question. Thus a human being is ‘truth’, whereas ‘a lie justifies the weight that crushed a worker’s hand, and it blames the man who is dying of hunger’; and a human being is his/her ‘own person, independent, not eating somebody else’s bread’. [[24]](#endnote-24) Stanislavsky’s parallel commentary in his score notes that Satin is sitting on a table, and is ‘drunk-inspired. One feels a talented human being – a drunken cabaret orator’. The rest of his commentary pictures an attentive group of people in a calm, rather than inebriated, scene.

Satin’s second ‘monologue’ accelerates the argument of the first. His third is meant to be a climax, a *tour de force* pivoting on three main points: ‘a human being is free’; a human being is ‘you and me and them… all rolled into one’ (my suspension points MS); a ‘hu-man be-ing – its magnificent! It rings… so proudly! A hu-man be-ing! A human being must be respected! Not pitied, not humiliated with pity.’[[25]](#endnote-25) Stanislavsky’s commentary for most of Satin’s speech centres on Satin’s qualities: he speaks with ‘kind feelings’; he is ‘sincere’; he ‘has a great deal of love, and a sense of the beauty in people. You can feel an artist in him’. Elsewhere in Act IV, when Satin’s lines are short, Stanislavsky indicates that he speaks ‘affectionately’ ‘gently’ or in a’ good-humoured’ way. There is nothing in any of this about grandstanding, let alone political conviction.

**Exercises**

1. Stay with Stanislavsky’s remarks about Satin and see where they take you and your actors as regards the relation between Luka and Satin and their views.

2. Modify Stanislavsky’s remarks according to your own impressions and observe how your directorial changes affect the way the actors deliver the Luka-Satin debate.

The MAT had great difficulty in finding the right ‘tone’ for *The Lower* *Depths*, ‘tone’ having become its mantra with its Chekhov productions. Worse still, ‘tone’ did not seem to be the right mantra. Gorky’s was a fundamentally discordant play with its emphasis on psychological and physical abuse, Satin’s seemingly abrupt change of character in Act IV, Luka’s preaching to lost souls (Gorky had not presented him as a ‘swindler’ to the company ­– rather, the reverse), and the Luka –Satin polemic, which looks like Gorky’s afterthought, since he had started out with Satin’s defense of the old man to the assembled ‘cattle’ (Satin’s word). It is enough to bedevil any director, let alone one attuned to Chekhov, as Stanislavsky had become. Stanislavsky lovingly wrote Chekhovian-inspired depictions of ‘mood’ and ‘atmosphere’ into his score for *The Lower Depths*. But, while the actors used them in rehearsals to help them, they overplayed the protagonists, and Stanislavsky leaned on his ‘old methods’ of ‘intensity, inward tension, etc.,’ until Nemirovich-Danchenko pointed out to both the actor *and* the director in Stanislavsky that what was required was a ‘*lightness* of touch’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Wearing his director’s mantle, Nemirovich-Danchenko further advised that the actors needed to ‘declare’ their lines, rather than go inside their characters, and stand outside them, as if they were commenting on them. [[27]](#endnote-27)

Stanislavsky fully accepted Nemirovich-Danchenko’s advice and, between them, they produced an acclaimed production. Yet Nemirovich-Danchenko ‘s observation about standing outside the characters was acute for another reason. It foreshadowed the idea of *ostraneniye* adopted by Meyerhold, which, in Bertolt Brecht’s practice, became *Verfremdungseffekt.* AndBrecht’s affinity with Gorky is legion. Stanislavsky was not to follow the directorial line of distancing techinique, but what he had learned from it was beneficial after 1905 and, again, after 1917 for the tasks he had set for himself and the MAT’s ascent to glory.[[28]](#endnote-28)

1. I am indebted to the Leverhulme Trust Research Award for giving me the opportunity to undertake research necessary for this chapter. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Konstantin Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, trans, and ed., Jean Benedetti (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 89-158. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid.,158-64. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko of 10 September 1898, *Stanislavsky ­– A Life in Letters*, selected, trans. and ed., Laurence Senelick (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Quoted in Olga Radishcheva, *Stanislavsky i Nemirovich-Danchenko: istoriya teatralnykh otnosheny, 1897-1908* (*Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko: A History of Theatre Relations, 1897-1908)* (Moscow: Artist. Director. Theatre, 1997), 61. Translations from sources cited in Russian here and below are mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. S.D. Balukhaty, *The Seagull Produced by Stanislavsky*, trans. David Magarshack (David Dobson Ltd: London, 1952) 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gorky’s *Meshchanye* hasbeen translated variously into English as *The Petty Bourgeois, Small People* and *The* *Philistines.* [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For development of this vital point, see my section on Stanislavsky in Christopher Innes and Maria Shevtsova, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 62-76. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. K.L. Rudnitsky, *Russkoye rezhissyerskoye iskusstvo, 1898-1917* (*The Russian Art* *of Directing*, *1898-1917*) (Moscow: GITIS, 2014), 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Quoted Ibid., p.102. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 113-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in Radishcheva, *Stanislavsky*, 269. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. Radishcheva’s commentary. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For complementary material, see my other examples from *The Seagull* and more detailed commentary than is possible here in *The Cambridge* *Introduction to Theatre Directing*, 68-74. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Note that Stanislavsky starts from ‘1’ on every page, whereas Magarshack’s translation (as cited above and used here because the non-Russian reader can access it) numbers them consecutively for each Act. I have deleted ‘Miss’ from ‘Arkadina’, but have otherwise kept the translation intact. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Balukhaty, *The Seagull*, 234-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Deduced from observations scattered throughout Radishcheva’s book, several based on testimonies and memoires. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Moskovsky Khudozhestveny Teatr v russkoy teatralnoy kritike*,

    *1898-1905* (*The Moscow Art Theatre in Russian Theatre Criticism*),(Moscow: Artist. Director. Theatre, 2005), 402. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Konstantin Stanislavsky, *Rezhissyerskiye ekzemplyary K.S. Stanislavskogo, Tom 3, 1901-1904* (*K. S.* *Stanislavsky’s Production Plans, Vol.3, 1901-1904*) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1983), 348-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. This view, *grosso modo,* appears in M.N. Stroyeva, *Rezhissyerskiye iskaniya Stanislavskogo, 1898-1917* (*Stanislavsky’s Directorial Search, 1898-1917*) (Moscow: Nauka, 1973), 91-3 *.* [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Quoted Ibid., 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Rezhissyerskiye ekzemplyary K.S Stanislavskogo, Tom 4, 1902-1905* (*K. S.* *Stanislavsky’s Production Plans, Vol 4, 1902-1905)* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1986), 466-67, including quotations from Stanislavsky’s plan. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 484-85. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Jean Benedetti, selected, ed. and trans., *The Moscow Art Theatre Letters* (London: Methuen Drama, 1991), 140-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Quoted in Stroyeva, *Rezhissyerskiye iskaniya*, 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. See my forthcoming book *Rediscovering Stanislavsky*, Cambridge University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)