

A minister prepares: liturgical performance and Stanislavski's method of acting

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Abstract

This article introduces some of the key concepts of the method approach to acting developed by Constantin Stanislavski, and begins to explore their application to the liturgical minister.

Keywords

liturgical performance, liturgical role, liturgy, method acting, Stanislavski

Reading Stanislavski's method for liturgical performance

While the name of Constantin Stanislavski is not widely known or cited in theological discourse, his 'method' is something that has achieved at least popular recognition, even if the details are less widely known. However, his three volumes – *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character* and *Creating a Role* – are standard texts in theatre studies and present a comprehensive theory of acting.¹ This article takes note of the core principles that stand behind Stanislavski's method, and begins to explore how they might be applied by the liturgical minister.²

Before addressing the application of Stanislavski's ideas to liturgical performance, I begin with a brief excursus on the applicability of the category of 'performance' to liturgy. Unlike theatre, which by its very nature is 'unreal', the church's celebration of the liturgy is perhaps the most real of human activities.³

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As such, the action is performative as ‘it creates a reality apart from speech itself’;⁴ nonetheless, the ministers (both clerical and lay) of the liturgical celebration in some sense must be understood as entering into and inhabiting roles. As Cally Hammond notes, this is at once both *simulo* and *dissimulo*. The ministers’ self-expression must be limited. However, this is culturally normal: consider how, in response to the question ‘How are you?’, every British person knows that the answer is obviously ‘Fine, thanks’, whatever one truly feels. This isn’t entirely pretence, but nor is it completely truth, but it is necessary for functional human interaction and seeks to be creative of reality.⁵ Ministers must also inhabit their role in the assembly: in particular, the priest presiding at the Eucharist speaks both to the assembly on behalf of God and Christ (as in the traditional expression *in persona Christi*) and to God as the representative voice of the assembly (as is often called *in persona Ecclesiae*). Both these aspects necessarily involve some aspect of performance, not that what is performed is not true, but it is in the performance that reality is created.⁶

Given this performative nature of liturgical celebration, why turn to Stanislavski? What does he in particular offer to the liturgical minister? After all, the function of the actor is to create something that is pretence. Yet fundamental to Stanislavski’s approach is the desire to achieve an integrity between the actor and the role, and he rejects outright pretence on the part of the actor just as we must reject it on the part of the liturgical minister.⁷

From this recognition, Stanislavski seeks to develop a technique whereby the actor can create ‘the conditions favourable to the emergence of ... inspiration’.⁸ Similarly, the preparation of the liturgical minister should be to enable the minister to be more receptive to the movement of the Spirit, such that their performance of their role is more genuine and more true. While there is no doubt a substantial element of the life of prayer and the formation of moral character to this for the liturgical minister, this article seeks to explore whether the techniques of Stanislavski can also aid the minister to be truly inspired in entering into their liturgical role. While Stanislavski speaks metaphorically of the inspiration being ‘a heavenly gift from Apollo’, the minister must seek a much more literal source of inspiration.⁹

Stanislavski and his work

Despite there being many different approaches and theories of acting, most are never explored or developed in a systematic manner. What Stanislavski develops, however, is exactly that: a systematic theory of acting. The first part of *Creating a Role* was the earliest material in these volumes Stanislavski composed; it takes the form of a study in the creation of the role of Chatsky in Alexander Griboyedov’s play *Woe from Wit*, considered a classic in Russian-language theatre but much less well known further afield.¹⁰

The remainder of that book and the other two volumes adopt a very different style. While the rest of *Creating a Role* covers similar territory to the

first part – comprising studies on the creation of the roles of Othello in Shakespeare's eponymous play and Khlestakov in Gogol's *The Inspector General* – it shares the semi-fictional style of *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*.¹¹ These works are set in a classroom with a teacher/director named Tortsov instructing a group of students, and are narrated as a diary by a keen member of the group. Tortsov appears to be the mature Stanislavski himself, perhaps combined with his mentor from the Bolshoi, Fyodor Komissarzhevski. The student keeping the diary, Nazanov, is perhaps a combination of a young Stanislavski and one of his favourite pupils.¹² Sometimes the style makes the method described more obscure but perhaps more engaging to read than a more conventional literary style might have achieved – but given the chaotic approach to writing taken by Stanislavski, it is difficult to tell.¹³

Stanislavski's approach remains popular among actors – a search online will find innumerable popular articles indicating a variety of both well-known and less famed performers who make use of the 'Method' at various points in their careers. It is also the topic of continued theoretical study, and a central tool in the training of actors.¹⁴ Perhaps Stanislavski's method is best known for its concern with the inner state of the character and the expectation that the actor enters completely into character.

The first two chapters of *An Actor Prepares* provide an insight into the core of Stanislavski's ideas. They are set within the semi-fictional narrative as the first few days Tortsov works with the students, and are mostly taken up with the students developing short scenes and with feedback on and discussion of these initial demonstrations of their technique. The single aspect of these performances that the director is positive about is when, in the narrator's performance as Othello, his subconscious breaks through and he begins to show the feelings and character of Othello – not simply as the inner spirit but to achieve '[t]he fundamental aim of our art... the creation of this inner life of a human spirit, and its expression in an artistic form'.¹⁵

Tortsov/Staniavski contrasts the brief moment in which he sees this with a variety of other, less satisfying elements. The first condemnation is for the 'art of representation' demonstrated by the narrator's companion, Paul, who plays the character of Iago from *Othello*. This approach is typified by the actor 'liv[ing] his part as a preparation for perfecting an external form'.¹⁶ Such an approach is epitomized, the critique continues, by the imitation of external models and by externalizations fixed by repetition – but no inner feelings form part of the character. This approach, Tortsov explains to the students, requires much work to maintain, and the 'effect is sharp but not lasting'.¹⁷

The next approach discussed is that of 'mechanical acting'. In response to the critique of representation, a student comments to the director how he 'feels very deeply what he does on stage'.¹⁸ The scathing response is that feeling like this only proves the student to be alive, and it questions whether what is brought on stage is sufficiently important and essential for the part. This student is told that his performance 'did not approach [the] role from its inner content neither lived it nor

represented it'; it was simply 'mechanical acting'.¹⁹ This mechanical acting is made up of the repetition of established clichés and conventions, but is no more than a 'dead mask'.²⁰ Feelings and the inner life are excluded, and the focus becomes 'prettiness in place of beauty', 'theatrical effect in place of expressiveness'.²¹

The narrator is the next target for critique, as the moments of inspiration for which he was initially praised were set in a sea of overacting. While the director considers this less dangerous than the mechanical, that is simply because it is less practised and ingrained, and thus easier to replace with something more substantial. The clichés here are trivial, and the aim is to impress the spectator. There is no inner life from 'true organic feelings'; instead, the actor takes the 'first general human conventions that come along'.²² The reason the actor falls into this model, claims Tortsov/Staniislavski, is that he or she 'does not have a wealth of live material taken from life' on which to draw.²³ The key advice the director gives to his students to avoid falling into this trap is that they should 'never allow [them]selves externally to portray anything that [they] have not inwardly experienced and which is not interesting to [them]'.²⁴

One student remains, and she comes in for the worst criticism – that her performance was 'the exploitation of art'. She is told: 'The bad part was that you flirted with the audience and did not play Katherine.'²⁵ The actor is challenged about whether she came 'to serve art, and to make sacrifices for its sake, or to exploit [her] own personal ends'.²⁶

In summing up, Tortsov/Staniislavski reminds the students that while boundaries can be drawn between these approaches in theory, in practice the categories are all mixed together, and so the self-reflection required to identify 'the boundaries of art' is a necessary part of their learning.²⁷ These first classes conclude with the students being sent off to undertake a series of practical and fitness exercises as 'the development of the muscles of the human body requires systematic and thorough exercise, and a long time', although, reading between the lines, the reader is left pondering whether the director is thinking of more than just the biomechanical muscles.²⁸

Stanislavski's key principles and the liturgical minister

Stanislavski's method, or system, was developed in reflection upon his own development as an actor and director. In spite of some of the self-critique, he had achieved high acclaim, but he was not satisfied. He had already been something of a reformer in a very staid Russian theatrical world at the end of the nineteenth century, but he came to realize that a more systematic approach was required to achieve what he sought. Perhaps his crisis point was a performance as Stockmann in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, which had initially been the inspired performance he sought but had settled into the rote he had come to reject.²⁹

Fundamental for Stanislavski became the challenge of 'creating and conveying inner life, a sense of being'.³⁰ First and foremost, this was played out in the actor needing to believe and to get beyond the unreality of theatre: 'Truth onstage is

what an actor can sincerely believe in, and even a blatant lie must become truth for it to be art.³¹ There is something of this same reality-making in liturgy – something of the liturgical event will always look unreal to the outsider looking on. It is not without reason that apologists and theologians since at least Justin Martyr have been trying to explain what it is that Christians do in worship, and how that makes Christ distinctively present in that action.

It is clear that this sort of integrity between the inner person and the outer performance is desired for the liturgical role. The stage has much in common with the church in understanding the reality presented within it primarily through text. The actor must work from the script, and from it find the substance of their character, to make that person really present to the audience. The minister must work from the Scriptures and the liturgy, mediated through the tradition of the Church, to make Christ present in word, in sacrament, and in the assembly.

If one considers some of the negative alternatives identified by Stanislavski, it is just as perilous for the liturgical minister to seek to produce the external form. Each individual is called to be themselves in truthfulness in their liturgical ministry, not to recreate the performance of the person who taught them when and how to move. And it is a failure of our Christology to suggest that the minister should seek to be Christ-like by undertaking a liturgical role as they imagine a first-century Palestinian Jew might have done. They must instead be authentically themselves, as persons in Christ.

To fall back on ‘mechanical acting’ is similarly flawed. We might each have a learned cliché of how to undertake our particular role in the liturgy. But that is not to enter fully into the celebration of the paschal mystery that any particular act of worship presents. Each time when the church gathers to ‘do this in remembrance’, it does so afresh, and therefore each participant must enter into it anew, however deeply the cliché makes us ‘feel’ what we do.

This repetition of what has been done before, for the liturgical minister just as much as the actor, is less dangerous when it is less ingrained as substance can be added more readily. But ‘overacting’ is just as much a compromise of integrity. In the end, even if we play the hero, it is not about us.

Finally, as it is not about us, the liturgical practitioner must be just as concerned as the actor not to exploit the art. It is easy, perhaps especially for the clergy, to allow the liturgical performance to become about the central performer. Yet however much the priest stands *in persona Christi*, they are not Christ; even as far as they take that role, it is the role of the one who ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a slave’ (Phil. 2.7) and made himself servant of all.

Creating the liturgical role

Perhaps for many liturgical ministers the desire for novelty is always especially tempting in the present age, to avoid falling into rote in undertaking their roles. The plethora of resources offered in, for example, the official volumes of the Church of England’s *Common Worship* does nothing to challenge that temptation.

But perhaps one thing the liturgical minister can take from Stanislavski is that novelty of text is not required to achieve a genuine performance. Stanislavski seeks to offer a method whereby the actor can present Othello, or whatever role, night after night using simply the same words – and the actor does this by getting inside the character.

While most who have stood before a liturgical assembly have had moments of hesitation over the words when leading prayers even as familiar as the ‘Our Father’, perhaps many liturgical ministers are too constrained by the book. Stanislavski gives no substantial attention to the question of when in the rehearsal process he would expect an actor to be ‘off book’ (i.e. to know the lines by heart). However, he does expect the actor to know their role so completely that lines may be delivered as though they come from within, rather than from recitation of a learned text. On the other hand, this is not a call for greater improvisation – the actor is not faithfully performing Shakespeare’s Othello if he does not use the lines that the bard placed on his hero’s lips. Do we, as liturgical ministers, know our parts in the cosmic drama of which the Eucharist makes anamnesis well enough if we do not know our lines sufficiently well to contribute them on cue, without having to follow along in a script?

As such, the application of Stanislavski’s ideas means just as much hard work for the liturgical minister as it does for the actor. The difference is that this work of preparation is part of their role in the drama of salvation even once they leave the ‘stage’. From the moment of baptism, ‘in theory at least all Christians inhabit our roles . . . of being formed in the likeness of Christ, and built into a living temple to his glory’.³²

And so, in our preparation for our roles as liturgical ministers, we must devote time to prepare ourselves to enter the roles with integrity, as fully ourselves, alight with the glory of God. This surely emphasizes the importance of discipleship in all those taking part in the liturgical celebration: that is, the whole assembled people of God. It is only by seeking, through prayer and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the flash of inspiration to present the drama of the liturgy as art that the minister can truly create the role. It is only by seeking the truth of the role they are called to fulfil – that is, seeking their vocation within the body of Christ – through the study of those things received in the Scriptures, the liturgy and the tradition of the Church that the minister can truly inhabit their place in the ensemble. There is much to learn from how an actor prepares their role – only, for the Christian, for the liturgical minister, ‘all the world’s a stage’, not one in which to create a fiction but to enter into the fullness of reality.³³

Notes

1. Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen, 1986); Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen, 1979); Constantin Stanislavski, *Creating a Role*, translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen,

- 1996). These authorized translations have been the standard editions for English-speaking practitioners, over and above the Russian originals. The work of Jean Benedetti and his revised translations (Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, translated by Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2017); Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work on a Role*, translated by Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2010)) have led to some revision of this: see Jean Benedetti, 'A history of Stanislavski in translation', *New Theatre Quarterly* Vol. 6 (1990), pp. 266–78; Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski: an introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004). The differences in the detail of translation are of limited impact for this article, although Benedetti's insights are substantial for an in-depth reading, particularly in relation to the role of Hapgood in shaping Stanislavski's work in the English-speaking world. As they are the more widely known, I will follow Hapgood here. No consideration is given here to the development by the likes of Stella Adler or Lee Strasberg into what has become known as 'The Method'; see Benedetti, 'A history of Stanislavski in translation', p. 266.
2. This article owes its inspiration to the lecture to the Alcuin Club by the Reverend Dr Cally Hammond in 2019; I am also indebted to Chris Thirlwell for guidance on the work of Stanislavski.
 3. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), pp. 20–1.
 4. Albert Gerhards and Benedikt Kranemann, *Introduction to the Study of Liturgy*, translated by Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2017), p. 288.
 5. Cally Hammond, 'Performance, pretence, priesthood: on liturgical being and doing' (Alcuin Club Lecture, St James' Church, Sussex Gardens, London, 2019).
 6. While I comment here only on the role of the priest, the 'fully active and conscious participation' of the assembly of the faithful suggests that it applies to them equally; see Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), para. 14.
 7. Stanislavski, *Creating a Role*, p. 19; David Magarshack, 'Stanislavsky' in Eric Bentley (ed.), *The Theory of the Modern Stage* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008 [1968]), p. 223.
 8. Magarshack, 'Stanislavsky', p. 223.
 9. No reference is cited in Magarshack, 'Stanislavsky'.
 10. Some English editions of the play title it 'Chatsky', although 'Woe from Wit' directly translates the Russian title. See, for example, Joshua Cooper (ed.), *Four Russian Plays: Fonvizin: The Infant; Griboyédov: Chatsky; Gógol: The Inspector; Ostróvsky: Thunder* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1972).
 11. English editions frequently title this play *The Government Inspector*; see, for example, Nikolay Gogol, *Diary of a Madman, The Government Inspector, & Selected Stories* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005).
 12. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, p. xxvii.
 13. Benedetti, 'A history of Stanislavski in translation', pp. 270–3.
 14. See, for example, details of Rose Bruford College's Acting BA (Hons) at <<https://www.bruford.ac.uk/courses/acting-ba-hons/>> and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art's BA (Hons) in Acting at <<https://www.rada.ac.uk/courses/ba-hons-acting/#the-course>> (both accessed 12 January 2021). See also Bella Merlin, *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2016). Perhaps the only other systematizer with similar impact is Bertolt Brecht.
 15. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 14.

16. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 18.
17. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 23.
18. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 23.
19. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 23.
20. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 24.
21. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 26.
22. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, pp. 28–9.
23. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 28.
24. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 29.
25. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 30. The ‘Katherine’ in question is from Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*.
26. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 31.
27. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 31.
28. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 32.
29. Benedetti, *Stanislavski*, p. 45.
30. Benedetti, *Stanislavski*, p. 45.
31. Konstantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, translated by Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 267.
32. Hammond, ‘Performance, pretence, priesthood’.
33. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII, line 139.

Author biography

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