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/ STANISLAVSKI

Stanislavski and his Acting System: An Attempt at Psychological Verification

Agata Dziegieć | Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University in Kraków
Krystian Barzykowski | Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University in Kraków

The creator and reformer of the turn-of-the-century theatre, Konstantin Stanislavski, created one of the most famous acting systems still in use today. In An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary, Stanislavski presented a comprehensive set of recommended practices for stage creation, which he developed based on years of observations. The artist also showed that in order to better understand how one should act on stage, it would be good to make use of psychological knowledge, which was not widely available to him at the time, also due to the fact that psychology as a scientific discipline was only just being formed at the time. This paper is an effort to integrate selected aspects of Stanislavski's system with contemporary psychological research. The paper focuses primarily on introducing the issues of memory together with the most important classifications thereof. It also develops the issue of 'emotional memory', which Stanislavski wrote about, in an attempt to interpret the category of memory created by the artist in the light of available terminology and psychological research.

Keywords: Stanislavski's system; Konstantin Stanislavski; emotional memory; psychology of memory; autobiographical memory; cognitive psychology; cognitive conception of emotions; psychological basis for acting

Introduction

The subject of this article is the system of Konstantin Stanislavski, created at the turn of the 20th century and currently considered one of the most important sets of acting methods and techniques (Piskorska, 2018). The Russian director, founder and creator of the Moscow Art Theatre (MChAT), wrote down his advice for actresses and actors in a series of publications, including *The Actor's Work on Himself* and *The Actor's Work on a Role* – books that contain an explanation of his methods. Stanislavski's system gained importance especially in the second half of the 20th century, becoming the basis for the performances of artists such as Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner of the American method of building film characters, known as Method Acting (Kołacz, 2017). In Poland, the work of the founder of MChAT was an important source of inspiration for theatre artists such as Jerzy Grotowski, Jerzy Jarocki and Krystian Lupa (Guczalska, 2011). Today still, Stanislavski's system remains a topic that leads to discussion and steers stage practices – as evidenced by the Stanislavski Studio acting school established in Warsaw.[1] Beata Guczalska (2011) suggests that, in the context of Stanislavski's system, we can mention three dimensions of its message: aesthetics, technique (two categories indicated by Grotowski) and worldview. Starting with the latter – understood as the meaning and purpose of theatre and the art of acting – it is worth quoting the words of Stanislavski, who wrote that in stage work it is crucial to: 'create the "life of the human spirit" of the stage character and present this life on stage in an artistic form' (1953, p. 27). The creator of MChAT organized his system to these aspirations. In view of the task set before the actor in this way, the broadly understood knowledge of the human actor, understanding his psychological processes seems essential, and is referred

to by Stanislavski as ‘engines of psychological life’. Following this idea, one may conclude that psychological knowledge should be an adequate point of reference to check and verify the potential effectiveness of the methods and techniques suggested by Stanislavski. Stanislavski himself referred to psychology (as it was available to him at that time). He mentioned that, in *The Actor's Work on Himself*, he would use scientific terms such as ‘subconsciousness’. At the same time, however, he emphasised that his understanding of the categories belonging to a field other than acting would, unfortunately, be pedestrian, common. As Stanislavski pointed out: ‘It is not our fault that science disregards stage creativity, that this creativity remains unexplored and that we have not been given the words needed in everyday practice’ (1953, p. 8).

Such a call by Stanislavski, even if it is an expression of regret, also draws attention to the fact that the creator was aware of the importance of scientific work (including empirical research) for the development of the art of acting. It should therefore be emphasised that Stanislavski, when building his system, tried to use the knowledge available to him from the fields of biology and psychology of the time. In *The Actor’s Work on Himself*, the creator of MChAT referred to the works of his peer, the researcher Théodule Armand Ribot – a teacher of philosophy and professor of experimental psychology at the Sorbonne. Ribot believed that memory was a biological phenomenon (Nalbantian, 2013). He saw it primarily as mechanical repetition and looked for neural connections that might be responsible for this process. In this connection, Ribot was primarily interested in possible malfunctions of biological mechanisms responsible for remembering, which he studied and described in his 1881 work *Les Maladies de la Mémoire* (*Diseases of Memory*). It was he who formulated the principle related to the phenomenon of retrograde amnesia, known today as Ribot's law. Stanislavski

was also inspired by Ivan Pavlov, a researcher very significant in the development of psychology, including contemporary psychology (Zaorska, 2010).

Pavlov, the author of the theory on the process of shaping unconditioned reflexes, also wrote about types of the central nervous system, distinguishing, among others, the artistic type. Stanislavski used this concept, considering that for stage artists it is particularly important to develop and use visual memory, understood as the ability to create or extract visual images from memory in response to verbal material (e.g. the text of a play, stage dialogue).[2] Looking more broadly at the development of psychology in Russia at the turn of the 20th century, one can see that Stanislavski's work echoes the understanding of this discipline at that time. At the end of the 19th century, psychology in Russia (as in other European countries) was close to philosophy, and scientists dealt with problems such as free will or human nature (Sirotkina, Smith, 2012). The angle of exploring and attempting to define that latter topic is also visible in Stanislavski, who referred several times to issues around it, e.g. in the area of control that we can exercise over ourselves and our internal processes (Stanislavski claimed that only nature – and not we ourselves – controls part of our mental processes; 2010). At that time, experimental psychology and physiology were also beginning to develop in Russia, which had an impact on the recognition of the importance of the brain for mental processes. For example, Ivan Sechenov wrote an important work combining both of the aforementioned disciplines, in which he showed that thought is an action which does not end with the motor movement phase. It is also worth adding that Sechenov inspired Pavlov, to whom Stanislavski referred. Perhaps the focus on action (physical, but also so-called internal), which the creator of MChAT presented in his system, was supported by the knowledge of Sechenov's works as well.

This work is therefore an attempt to respond to Stanislavski's call to include stage creativity in the realm of scientific considerations and to provoke systematic reflection on acting activity using the language appropriate to psychology. Adequate recognition and presentation of relevant psychological research (especially in cognitive psychology) will allow for the practical verification of Stanislavski's system, i.e. checking whether and/or under what conditions it can effectively support the creative process of actresses and actors.

We are not aware of any Polish work that closely examines Stanislavski's system from such an application-verification perspective. The system is therefore used more or less consciously and more or less selectively. As Agnieszka Marszałek (2011) has shown, in Polish reality, Stanislavski's system is often learned along the lines of 'Chinese whispers', that is, it reaches many people, but from indirect and therefore potentially distorted sources. In the theatre and film environment, Stanislavski's work is present and is commonly referenced, despite the fact that few have become familiar with works such as *The Actor's Work on Himself*. At the same time, there is no analysis of the psychological mechanisms that Stanislavski (to a large extent) correctly observed, assessed and employed in his system. In our opinion, such a status quo may be related to the lack of a unified acting method based on verified and potentially effective assumptions of Stanislavski's system. It is not our goal to evaluate this state of affairs; we only want to show that it is possible to create a psychological verification of Stanislavski's system. In our opinion, this type of work can be compared to creating the musical notation to a melody – and creating the musical score of a song heard (if done faithfully) does not change its sound, but makes it easier others to reproduce the melody, rendering it a useful and effective tool.

The possibility of looking at Stanislavski’s system from the perspective of contemporary cognitive psychology is also important for the ethics of acting. In this area, it is impossible to ignore the practices promoted and practised by one of the American advocates of Stanislavski’s system, Lee Strasberg (Kołacz, 2017). Strasberg learned about Stanislavski’s thought indirectly, while studying at the American Laboratory Theatre. He did not have the opportunity to work directly with the creator of the system. Strasberg was particularly interested in Stanislavski’s views on emotional memory. In the Group Theatre he ran, it was affective memory that became the foundation in the process of building a role. Interpreting this part of the system, Strasberg concluded that in order to reliably and authentically convey emotions on stage, one should reach for one's own memories and include personal history in the process of creating a role. This consisted of substitution, i.e. mentally replacing one's own experiences in place of the character's analogous experiences. So, for example, if the character played by actor X experienced sadness and regret as a result of a stormy breakup with a partner, then when playing this character, one should refer to one's own difficult breakup with someone close. Strasberg understood that such use of memories can be burdensome, which is why he recommended that his students, whom he introduced to the world of acting at the Actors Studio, use psychoanalysis sessions to help work through these difficult emotions. As mentioned, Strasberg never had the opportunity to work with Stanislavski, so his interpretation and use of the system may have significantly differed from how the rehearsals at MChAT were conducted. Strasberg's conflict with Stella Adler, who learned Stanislavski’s system with him at the American Laboratory Theatre, could be an illustration of this: Adler did have the opportunity to meet Stanislavski and talk to him about his techniques and methods. This meeting resulted in a different interpretation

of the system, causing the dispute between Adler and Strasberg. In light of this, it seems fully justified to emphasise the importance of the ethical aspects of acting. Therefore, showing the psychological mechanisms underlying the functioning of memory and emotions emerges as a valuable part of understanding the dynamics governing the human psyche. An attempt to look at Stanislavski's system using cognitive psychology can help us understand which personal resources individual techniques potentially draw on, which in turn should translate into more conscious decisions regarding their use.

How to use Stanislavski's system is of particular importance for people who are just starting to act professionally. As prof. Barbara Osterloff (former vice-rector of the Theatre Academy in Warsaw) admitted in an interview with prof. Barbara Mróz, Stanislavski's work is not unfamiliar to teachers teaching at the Theatre Academy (Mróz, 2014). What is more, his system, to a varying extent and subject to individual interpretation by the teachers, is passed on to the students. Perhaps, expanding the interpretation of Stanislavski's system with knowledge about cognitive processes could be beneficial from the perspective of learners, leading to a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms that underpin stage work.

Stanislavski's system is a theory that is being used with varying degrees of compliance with the original. However, the theory behind it has not yet been empirically verified from a psychological perspective. Although the connections between psychology and the art of acting were written about in the 20th century, those works set themselves the task of explaining the impact of art on humans, strongly emphasizing the issue of catharsis (Chojnacki, 2019).[3] However, we are not aware of any Polish works where the question of how to use knowledge from the field of cognitive psychology

to formulate a set of practical tips supporting acting is addressed. In this work, we want to emphasise in particular the reference to issues of cognitive psychology – we will not deal here with Freudian psychoanalysis, nor with social or developmental psychology akin to Lev Vygotsky. We will not construct our considerations around the concept of catharsis, which seems to be Freud's or Vygotsky's emphasis. Our goal is to reflect on how the research we have in the field of cognitive psychology can help actors in the process of building a role, especially when they use the Stanislavski system and techniques related to memory processes.

It seems to us that such a psychological elaboration of the material contained in the interpretation of the system is close to Stanislavski's aspirations. We formulate such conclusions based on his appeal 'to the subconscious creativity of man through the conscious psychic technique of the artist' (1953, p. 25). Stanislavski used the term 'subconsciousness' many times in *The Actor's Work on Himself*. However, as he mentioned in that work, it concerned the common understanding of the term at the time. The time of the creation of the system partly coincided with the emergence of Freud's psychoanalysis, considered (incorrectly, by the way) to be the discoverer of the unconscious, but it is difficult to state unequivocally whether Stanislavski had access to his works — there is no consensus on this issue among researchers. Alexander M. Etkind (1994) indicates that, at the beginning of the 20th century, psychoanalysis was very popular in Russia. The author quotes a fragment of Freud's letter to Jung, in which he even mentions an 'epidemic' of psychoanalysis in Russia (primarily in Odessa). In 1909, the first translations of Freud's books into Russian were published, and two years later the Russian Psychoanalytic Association was founded. Freud was of interest not only to psychoanalytic circles – artists also referred to him.[4] In turn, John J. Sullivan (1964) points out that Stanislavski's

approach to characterization and identity, exploring the inner lives of heroes, was a natural element visible at first mainly in literature and in line with the prevailing zeitgeist in Europe. Sullivan also points out that the term ‘subconscious’ comes from the French psychiatric tradition. The researcher also draws attention to Stanislavski’s use of the word ‘superconscious’, which is a term foreign to Freud's theory and to the psychological tradition in general. Jean Benedetti (1999), in turn, believes that the creator of MChAT, when writing about the subconscious, spoke of those mental processes that to his knowledge were not subject to the volitional control of the individual. It is difficult to state unequivocally which processes belonged to this category according to Stanislavski. However, it is worth noting in these words the desire to include mental processes in the acting work and – to the extent possible – to gain at least partial, direct control over some of them. In such an approach, it seems all the more justified for us to undertake work that will compare Stanislavski’s thought with the achievements of contemporary cognitive psychology.

It should be noted here, however, that Stanislavski’s work on the subject of stage performance is quite extensive, and more than one book could be written on the subject of the advice he gives to actresses and actors. Therefore, in this article we will address only one of the many issues which the creator of MChAT addresses in *The Actor's Work on Himself*. We have chosen the topic of memory, and in particular autobiographical memory. We will consider the ideas and tools developed by Stanislavski in the light of contemporary psychological research. We will also consider the implications of such comparisons for the work of actors.

Stanislavski and the Psychology of Memory

When we look for connections between acting and memory, the first associations may concern learning a text or learning a sequence of stage movements (Stanislavski, 1953). Many researchers dealing with the psychology of memory most often conduct experiments on the general population and rarely deal with a specific professional group. Konstantin Stanislavski appears as a leader in attempts to apply his empirical observations (which could be called ‘folk psychology’) and the knowledge acquired in this area to theatrical activities. It is also surprising that the creator organizes his works around autobiographical memory, which to this day remains a relatively less known area within memory research (Jagodzińska, 2008). In order to better understand the meaning and functioning of autobiographical memory, it is worth first taking a look at the definitions and categorizations proposed by researchers dealing with cognitive psychology. This is also a direct implementation of Stanislavski’s call to provide everyday practice with appropriate and precise words of description.

Memory is conceptualized in psychology in several different ways, depending on the context and the purpose of its analysis. It is possible to pay special attention to its different aspects. Hence, defining memory allows for the separation of several conceptual groups. Daniel Schacter and Endel Tulving (1982) pay attention primarily to the functional and dynamic aspects of memory, emphasizing its importance for the existence of an individual in the world. Tulving (2000) considered memory as a neurocognitive ability to encode, store and retrieve information. Such a broad and general definition of memory understood as an individual ability shows the importance of processes occurring in the nervous system, which enable us to learn. The

second important way of understanding memory is to perceive it as a system (and therefore statically) that stores information (Atkinson, Shiffrin, 1968). In this context, encoding, storing and retrieving content refers to memory metaphorically presented as a warehouse. The systems approach to memory allows for its further division into smaller subsystems such as: sensory storage, short-term memory storage and long-term memory storage. The division criterion described above takes into account the temporal aspect of information storage, distinguishing individual forms of memory depending on how long information can be stored in them.

According to the division proposed by Richard Atkinson and Richard Shiffrin (1968), the sensory warehouse (also called ‘sensory memory’) is closely related to the reception of sensory stimuli, e.g. visual or auditory. The role of the sensory warehouse is to store stimuli in memory for a very short period (from a few milliseconds to a few seconds), so as to enable its further processing at higher levels. Its operation is independent of our will.

According to another division, taking into account the time of storing information in memory, we can distinguish between short-term memory storage and long-term memory storage. Short-term memory storage has a small capacity, which is why it is easily burdened. It stores both information reaching it from sensory storage and that which is recalled from long-term memory. However, its main function is the current processing of information and maintaining it long enough so that it can be used to achieve a higher goal, e.g. writing down the phone number of a new friend on a piece of paper. The time for which newly provided data is maintained in the short-term memory storage is on average from several seconds up to about a minute (Nęcka et al., 2006).

Long-term memory storage is characterized by the longest duration of

storing information. Data can be stored in it for years. The capacity of this storage can be unlimited. The main task of long-term memory is to collect knowledge about the environment, so that it can be used to adapt the individual to the environment. Within long-term memory, Larry Squire (1994) made another division into declarative and non-declarative memory, also called ‘procedural memory’ (Ryle, 1970). Declarative memory includes the type of information that we can verbalize, e.g., ‘I visited my cousin from the Netherlands in 2009’, whereas information stored in non-declarative memory is difficult to precisely put into words, e.g. describing exactly all the actions one takes while driving a car.

The division made by Squire serves mainly to organize knowledge about memory and it is worth noting here that the categories distinguished by the researcher are not hermetic; on the contrary, the elements of declarative and non-declarative memory interact with each other. Within declarative memory, Squire presents another division, distinguishing, following Tulving (1972), semantic memory and episodic memory. The first category introduced by Tulving refers to general facts, knowledge about the world that can be verbalized, e.g. ‘The capital of France is Paris.’ The context of obtaining this information is not important and is usually not an important element necessary for retrieval. The second category is the memory of events that can be anchored in a specific place and time, e.g. a friend's birthday party that she organized this summer. The verbalization of knowledge contained in episodic memory depends on the individual's linguistic skills and the level of detail in the recording of a given event. As is the case with declarative and non-declarative memory, information belonging to these two categories may overlap in the case of semantic and episodic memory.

A specific type of episodic memory is autobiographical memory, which refers to personal events, i.e. those related to the Self, e.g. one’s first swimming lesson. This type of memory closely related to the Self is assigned to episodic memory, because it contains proportionally more data about the event than semantic information (Maruszewski, 2005). Maruszewski additionally lists further determinants that allow us to distinguish autobiographical memory as a separate subcategory. The material in the memory related to the Self is subject to a characteristic type of organisation. First, it is chronologically ordered in time. Moreover, the information contained in autobiographical memory is ordered and regulated by the course of social interactions. Such units of information built around contacts with other people create larger episodes that are meaningful to a given subject. Another important feature of autobiographical memory is the high degree of connection with emotions: memories related to the Self contain more emotional material compared to other types of memory. The last important distinguishing feature is the issue related to encoding and storing knowledge related to the Self. Initially, before it is stored in memory, information about a given individual is very specific, and only after encoding does it take on a more general meaning and fit into a broader context (e.g. a personal narrative about one's own life).

The types of memory presented above are constantly activated during everyday activities; e.g. while training we store an important date in short-term memory to write it down in a notebook right away, or with each drawing lesson we get better at drawing portraits, although it would be difficult to explain exactly how the whole process of creation works. We can say that specific types of tasks are associated with specific types of memory. In this context, in the case of acting — in the process of building a stage character — we could also distinguish such tasks that trigger the use of different types of memory. First, we should mention learning the text of a

role, which is connected with the operation of semantic memory. Another phase could be practising specific skills needed for a specific performance, e.g. to master a fencing duel for a performance in *Hamlet* – here we have a sequence that can be learned thanks to procedural memory. Looking at it in this way, the work of actresses and actors seems very far from involving episodic memory. The memory of events is seemingly not connected in any way to the tasks of on-stage creators. However, the tasks listed above do not refer to that stage of creation which requires that patterns of a character's behaviour be established, or, as Stanislavski wrote: 'creating the "life of the human spirit"' (Stanislavski, 1953, p. 27).

This description of categories and divisions significant for contemporary cognitive psychology was necessary from the perspective of our reflection on Stanislavski's work, because, as can be seen, the concept of emotional or affective memory, which the creator of MChAT used so eagerly (drawing on the work of his contemporary researcher, Ribot) did not appear here. So where can we place this emotional memory, about which Stanislavski wrote in the form of a master–disciple dialogue: 'This very memory, thanks to which all your feelings experienced during Moskvin's performances and those after the death of your friend are repeated, we call emotional memory' (2010, p. 325)?

Placing this example within the framework of today's categorizations, we can see that Stanislavski refers to autobiographical memory, a characteristic feature of which is 'emotogenicity' (Maruszewski, 2005). We will therefore take a broader look at the understanding of the concept of emotional memory and pay special attention to its consequences in the process of building a role.

Emotional Memory

So what constitutes this emotional memory (or, in other words, the memory of feelings) for Stanislavski? The artist claims that it is a gradable ability, occurring in individual people at different levels, which concerns the possibility of recalling the feelings accompanying the individual in given circumstances. Few people have this disposition in a developed form. Stanislavski also organizes memory according to the senses – he distinguishes, for example, its visual and auditory forms. In today's psychology, sensory memory functions within the short-term memory system and includes both iconic memory, related to vision (Sperling, 1960) and echoic memory, related to hearing (Neisser, 1967). However, both of these categories refer to extremely short-term reactions to the presented stimulus, because the time of storing perceptual information, both visual and acoustic, is measured in milliseconds. However, it can be noted that what Stanislavski understands by ‘sensory memory’, we currently recognize as issues related to the organization of three memory processes – encoding, storage and retrieval. Visual memory in Stanislavski’s approach would be best suited to one of the methods of encoding, which is the creation of images. As for emotional memory in his vision, the importance of extraction processes, especially the ability to handle relevant cues, is much more clearly outlined here. Stanislavski writes the following about the two types of memory mentioned above:

> Just as in visual memory, a long-forgotten object, landscape or human figure comes alive before your inner sight, so in emotional memory once experienced feelings come alive. It seems to us that we have completely forgotten about them, when suddenly some

> allusion, thought, familiar image makes us experience again, sometimes just as strong as the first time, sometimes a little weaker (2010, pp. 325-326).

Writing further about emotional memory in his diary, Stanislavski also touches on the issue of individual differences that can affect the mechanisms of memory. In order to illustrate his observations, he cites the story of two travellers: the first of them remembered his behaviour perfectly; that is, the actions he took during the event in which he took part, while the second did not recall any actions, but was able to recall the emotions that accompanied him at the time. The ability to recall and describe feelings in such an accurate and expressive way as the second man in the story was able to, Stanislavski calls ‘the possession of emotional memory’. The artist believes that emotional memory is a certain ability that differs from person to person. According to him, this means that not everyone has the same ability to execute a task associated with emotional memory, e.g. to recall the feelings that accompanied a specific event.

Emotional memory is particularly important to Stanislavski, because in his opinion it determines the possibility of obtaining and showing internal experiences in the process of playing the role. Without those, according to the creator of MChAT, the actor and their creation are based only on external actions, on mechanical repetition of movement sequences and spoken sentences. In such circumstances, the goal of ‘creating the life of the human spirit’ is not fulfilled.

As we have already mentioned, Stanislavski sees emotional memory as a gradable ability that varies from person to person. He also provides examples of possible behaviours that indicate a specific level of emotional

memory efficiency. If an actor in a stage setting is able to recall very quickly, almost instinctively, all the feelings that accompany a given role during the previous rehearsal, it means that they have an exceptional memory of feelings. However, as Stanislavski himself points out, this happens very rarely. Still, if a stage actor, after initially activating only a previously established sequence of physical actions, after some time is able to recall the feelings that they previously experienced in connection with these fragments of the role, it means that they have a good emotional memory. Stanislavski wrote about this as follows:

> You could start the etude guided only by the previous settings. They should remind you of the experienced feelings, and you would give yourself over to these emotional memories and play the etude dictated by them. I would then say that you have a good emotional memory, although perhaps not exceptional or supernatural (2010, p. 324).

This approach clearly indicates the use of autobiographical memory resources. Stanislavski refers here to the phase of retrieval from memory, recollection. It is therefore worth presenting briefly the temporal organization of memory processes. This allows for a division into three stages: encoding, storage, retrieval. This approach is dynamic in nature and draws attention primarily to the fact that we can look at memory not only as a system of structures, as suggested by the previously cited division by Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968), but also as a mechanism of functional information processing.

The initial phase of memory processes is encoding, which allows information

to be stored in memory thanks to operations such as: organization, verbalization, creating images, and elaboration. Encoding can occur both consciously (explicitly) and implicitly. The process that consolidates a newly created memory trace is verbalization, i.e. naming individual elements of the seen image. This stage is characterized by selectivity, because not all elements of reality will be encoded. The role of attentional processes and strategies used to achieve the goal, e.g. the effective memorization of selected aspects of one's own experience, is significant here. The more deeply, consciously and actively we process the information that reaches us, the more likely it is that we will store it in memory (Zinczenko, 1961).

Importantly, both encoding and subsequent retrieval are more effective when aligned them with the goal and employ an effective strategy, closely linked to the conscious and active use of attention. Fergus Craik and Robert Lockhart (1972) created the concept of processing levels, according to which the durability of a memory trace depends on the depth to which we process the content that reaches us. Material that we receive only sensorially (e.g. smell, taste, visual impressions, colour and shape of font) is the most basic level, while what we subject to semantic analysis is at the opposite end of the continuum. In short, this means that the deeper we process a given portion of information, the better we remember it; e.g. if we write a work that is an interpretation of a selected film scene, we will remember this fragment of the work better than other sequences we only watched on the screen.

Let us now return to Stanislavski's concept and emotional memory. As we have already said, what he calls the memory of feelings falls within the system currently classified as autobiographical memory. As mentioned, Stanislavski believed that this is a gradable feature and that not everyone

has the same abilities in this respect. From the perspective of contemporary cognitive psychology, Stanislavski's considerations can be compared with the aforementioned concept of levels of processing (Craik, Lockhart, 1972), but also with the effective use of a retrieval cue, i.e. information that can be helpful in gaining access to our memories (Jagodzińska, 2008). We can divide cues into external ones – related to the context, e.g. an object in the environment – and internal ones, i.e. those that the individual generates themselves, e.g. associations or ideas.

The quality of such a cue is also important – a good one should be distinctive, i.e. characteristic only of a given memory. Looking at the role of clues, it is worth considering whether the diverse abilities in emotional memory described by Stanislavski can be related to the ability to create and use them. Skilful use of clues can help an actor quickly access their memories, including experiences related to emotions. For example: while working on a role during rehearsals, an actor discovered that a specific scene led his character to a feeling of disgust. If he wanted to support the process of internally experiencing this emotion, he could try to think about what disgust is associated with. He could then realize that disgust is associated with an Antonovka apple and thanks to this, he could recall a situation in which, while visiting friends, he was treated to fruit from their orchard. Unfortunately, when he bit into the apple, it turned out to be worm-eaten and he felt disgust. Keeping a diary containing emotion-association pairs could be helpful in developing clues related to memories of greater or lesser emotional charge. An association would be a clue allowing access to memories related to the experiencing of a specific emotion. In our opinion, such practices could be appreciated by Stanislavski, who wrote in his *Ethics*:

> In most cases, during rehearsals, the feelings that have been stored

> in emotional memory are analysed. In order to understand them, grasp them with reason and remember them, one must find the right word, example (descriptive) or gesture by means of which one can evoke and perpetuate this very feeling (2010a, pp. 60–61).

However, it is also necessary to refer to the ethical aspect here. Such use of one's own autobiographical memory resources can be risky – as illustrated by Lee Strasberg's practice and the recommendation to use psychoanalysis sessions so that actors and actresses are able to cope with difficult memories that they recall for the purposes of stage practice. It seems to us that Stanislavski does not suggest to actors that the only way to achieve internal experience on stage and go beyond the schematic physical action is to recall personal autobiographical memories with a high emotional charge each time. Rather, he treats the material contained in autobiographical memory rather as a source of inspiration, and, using more psychological terms, as cognitive resources on the basis of which subsequent stages of stage work are based. Stanislavski wrote about this process as follows:

> So try to learn, first, the means and methods of extracting emotional material from your own soul, and second, the means and methods of creating endless combinations of human souls of characters, characters, feelings and passions from that (2010, pp. 342–343).

Memories that contain emotional reactions should not be recalled on stage every time and try to experience exactly the same feelings (in type or intensity) that are found in the extracted memories. Moreover, Stanislavski was aware that memory does not work like a camera, and memories are not

a re-creation as an exact digital image stored on a memory card is. The director showed that what we extract from memory, what we recall, is fluid, changeable and susceptible to fluctuations. He wrote: ‘Please do not wait for what was yesterday and be satisfied with what is today. You only have to employ even the resurrected memories well’ (Stanislavski, 2010, p. 337). Autobiographical memory has a reconstructive nature, and the memories we retrieve depend on many factors, such as the context or our current goal (Jagodzińska, 2008; Maruszewski, 2005; Bartlett, 1932/1933).

Emotional Memory and Assumed Circumstances

In Stanislavski’s concept, the so-called assumed circumstances play a fundamental role, i.e. the context of action established by the stage creator, which can be built using the word ‘if’. This is a suggestion that asks the actor, ‘How would you behave if certain circumstances occurred?’ Looking at Stanislavski’s words describing good emotional memory, quoted earlier, it is not possible to clearly state how the described actors and actresses came to experience specific emotions during the previous rehearsal. However, knowing the broader context, which is the entire system, we can assume that it was the assumed circumstances that were helpful in this process – not personal memories. The assumed circumstances are supposed to lead to the stage action being ‘internally justified, logical, consistent and probable in reality’ (Stanislavski, 2010, p. 98). In turn, Stanislavski firmly places the possibility of ‘creating the life of the human spirit’ on stage in stage action. It is worth considering how, by using this ‘if’, a stage artist can achieve a genuine emotional experience. Richard Lazarus's concept (1991) is helpful here. Lazarus' theory assumes that emotions are the result of an individual's

interpretation of events. Each situation – referred to by Lazarus as an encounter or an adaptive episode – is in some way linked to the person's system of aspirations, goals and values. The individual evaluates the encounter in relation to personal motives. The result of such an evaluation process is the emergence of emotions, the sign of which – positive or negative – depends on how the adaptive episode is interpreted by the person.

The situation can therefore trigger a negative affective state, because it is assessed by the individual as an unfavourable event that to some extent threatens their current status. Although at this stage the presented concept of emotion and its application in relation to Stanislavski’s works may seem obvious, the concept proposed by Lazarus in light of Stanislavski’s writings has much more significant implications. The latter noticed that the focus should not be on the emotion itself, but on the circumstances that caused it. An example of this can be the following assumed circumstances: the heroine receives a letter from a wealthy aunt who decides that to give her money for her education if she considers the girl to have the right potential. The aunt writes that she will come to visit. We observe the protagonist just before this visit. Adopting certain assumptions regarding the situation in which the stage heroine or hero finds themself means that actors have opportunities for external actions (actions in which the character may be involved) and internal actions (thoughts that accompany the character; affective states). This vision of Stanislavski, who emphasized the need to outline the form of options towards goal-oriented action, is consistent with the concept of Lazarus, because it shows that affective states do not arise in a vacuum and are, in a way, a side effect of experiencing various situations and relating them to personal aspirations.

Moreover, Stanislavski stressed that it is impossible to experience the same affective state twice. Therefore, striving to recreate only the emotions seems ineffective and incomplete. According to Lazarus's cognitive concept, emotions do not arise in a vacuum, so in order to experience them, we need a process that goes on from the encounter (adaptive episode) to the evaluation. Such an encounter can take place precisely within the framework of the assumed circumstances described by Stanislavski, where the on-stage creator shapes the context in which the stage events will take place. The actor, taking on the role, evaluates this situation from the perspective of their character. In this way, it is possible to create an affective state and experience emotions that are consistent with the emotions of the character. As Stanislavski wrote: ‘One can understand the character, empathize with their situation and begin to act like them. This creative action will evoke in the actor himself experiences analogous to the character's experiences’ (2010, p. 341).

Cited in relation to Stanislavski’s system, the concept of Lazarus shows the possibilities of attempting to explain the operational mechanisms of subsequent elements contained in Stanislavski’s works very well. Such a perspective shows the potential of verifying the director's assumptions by using the resources from the field of psychology.

Summary

To sum up our considerations on the subject of Stanislavski’s system in the context of contemporary psychology, we would like to cite a set of remarks that the creator of MChAT expressed in his *Ethics*: ‘Many actors, especially guest performers, usually only act during rehearsals, and this is unacceptable. What is the use of barely mumbling a role, not experiencing it

internally, or even not understanding it?' (2010a, p. 23).

Indeed, without understanding and experiencing the role, it is probably difficult to achieve the goal of art as Stanislavski saw it, which is to create the life of the human spirit on stage. However, if we refer to cognitive psychology and memory processes, we can see the sense of rehearsals, during which actors and actresses only 'technically', or, as Stanislavski would say, 'craft-like', play their roles. The value of such rehearsals lies in the functioning of the procedural memory mentioned earlier, which allows us to master repetitive activities and skills. Thanks to this type of stage exercises, the actor learns (memorizes) the sequence of dialogues and stage movements (e.g. if a choreography appears in the performance), which is useful, provided that the creators are aware of the purpose of such a rehearsal.

> In most cases, during rehearsals, the feelings that have been stored in emotional memory are analysed. In order to understand them, grasp them with reason and remember them, one needs to find an appropriate word, an example (descriptive) or some gesture that can be used to evoke and preserve this feeling (Stanislavski, 2010, pp. 60–61).

In this paper, we proposed to look at Stanislavski's work as a space for exploration, interpretation and verification using tools from contemporary psychology. The creator of MChAT worked with his team, with whom he tried to reach the vision of theatre that was outlined in his imagination. At the same time, he was a diligent and meticulous observer of life and people, thanks to which many issues raised in his works are not only relevant today –

and possible to implement – but also effective in the context of working on a role. It should be noted, however, that Stanislavski, even with his drive to equip himself with knowledge, had only modest resources at his disposal, because psychology was a freshscientific discipline in his day. He suggested that acting is a profession focused on using personal resources, and he recognized these resources, described them and indicated how to use them on stage.

It is precisely this potential for implementing his system into stage work that is the reason to look at his work methods and place them in the context of the conceptual apparatus that is widely available today to those interested. Recognizing and interpreting the folk psychology practised by Stanislavski can serve to help stage artists see how they can use their own resources and create a tool adapted to individual characteristics. Looking at Stanislavski's concept of emotional memory cited in this article and the closer and wider connotations related to this category proposed by us, we can see that although our memory processes are governed by relatively universal principles (i.e. belonging to everyone), they do not lead to the same results for everyone.

By presenting memory in a dynamic way and focusing on the successive phases of encoding, storage and retrieval, we have indicated that what happens in each of them influences what information we can remember, and therefore use in stage practice. Looking at Stanislavski's system more broadly, we can see that as an author he tried to show that the path to stage realization – close to life, realistic – is for the actor to learn about his conditions and subsequently, to select those tools for these dispositions which in stage circumstances allow for the intended performance.

Knowledge of memory, grounded in psychological research, may prove

helpful in constructing a map of the space created by the individual resources of each person acting on stage – their personality, temperament, cultural patterns, life experiences, etc. In this work we managed to look at only a small fragment of these resources, focusing primarily on contemporary concepts of memory and factors concerning emotional memory as described by Stanislavski. However, we are aware that his publications are rich in content and, we hope, will receive appropriate, systematic analysis and interpretation in the context of psychological knowledge in the coming years, in accordance with Stanislavski's wish quoted in the introduction to this article. This article is a response to that wish, and a step in that direction: a systematic analysis of this type of stage performance.

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Author

Agata Dziegieć

Agata Dziegieć (agata.dziegiec@student.uj.edu.pl) – graduate of acting school Lart Studio, student of psychology at MISH of the Jagiellonian University. Scientifically interested in researching the connections between psychology and contemporary acting, as well as the

psychology of education. ORCID: 0000-0002-6643-7235.

Krystian Barzykowski

Krystian Barzykowski (krystian.barzykowski@uj.edu.pl) – dr hab., professor at the Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University; his main scientific interests include: autobiographical memories, prospective memory, memory research methodology, psychological diagnosis and cultural psychology. He has received several scholarships and awards for his scientific achievements, including the French Government Scholarship for Young Scientists (2019). He received a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship from the European Commission to conduct a research project on involuntary memory and déjà vu at the University of Grenoble Alpes in France (2024–26). ORCID: 0000-0003-4016-3966.

Footnotes

1. Website of Stanislavski Studio: https://www.stanislawskistudio.pl/
2. Pavlov's concept of central nervous system types is currently considered in psychology to be one of the earliest concepts of temperament types. Contemporary, research-based theories in this area to some extent develop Pavlov's thought – see Strelau, 2015. However, they do not refer to categories such as ‘visual memory’.
3. Lev Vygotsky, looking at Stanislavski’s system, formulated a theory of drama in *The Psychology of Art*. He also showed how energy is released and a state of catharsis is experienced.
4. Etkind mentions a situation from 1912 when three actors from St Petersburg organized a performance in which they embodied three qualities of the I – rational, emotional and unconscious – which may have been a reference to Freud's id, ego and superego.

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