

## 6. THE PHYSICAL TRAINING OF THE ACTOR IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY DRAMA PEDAGOGY

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**Abstract:** *In this paper we will focus on the aspects of the actor's physical training and on the relations between the body and the soul, the body and the psyche which, in Stanislavski's theory and practice, organically form one entity. We will also refer to the domain of Physical Education which includes physical training and is defined along two avenues: general physical training and motion; a parallel can thus be drawn between the methods and means used by K. S. Stanislavski and the methods currently used in Physical Education.*

**Key words:** *actor, physical training, physical education*

The founder of the Art Theatre of Moscow, a benchmark of 20<sup>th</sup> century drama, K. S. Stanislavski was one of the renovators of theatre directing and also one of the most widely known experts in acting. His discoveries, transmitted under the name of “the system”, have changed the manner in which acting can be approached not only by those who act, but also by those who study acting. He was one of the great masters of theatre and theatrical thinking for two reasons: one is the manner in which he handled the issue of transmitting experience by way of the written word; the second is his practical and systematic work at the boundary between the body and the soul, regardless of how this work is put to use in performances. He devised a program – a system for the actor's work, which relies mainly on practical activities and **physical training**, as we would call it today, or on training certain muscle groups (by contraction and relaxation, according to the author's specifications), as well as on psychological training, the training of the inner self and training of the voice.

The area of Physical Education provides the information according to which physical training is based on the following notions derived from the term “motive power”<sup>158</sup>: the act of moving (the physical exercise), movement (a sequence of physical exercises describing a gesture, a motion) and motive activity. K. Stanislavski started from the very notion of **physical activity** and developed the famous “system” which holds to this day in most drama schools in the world; **physical activity** in Stanislavski's view is equalled to **motive activity** which is mainly used in The Theory and Methodology of Physical Education and of Sports. We see that the **physical activity** in Stanislavski's system has the same meaning as that of **motive activity** in the area of Physical Education, which refers to accomplishing a task by means of the skeletal muscles, mainly in the case of physical exercises. Here we can emphasize the connection between Stanislavski's system and Physical Education, a connection which resides mainly in **the use of the physical exercise**. In answering the question “What should an actor start with in the training necessary for a role?”<sup>159</sup>, relying on his extended experience as an actor and researcher, K.

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<sup>158</sup> A force producing or generating movement (DEX).

<sup>159</sup> N. Abalkin, *Sistemul lui Stanislavski și teatrul sovietic*, Editura Cartea rusă, 1955. p.199

Stanislavski rightly states that “the most suitable and efficient method to prepare a role is getting familiar with the role by physical activity.”<sup>160</sup> Here, **physical activity** is understood as any manifestation of the body segments or of the entire body, of a technique, but by **physical activity** the above mentioned author also understands **specialised physical exercise**. K. Stanislavski rightly stated that analysing the drama, the role, by using the appropriate physical participation from the very first rehearsals creates the atmosphere of authenticity. Even a simple jump to see over a high fence can be viewed as **physical participation**; through repetitions, this element or **physical exercise** captures the form, rhythm and attitude required by the role. The right posture, characteristic of the particular character impersonated in the role, necessary to enter the stage, should be thoroughly rehearsed; mastering the emotions which take hold of the actor, especially during the first scenes of a performance. K. Stanislavski calls the new methodology of working for the role “**the method of physical activities**” and he insisted that this should be understood in the sense that he attached to it in “**stage training**” and not in the sense of “**athletic training in sports**”, which focuses on intense development of physical abilities. The Russian actor emphasized that a role is created by an actor’s entire set of faculties – intellectual, emotional, psychological and physical, which has been accepted as an axiom by all theatre professionals.

There are various **physical activities** extracted from social activities, such as walking, holding, opening a window, jumping, lifting a suitcase; by stage convention, they have a particular purpose. However, K. Stanislavski referred only to “**the simple physical activity**” and considered that it lies at the foundation of any “**physical activity**.” Here is, for instance, a sequence of **simple physical activities**: the actor comes closer, raises his right hand to signal hello, hands over a message can represent a **physical activity** such as meeting someone, carrying out an order, or making an announcement.

**The simple physical activity** is not a mere expressive gesture or movement, it is primarily an **activity**. Anything happening on the stage is meant for a particular purpose. A **simple physical activity** is defined as any movement of the actor’s body that is carried out for a particular purpose. Similar to a dancer, ballet dancer, athlete or any highly performing gymnast, the actor performs **simple physical activities** in an organic sequence in order to achieve a well defined **physical activity**. In this comparison in which the **simple physical activity** has a fundamental role in both Theater and highly performing sports, there is also a difference in the way muscle force is graded, as well as other motive faculties (speed in execution, speed in reacting, resilience, deftness) in performing **simple physical activities**; this difference results from the different purpose of each of the two domains: **the simple physical activity** is a component of the creative process: **the performance and the competition**, respectively.

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<sup>160</sup> N. Abalkin, *Sistemul lui Stanislavski și teatrul sovietic*, Editura Cartea rusă, 1955. p.199 p. 199-200

**The simple physical activity** in K. Stanislavski's system is the result of a union between movement, thought and feeling. In performing a **simple physical activity** on the stage, the various muscle groups involved participate, along with the entire nervous system through the actor's will, emotions and feelings. Thus, the actor, as well as the athlete, participates entirely in performing **the simple physical activity**. Decoding **the simple physical activity** should be simple, easy to understand and to perceive by the spectators and should render the meaning and the importance of what is going on.

In many texts about drama, there is a constant parallel between the actor and a gymnast or athlete, but equally there is a warning against the "danger" of **intense physical training**. Within the given context, we shall try to offer factual arguments for the role of **the simple physical activity** and of Physical Education implicitly in the formation of the professionals in the two professions: the actor and the athlete; in doing so, we shall start from the premise that each domain appropriately adapts and graduates its objectives, the necessary **simple physical activities**. Aiming at breaking the barriers of this "danger" that we have identified in the readings from texts about drama, we shall emphasize the similarity between the psychological and physical training of the actor and that of the athlete, but especially the benefits obtained from "borrowing" certain methods from/to each of the two domains.

We should also remark on the fact that "physical training" is also included among the tasks of Physical Education, while the psychological training will complement the domain **Highly performing Sports**. The increasingly close connection is thus established between **Physical Education – the training of the highly performing athlete** and **the training of the actor**, where Physical Education has an important, even coordinating – role:

**Physical Education**

**the athlete's training**

**the actor's training**

**The simple physical activity** suggested by Stanislavski is the compressed expression of the character's inner state or the atmosphere of the situation and of the actor's physical state. Adrian Dragnea<sup>161</sup> convincingly argues that "an individual (whether an actor or an athlete, we could add) involved in a **creative activity** (or competition) is a person fully engaged with his entire biological, psychological and social sphere"<sup>162</sup>; as Stanislavski stated, "the psychological aspect can be studied only in direct relation to the human being's activities and deeds."<sup>163</sup> Experience and the criterion of practice was placed at the foundation

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<sup>161</sup> Profesorul universitar dr. Adrian Dragnea este șeful disciplinelor *Teoria și metodică antrenamentului sportiv și Bazele exercițiilor fizice din A.N.E.F.S.*, licențiat în Educație fizică și sport și în Psihologie.

<sup>162</sup> Adrian Dragnea, *Antrenamentul sportiv, teorie și metodică*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, R.A., p. 230

<sup>163</sup> N. Abalkin, *Sistemul lui Stanislavski și teatrul sovietic*, București, Editura Cartea rusă, 1955, p. 170

of Stanislavski's system. The need to find a theoretical and objective basis for the results of his own experience made K. Stanislavski resort to science and theoretical thinking. Thus, he drew his inspiration from the practice of Indian yoga and created a set of **special exercises** that were mainly devised to train the actor to relax tense muscles, to develop attention, to teach the training actor how to focus and direct his thoughts towards one point only (without, however, any religious or philosophical implications).

In K. Stanislavski's view, the actor's physical training should be adapted to the medium of drama and should not be similar to the training of a weight lifter, but should not be altogether absent either. Muscle cramps are damaging to the creative process. This is only one of the reasons why relaxation exercises are necessary: "when tenseness is felt in the speech organ, even people with wonderful native voices can begin to croak or even become speechless. When the legs get cramped, the actor will walk like one struck by paralysis, when the arms get cramped they become stiff and turn into sticks and move like stiles. Cramps alter the actor's countenance and prevent him from acting. It is even worse when cramps appear on the face muscles and disfigure, paralyse or block facial expressiveness. Cramps can appear in the diaphragm and other muscles that participate in the process of breathing and the actor goes out of breath. Such phenomena prevent the artist from living the role, from giving an outer expression to this experience and inner state."<sup>164</sup> K. Stanislavski clearly explains the negative effects of a body which is tense and insufficiently trained; the same explanation holds for the athlete's training and no one has more poignantly emphasized the need for **physical training** and **psychological training sessions**. Relaxation and self-control exercises before the creative act are recommended with the aim at unlocking freedom in action. They equally have the role of creating a mechanism of self control, a regular habit that can govern the entire organism not so much in the quiet moments as in the "minutes of high nervous and physical excitement."<sup>165</sup>

The interest shown by various specialists in clarifying the relation between Physical Education and thinking, especially philosophical thinking, is considered to belong to the wholistic complete educational process. The issue of the relation between **physical activities** and **intellectual activity** brings to the fore the idea of the athlete's training not as a purpose in itself, to create a "professional" athlete, but, in a broader sense, to create a complete human being, as the sum of the ethic and aesthetic features which are characteristic of the ancient human ideal of moral and physical beauty.

The **Physical Education** that Platon speaks of in his dialogues on political topics such as *The Republic* or *The Laws* is, along with the education of the soul, an important part of the virtuous citizen in the ideal city. This ideal of harmony is one of the most important and at the same time one of the most original contributions that Ancient Greece made to the entire history of Physical

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<sup>164</sup> K. S. Stanislavski, *Munca actorului cu sine însuși, Însemnările zilnice ale unui elev*, p. 133

<sup>165</sup> Idem p. 136

Education. Theoretically speaking, the human being is seen as a complex combination of physical and spiritual features which can constantly be improved and is aspiring towards the ideal.<sup>166</sup> Stanislavski, the creator of the actor's training "system" of global fame, was familiar with this part of the ancient thinking.

In ancient times, the modern concept that today we call Physical Education was associated with Gymnastics, a term which K. Stanislavski used in presenting the system he created to train his pupils and in which physical training was of the highest importance. Intensive research of the actor's being, his body and soul, from head to toe, and the adaptation to art's requirement were hard to accept even by some of Stanislavski's pupils, but mostly by certain actors of a mannerist bombastic style of acting. Stanislavski's principles required a daily method and a work routine which is undoubtedly unique and always proved efficient. K. Stanislavski, and other contemporaries as well, created and perfected methods for the actors' training inspired from the theories and practice of the art of movement and its advantages as they can be found in the domain of **Physical education**.

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<sup>166</sup> Tsoukalas-Kotsiris, Dionysios, *Educația fizică în concepția lui Platon*, Editura G.M.I. S.R.L., 2007, p.4