



LORD, HEAR—AND SEE—OUR PRAYER:

ARTISTIC PERFORMANCE AS EXPRESSION OF PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY

John Steven Paul

"Acting is Believing," Charles McGaw, late of the Goodman School of Drama, entitled his famous basic acting textbook. And, before we ask "Believing in what, exactly?" we might pause to consider the word "believing." The word takes us into a distinctly different realm of actions from that in which we would find ourselves were the phrase "acting is feeling," though that is surely what some people want most from their actors—public, projected feelings. In a brief passage of the *Ars Poetica* (68-5 BCE) directed to the actor, the Roman critic Horace wrote that, if he is to make an audience weep, the actor must first *feel* the grief himself (Carlson 24). Nor are we in the realm of the intellectual, though certainly no small part of the actor's preparation might fall under the title, "acting is thinking." In the words of the nineteenth-century English tragedian Henry Irving "a good *understanding* is as necessary to a player as a pilot is to a vessel at sea" (Cole and Chinoy 125). Laurence Olivier would have countered that acting is doing, a primarily physical exercise, since one of his life-long mottoes was "the best way to begin to do a thing is to *do it*."

John Steven Paul teaches theatre and is the Chair of the Division of the Visual and Performing Arts at VU, where he also serves as advisor to *Soul Purpose*, VU's chancel drama troupe. His extensive experience in directing this year resulted in *King Lear*, as well as *A Lesson from Aloes*, and in the Christ College Freshman Production, a yearly workshop presentation developed and staged entirely by first year students in VU's Honors College. For a number of years he has written occasional pieces on theatre for *The Cresset*. This paper, the third presentation at the Lilly Fellows Conference '92, wrapped around a performance by *Soul Purpose*. The objective of this format was to reveal the integral relationship between theory and practice in the work of this drama troupe. The troupe performed "And They Danced," a play by John Steven Paul based on a sermon by The Rev. David H. Kehret and developed in workshop by *Soul Purpose*. In the play, Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead after which a joyful celebration takes place in Bethany. The right-justified text in this layout attempts to bring that performance into the context of the paper itself.

McGaw's choice of the word "believing," however, takes us into the spiritual domain. And, given the fact that so many colleges and universities dedicate significant resources to the study of acting and its associated theatre arts, it is appropriate to talk about the teaching and practice of acting at a conference with the theme "spirituality and higher learning."

In 1987 Soul Purpose was founded at Valparaiso University. The objectives of the group were 1) to provide students with the opportunity to combine their love for theatre with their Christian commitments, 2) to serve the Church by spreading the Good News of Christ Crucified through the medium of theatre, and 3) to create new works for the chancel drama repertoire.

We are, of course, not the first to focus on the spiritual dimension of acting. Robert Benedetti has devoted his useful survey of acting in the twentieth century, *Seeming, Being, and Becoming*, to the "perception of acting as a necessary spiritual enterprise" (Benedetti 2). Jerzy Grotowski of the Polish Laboratory Theatre, which flourished in Cracow during the nineteen-sixties and seventies deemed the actor "holy" and sought to elevate him to a spiritual state (Benedetti 66). In his study *The Theatrical Event*, David Cole likens the actor, first, to a shaman who makes trance-journeys to the other world where he presents the wishes of the community to the gods, and then to the one who returns from the land of the gods, spiritually possessed, to present the gods' words in dramatic form to the community. We could go on citing references to acting as a spiritual enterprise; spirituality is something of a favorite theme of twentieth-century acting philosophers. In the interests of reminding ourselves that all philosophy is but a footnote to Plato, himself no lover of the theatre, we might quote the Ion. Socrates, speaking to the rhetorician: "Are you not carried out of yourself, and does not your soul in an ecstasy seem to be among the persons or places of which you are speaking . . . ?" (Cole and Chinoy 8) So, there is, then, a long history of emphasizing the spiritual dimension of acting.

Soul Purpose's first play was The Man Who Was Not Far from the Kingdom of God, a dramatization of a story by

David Kehret, associate campus pastor at Valparaiso University, based on Mark 12.28-34. In the story, an unsuspecting young lawyer has a life-changing encounter with the Son of God. The play was performed as a part of morning services in churches and high schools. Like the lawyer, *Soul Purpose* actors have been repeatedly surprised at their proximity to the Kingdom of God as they have performed their plays in the midst of God's people at worship.

There has been no more influential commentator on the art of acting than Konstantin Stanislavski. Born in Moscow in 1863 to a wealthy merchant family, Stanislavski's whole life, from the time he acted in amateur theatricals on his family's country estate, was devoted to actors and acting. He is justly famous as the co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, the original producer of Anton Chekhov's major plays, and for his revolutionary approach to the art of acting. More than an acting teacher or even a systematic theorist, Stanislavski was like Socrates, a pragmatic, persistent questioner guided by a single question: how does the actor *act*? Stanislavski's efforts to induce naturalistic performances from his actors echoes the work of his Russian contemporary, the behavioral psychologist Anton Pavlov. But Robert Benedetti asserts that Stanislavski's most important contribution to contemporary theatre was to "give us a focus on the spirituality of the actor" (Benedetti 41).

Stanislavski articulated his system in a series of three books, known as the "ABC's of Acting:" *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, and *Creating a Role*. The first of these alone could constitute an acting curriculum for years of study. In *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski states his aim: . . . not only to create the life of the human spirit, but also to express it in a beautiful, artistic form" (Stanislavski 15). The system itself is comprised of ten components, the most famous of which is "Emotion Memory" (also translated as "sense memory" or "affective memory") in which the actor calls to consciousness an emotion from her own life analogous to the one being experienced by the character she is portraying. Using his system (which, by the way, he reportedly never thought of as a system, *per se*, while he was teaching), Stanislavski taught the actor to metamorphose her own self into a new self by the power of the experiences of the character. The experiences were to be happening *as if* to the actor herself. "Metamorphose" is Robert Benedetti's term and he uses it, he writes, literally to mean *meta-morphose*, a form above or a transcendent reality.

The Soul Purpose plays are designed to be played in the space surrounding the altar. If we're fortunate several steps lead to the chancel and improve the sight-lines! Like liturgical celebrants, the actors perform in that sacred space between God's table and the people in the pews. Here they offer to God their prayers and those of the people and they bring the word of God to the congregation. They repeatedly report, following performances, a rare feeling that can only be described as transcendence.

An Actor Prepares is composed in the form of a series of acting lessons with several students directed by "M. Tortsov," the voice of Stanislavski. Each chapter of the book takes up a different part of what has come to be known as "the system:" relaxation, concentration, given circumstances, imagination, and so forth. Two of the later chapters in the English translation by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood are entitled "Faith and a Sense of Truth" (chapter VIII) and "Communion" (chapter X). We would not be wrong to expect a spiritual emphasis in chapters with titles such as these.

In the chapter on *scenic truth*, one of Tortsov's students protests "I don't see how there can be any question of truth in the theatre since everything about it is fictitious, beginning with the very plays of Shakespeare and ending with the papier maché dagger with which Othello stabs himself." Tortsov counsels the student not to be concerned about the material from which the prop dagger has been made. "Of significance to us," he says,

is the reality of the inner life of a human spirit in a part and a belief in that reality. We are not concerned with the actual naturalistic existence of what surrounds us on the stage, the reality of the material world! [. . .] Put life into all the imagined circumstances and actions until you have completely satisfied your sense of truth, and until you have awakened a sense of faith in the reality of your sensations Truth on stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues. Truth cannot be separated from belief, nor belief from truth. They cannot exist without each other and without both of them it is impossible to live your part or create anything. (121-122)

In And They Danced, Jesus's friends and disciples look on in astonishment as he calls forth Lazarus from the tomb. The play is divided into three sections: 1) the events surrounding the resurrection itself, 2) the joyous celebration following the resurrection, and 3) a meditation on the lesson to be learned from the story of Lazarus. The players begin in simple black and white costume. For the celebration they each don three items of gaudily-colored party clothing. During the meditation, the players gradually shed the party-clothes, returning to their black and white.

Stanislavski's approach to creating a *scenic truth* in which an actor could believe was first to break down a large action into its component parts and then direct the actor to focus on each of these smaller actions in sequence. To bake a loaf of bread is an example of a large action consisting of many individual steps. Within each step, the actor comes into contact with many discrete material objects: ingredients, utensils, equipment. In their training regimen, Stanislavski's students were not given any stage properties with which to work. (A radical idea in a period where the Naturalistic style dictated that stage settings be chock-full of environmental minutiae.) They were told to work "with air." After a time, the students would come to

recall just how they had taken the physical action on which they were focusing in real life. Through a combination of imagination, concentration, faith, and recall the students came to believe in the truth of the moment.

And They Danced begins with a funeral preparation. Lazarus is dead. Against everybody's hopes, Lazarus is dead. Esther is methodically preparing a casserole meal. Her actions are mimed. She reads the recipe instructions aloud to herself:

*"Four double handfuls of bulgar wheat,
steamed until it cracks open.
A measure of flour.
A pinch of salt.
A pinch of dried herbs, rubbed together
and sprinkled into the mixture.
One egg, beaten.
Enough broth to give it moisture.
Mix together.
Prepare another bowl . . .
Rub around with olive oil.
Press a clove of garlic into the surface.
Place first mixture into the new bowl.
Firm down.
Sprinkle bread crumbs over the top.
Pat in.
Place a damp towel over bowl."*

An essential step in the creation of *scenic truth* is opening and sustaining communion among the actors *en ensemble*. Stanislavski defines communion as "spiritual intercourse," which occurs when one is giving to and receiving something from an object. An "object" here does not refer to an inanimate thing, rather it is an umbrella term which might also be translated as "an other." Among the "others" with which actors seek to be in communion are 1) other parts of themselves, 2) other objects (actual or imaginary), 3) other actors, and 4) the others in the audience.

"With whom or with what are you in communion at this moment," Tortsov abruptly asks a student at the beginning of a lesson. "Why, not with anyone or anything," the student replies. "You must be a marvel," the amused master responds, "if you are able to continue in that state for long." In the waking moments of life, according to Stanislavski, human beings are in communion with something or someone nearly all of the time. One of the students reports that he had difficulty "communing" with a string quartet while it was performing a famous piece of music. The young man felt that he was distracted by the chandelier hanging in the auditorium. Tortsov counters that the student was in communion with this particular lighting fixture:

You were trying to find out how and of what that object was made. You absorbed its form, its general aspect, and all sorts of details about it. You accepted these impressions, entered them in your memory, and proceeded to think about them. That means that you drew something from your object, and we actors look upon that as necessary. You are worried about the inanimate

quality of your object. Any picture, statue, photograph of a friend, or object in a museum is inanimate, yet it contains some part of the life the artist who created it. Even a chandelier can, to a certain degree, become an object of lively interest, if only because of our absorption in it. (184)

The problem for the actor is to stimulate this kind of communion on stage.

At the height of the celebration of Lazarus's resurrection, at the height of singing and the dancing, the gaudily costumed actors realize that none of the joy that they are experiencing would have been theirs had Lazarus not first have died. To signify their understanding of this truth, each actor deliberately, agonizingly removes an item of party-clothing — a scarf, a vest, a hat — and wistfully drops the object. Each of these has a material reality and a symbolic reality. They are happily familiar with these pieces of clothing and it's frightening to give them up. More than clothing, they are fragments of an old life which must be buried so that new life can be born.

Stanislavski's approach to this problem begins by making his actors aware of the types of communication of which they are capable because of their "spiritual resources." One type is communication with actual objects on stage, similar to the way it happens in off-stage life. Another type is that which communications theorists would call "intra-personal." Here Stanislavski identifies a center of vital energy located near the solar plexus which, he says, the Hindus call "Prana." The actor "communes with himself on the stage" by opening communication between the brain "the cerebral centre . . . and the nerve center of the solar plexus—the seat of emotion" (Stanislavski 187). Actors may also commune with imaginary or non-existent objects, such as apparitions. Such communion is particularly difficult to achieve and often results in actors only "representing" (a particularly negative term for Stanislavski) themselves in such communion.

As might be expected, Stanislavski devotes much of this chapter to achieving communion between actors. "Spiritual intercourse" between actors may be achieved by means of external, visible resources; that is, the sensory faculties, but also through the wordless interchange of feeling. He is at a loss to articulate this process:

My difficulty here is that I have to talk to you about something I feel but do not know. It is something I have experienced and yet I cannot theorize about it. . . . What name can we give to these invisible currents, which we use to communicate with one another? Some day this phenomenon will be the subject of scientific research. Meantime let us call them rays. (199-200)

Note that Stanislavski sought to teach actors how to enter into spiritual intercourse with one another not as themselves but as the dramatic characters into which they had transformed themselves. Such transformation was accomplished identifying the character's feelings and then finding analogous feelings in their own lives, thus fusing

actor with character. The feelings transmitted would be personal ones but in the form of the character's feelings. This is an immensely difficult accomplishment, but when actors do achieve the desired communion it is always between, for example, Hamlet and Ophelia, rather than between Branaugh and Thompson.

As difficult as communion is to achieve between actors it is "even more difficult [to establish] mutual communion with a collective object; in other words, the public" (Stanislavski 191). It was actors' pre-occupation with the audience that Stanislavski sought to overcome through his teaching. He believed that in order to achieve truth on the stage, to achieve communion among themselves, actors would have to stop playing to the audience. This seemed a radical even ridiculous idea at the time. What else, after all, were actors for, if not for playing to an audience? Stanislavski had no intention of severing the actor-audience relationship, indeed he sought to deepen it. What he wanted from actors was total, relaxed concentration within and upon the objects of the stage environment. This concentration could be maintained only through a paradoxical state he called "public solitude," a moment of communion with an object so complete that it shut out an audience that might be a little as two or three yards away. In this way, communion with the audience was achievable, not directly or consciously but indirectly and unconsciously:

When the spectator is present during such an emotional and intellectual exchange, he is like a witness to a conversation. He has a silent part in the exchange of feelings, and is excited by their experiences. But the spectators in the theatre can understand and indirectly participate in what goes on on stage only while this intercourse continues among the actors. (186)

Stanislavski asserts that the audience "wishes, above all, to believe everything that happens on stage" (Stanislavski 126). To borrow a phrase, the audience is quite willing to suspend its disbelief in return for the opportunity to enter into a spiritual intercourse with the actors in the mutual creation of scenic truth.

The purpose of Soul Purpose is to bring the truth of Christ crucified to God's people. At times this purpose is best served by making direct contact with the audience during the course of the play. The actors occasionally step out of character consciously attempting to deepen their communion with the audience while maintaining it with one another.

The sub-title of this presentation is "Artistic Performance as Expression of Personal Spirituality." One of the assumptions underlying the work of Soul Purpose is that acting can be viewed as an expression of personal spirituality. Acting for Soul Purpose is a form of prayer, but one integrally connected to Stanislavski's views on the spiritual aspects of acting.

Stanislavski, a thorough-going aesthete, believed in the truth of art without need for external referents. "Truth on the stage," Stanislavski wrote, "is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues." Our creed is similar: "We believe in all things, seen and unseen." When Soul Purpose performs a play based on a scriptural text or elaborates a story from the Bible — that is, when we fill in Stanislavski's blank *whatever* with the phrase "the body and blood of Christ" — the terms belief, faith, truth, and communion take on a new and different meaning. Yet we do not leave the actor's discipline behind. Indeed, Stanislavski's beliefs and our own are mutually informative and equally important in the creation of truly Christian religious drama.

Were we to replace Stanislavski's *whatever* with the truth of Sophocles or Shakespeare, or Chekhov, or Sam Sheppard we would not be undermining or diluting the essential spirituality of the actor's art. What Soul Purpose and I suggest, however, is that when *whatever* becomes the Gospel of Christ then acting is more than communing with objects real or imagined, with self, with ensemble, environment or the audience; it is communion with God. That communion, accomplished by grace, through faith and the wondrous Stanislavski System, is attained through a form of communication which we more often refer to as *prayer*.

The actors of Soul Purpose pray at times in solitude, sometimes in public solitude, often in concert with the audience. They hope they will not be accused of praying ostentatiously like the Pharisee in the Temple. Their prayers are solitary, concentrated, contemplative. They are also public; prayed in communion with God, their ensemble, and their audiences, also known as congregations of worshippers, who, more than anything else, wish, above all, to believe everything that happens on stage. □

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