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## "We Need New Forms": The Systems Influence on the Development of the Group Theatre

Colby Sostarich

### Prologue

On a cold and snowy day in 1924 a troupe of Russian actors, led by Constantin Stanislavsky, was making their way through Washington D.C. to visit the White House. The Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, invited the artists to an audience with the president. Once at the White House, a few cultural differences between the Americans and the Russians became apparent. The Russian habit of removing and checking winter clothes once inside a building was not observed, forcing the actors to awkwardly carry their coats. To make matters worse, the demands of the president's office kept them waiting, though the appointment had a set time. Due to the awkward situation, Stanislavsky began performing to lighten the mood. He demonstrated the elaborate way that men and women used to bow during the eighteenth-century. This frivolity was suddenly cut short as the troupe was herded into the company of President Calvin Coolidge.<sup>[1]</sup>

Though Stanislavsky was an informal cultural ambassador between the two countries, Coolidge seemed to be rather ambivalent to the meeting. Elizabeth Reynolds-Hapgood, an American accompanying the crew, noted the president's cool reaction. To Hapgood it was "impossible to guess whether he had any idea that standing there before him were the actors of the world famous Moscow Art Theatre--who, incidentally, were the first persons with Soviet Passports to be received at the Whitehouse."<sup>[2]</sup> Stanislavsky and his troupe were greeted kindly by the president, but were not allowed to speak because a foreign citizen could only talk with the president through an ambassador. There was no ambassador for the Soviet Union yet, so they were forced to sit through the meeting in silence. Though the gathering was less than glamorous, the actors were not bothered. They left the president to go practice for their next play where they would be pretending to be Tsars.<sup>[3]</sup>

The conference between Stanislavsky and Coolidge is not remembered as some great meeting of the minds. This meeting was not a large political or artistic triumph, but it represents an important step in the evolution of the relationship between the Russian art community and America. While the event could be representative of the political environment in the 1920's, the sheer fact the meeting even took place added to the mythos of Stanislavsky.<sup>[4]</sup> He was an artist so great that even during the first American tour, he and the Moscow Art Theatre (MXT) were recognized for their artistic contributions. Though he was not able to ease the political tension between the two countries, his presence in America started a process of cultural exchange. This meeting would be the first of many points of contact between the Russian figure and American culture, thus marking the beginning of the Stanislavsky tradition in the United States.

Constantin Stanislavsky brought a revolutionary theory to America. His ideas, known collectively as the System, were a combination of exercises, techniques, and concepts that changed the interoperation of characters, emotional states, and textual analysis. The all-encompassing training regime, developed in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, responded to the natural and realistic artistic and theatrical movements popular during the period. By employing the System, actors could accurately portray the lives and emotions of characters developed by the great

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playwrights of the time. The theory, introduced to America by the 1923-24 tour of the Moscow Art Theatre and subsequently by Russian émigré teachers, had already undergone radical changes. By the time of its introduction in the United States, it was not the same series of techniques and exercises developed by Stanislavsky in Russia. Though they bear striking similarities, the key differences altered the application and realization of the System. Stanislavsky might be a theatrical hero, but his pure thoughts on the process of acting were not introduced by the American Tour, the Group Theatre, or even through his own writing. Instead, a series of mimics were used as the foundation of the System in America, and the final creation developed a new breed of distinctly American techniques that changed the course of theatrical development in the United States.

The origins of the System and its creator have become theatrical legend. Practitioners hailed Stanislavsky and his creation as a brilliant contribution to the study of acting. Stanislavsky became synonymous with certain ideas that allowed theatre to evolve into its present form. His techniques provide a framework to create realistic characters and emotions on stage in the actor's pursuit for artistic truth. By utilizing texts developed during specific artistic movements, realism and modernism, Stanislavsky introduced a style of acting that depended upon the actors living the part and not simply acting it out. Originally, the System was a loosely defined set of rules that allowed access to the inner technique "that is necessary for promoting a proper *creative mood*[that] is based in the main on will."<sup>[5]</sup> It accessed a form of acting that tapped into the realistic and naturalistic artistic movements of the day by basing the training and rehearsal process on a strong foundation of style, concentration, and given circumstances.

Shortly after its introduction in America, theatre practitioners in New York adopted the System. Through experiences with Russian émigré teachers like Richard Boleslavsky, new versions of the theory, such as Lee Strasberg's Method, were created. These new forms of the System became the foundation for a burgeoning company, the Group Theatre. The young artists who would make up the Group Theatre were highly influenced by the foundation Stanislavsky provided. Responsible for popularizing the use of the System, the Group Theatre's experiments created even more theories associated with Stanislavsky's original ideas. By 1934, the differing opinions of how the System should be applied created a wide schism between American actors. Members of the Group Theatre, including Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, visited Moscow in order to learn about the System developed by Stanislavsky and his colleagues. Upon returning to America, Strasberg acknowledged the System provided a good foundation, but felt that his own work improved upon the foundation provided by the Russians. The evolution was a result of his method being an American interpretation and not simply a copy of Stanislavsky.<sup>[6]</sup> Stella Adler, an actress in the Group Theatre, also sought out Stanislavsky, desiring lessons in the System. Adler gained a better understanding of the faults manifesting in the American System and decided to return to the source. In a polarizing event that divided the group of thespians, Adler returned to America urging a more stringent application of Stanislavsky's core ideas. The Group split into two camps, those that followed Adler, and those that followed Strasberg. One member compared this ideological schism to that of the Republicans and Democrats.<sup>[7]</sup> All of the multiple schools of thought that exist count Stanislavsky as their founding father and work to uphold the ideals of the System he created. It is through Adler, Strasberg, and their colleague's work that the true transformation of the Stanislavsky System occurred, and simultaneously entered America as the de facto foundation for any aspiring actor.

The aim of this paper is to explore the interpretation of the System and the influences that radically changed its practical application by the Group Theatre through the examination of the published material of the individuals involved. In order to adapt the artistic style for an American audience, artists needed to introduce a hybridized version of the technique that pulled elements from both dominant cultures. These concepts, communicated through émigré teachers, specifically Richard Boleslavsky, and his writings provide the point of contact between the Russian practitioner and the new, distinctly American form of theatre that was built upon Stanislavsky's foundation.

A majority of the current research on Stanislavsky attempts to either break or uphold the image created around his work. The split focus of the research indicates that though some historians, such as Sharon Marie Carnicke, feel the myth needs to be rewritten. Carnicke, one of the leading scholars on Stanislavsky, centered her work on the mistranslation of the Russian Master's work specifically by American Artists. Her work *Stanislavsky in Focus: An Acting Master for the Twenty-First Century* broke down the evolution of the System into three parts: transmission, translation, and transformation. Each of these sections worked to demythologize the man behind the ideas by introducing little known concepts in an attempt to reevaluate Stanislavsky's work. Through her discussion, she postulates the idea that the System was only formalized out of a need for Stanislavsky's financial gain. To the contrary, it was not truly a defined set of rules as once believed.<sup>[8]</sup> Carnicke focused on the larger political and economic climate. For her, most of the transformation seemed to occur out of an unconscious and practical nature.

In slight contrast to Carnicke, Mel Gordon analyzed each theorist or theatre company in an attempt to clarify the exact nature of the evolution. By providing condensed practical acting exercises, Gordon attempted to illustrate how specific personalities and the social climates they inhabited had a larger effect on the evolution of the System than previously thought.<sup>[9]</sup> He explored the different theatrical companies that employed a version of the System; Gordon discussed the American Laboratory Theatre and the Group Theatre in an effort to explain how individual artists were the driving force behind the transformation of the concepts presented. To him, Stanislavsky's rise to theatrical authority was a matter of chance.<sup>[10]</sup>

Rounding out the major scholars on Stanislavsky's work is Jean Benedetti. His scholarship deals directly with the translations of the Russians original material. He began to reinterpret the original manuscripts in an effort to provide a better translation of Stanislavsky's acting manuals than the accepted ones created by Elizabeth Reynolds-Hapgood. His translations set the new standard of excellence in the translation of dramatic theory, due to the fact that, "they are more closely aligned with how Stanislavski [sic] originally interpreted his works to be published."<sup>[11]</sup> Benedetti worked to introduce a new version of the System to the English-speaking world, and he provided a more complete idea of the original System and its subsequent variations.

### Act I: The Creation of the System

The System developed during the infancy of the Moscow Art Theatre. The idea for MXT began to percolate in June of 1897. Constantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko met for the first time to discuss the idea of a national theatre. The conversation, beginning at 2 p.m. and lasting until 8 a.m. the next morning, would cover many of the important aspects of the theatre from how it would be run to the types of shows that would be produced. Also discussed was the clear division of work. Stanislavsky noted that the two would play to their specific artistic strengths saying, "The literary veto belongs to Nemirovich-Danchenko, the artistic veto to Stanislavsky."<sup>[12]</sup> This clear division of artistic work proved to be decisive, because it would allow Stanislavsky to fully explore the implementation of the System in the years to come. In order to create the artistic vision of the theater, he would be able to direct, in addition to acting in the plays. It was through the inaugural seasons of MXT that the early experiments of the System were implemented.

In the first season of MXT, the pair convinced author Anton Chekhov to allow the newly founded company to produce his work, *The Seagull*. This particular play, which explores emerging artistic forms, premiered in St. Petersburg a few years before the foundation of MXT. This production failed critically. <sup>[13]</sup> Stanislavsky observed that, "All the theatres in Russia and a great many in Europe tried to interpret Chekhov with old methods of acting. And the result? They failed."<sup>[14]</sup> To Stanislavsky, the simple reason for their lack of success was that Chekhov and his contemporaries moved into a new and unexplored realm of artistic development. As the director, Stanislavsky did what he could to help the young actors of the company find the right path to art. He created an easily

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accessible outer mood that influenced the actors. Through the direction and *mises-en-scene* Stanislavsky produced an environment where during special moments "the actor stopped playing; he began to live the role, became the character he was portraying."<sup>[15]</sup> While the men in charge would describe this as a creative miracle, it proved to be a great success critically for the company. It also indicated an artistic milestone for the System. This rudimentary way of creating mood would allow actors to access a creative state that would be vaguely reminiscent of the state that Stanislavsky attempted to teach his young actors to reach through the use of the System. His descriptions of the performances showed an unconscious move towards the implementation of the System, even before it had been established.

Anton Chekhov's work, more than any other author influenced the development of the System in Russia. To Stanislavsky, the playwright stood apart from his contemporaries because Chekhov "like no one else...knows how to choose and convey human moods, intersperse them with every day life scenes of sharply different character and endow them with sparkling humor."<sup>[16]</sup> The characters and dialogue sharpened the images of everyday life to a type of hyperrealism. He pulled from impressionism, naturalism, realism, and the other artistic movements of the day to provide a hard-hitting drama, without relying upon the melodramatic plot points or spectacle.<sup>[17]</sup> The most important element of this work was the authenticity of the characters. As Stanislavsky noted, the outward development was apparent, but the inner development was surprisingly complex. This allowed Stanislavsky to experiment with characters as he directed and acted in the productions.<sup>[18]</sup> Chekhov's characters remained different from other characters, because they had a soul. They developed a complex personality that remained underneath the text and the given circumstances. To effectively create a production, the actors needed to live, not perform. In order to live the part, a new technique was necessary.

Starting to play with ideas in these early productions, Stanislavsky soon found that established actors did not respond well to his unique style of training.<sup>[19]</sup> It was only in 1912, with the opening of the First Studio in Moscow, that Stanislavsky began to experiment and implement his techniques on a young group of Russian actors. During these rehearsals, an effective terminology and procedure emerged.<sup>[20]</sup> Stanislavsky's goal was simple, he wanted to break away from the artistic tradition of Russian acting in order to allow artists to fully explore the "life of human spirit and naturally incarnate it in a beautiful artistic form on stage."<sup>[21]</sup> This type of acting could be accessed through a specific set of rules that would be laid out during an intensive training regime. It is important to realize that, while the avenue to achieving artistic success involved different aspects of training from previous and subsequent traditions, the core goal of all practitioners was to provide theatrical truth on stage.

There is a specific vocabulary associated with the System. It is concentrated on terms that would allow the actors to release their emotion to find truth on stage. Russian émigré teachers first transmitted Stanislavsky's ideas to America. They were able to adapt the verbiage into English that was necessary to apply the tenets of the System. This vocabulary would then be applied back to the Stanislavsky's thoughts with the publication of *An Actor Prepares*. The jargon, used by actors all over the world, includes familiar phrases, such as the *magic if*, but also is made up of misconceptions and misinterpretations. To fully understand how parts of the System transitioned into an American theory, basic understanding of its general concepts is required.

The main concepts of the System, combined with other intensive ideas, were used in an effort to help the actors begin to live their parts. Stanislavsky felt that the System should, "fall into two main parts: 1) the actor's inner and outer work on himself; 2) inner and outer work on the role."<sup>[22]</sup> Before an actor could fully explore a character, he had to work on himself. Through a series of exercises and study in movement techniques such as ballet, fencing, and yoga, the actor could build a strong foundation on which to explore a multitude of characters. Like a chameleon, the actors must be able to adapt physically and emotionally to the circumstance. The Russian stated that there are times "we [as artists] must express on stage the inexpressible."<sup>[23]</sup> By exposing a young actor to the

different elements that make up their sense of self, the System allowed them to delve deeper into the psyche of the character. The System relied on concepts and exercises to help build truthful characters.

To utilize the System was to employ what Stanislavsky referred to as the three bases. Action, emotion and the subconscious, combined to form the foundation. To find this creative state the actor should attempt to focus on affective memory, the given circumstances, the task, the bits, and the three bases of the System. These concepts allowed each artist to begin his quest for a relaxed and clear interpretation of the character. Within action, the actor focuses on specific objectives that are used to express physical or emotional states.<sup>[24]</sup> These tasks are identified from the bits of text that help provide the actor with their given circumstances and emotional state. The given circumstances are the basics provided by the text, such as character, status, time, place, etc.<sup>[25]</sup> Stanislavsky believed that these circumstances were the basic core of the characters and helped illuminate the entire journey of the characters. He noted that the circumstances helped create the actions that would be utilized, explaining that "...when you are choosing a bit of action leave feeling and spiritual content alone. Never seek to be jealous, or to make love or to suffer for its own sake." He continued the idea that these bits and circumstances were connected. They formed an unbroken line of feeling from the beginning to the end of the play. To him, "all such feelings are the result of something that has gone before. Of the things that go before you should think as hard as you can. As for the result, it will produce itself."<sup>[26]</sup> By working with the text and the given circumstances, the emotions necessary to create a truthful character would eventually reveal themselves to the actor. The process would be organic and allow for real emotion, instead of forced presentation.

The emotional base of the System involves the ideas of affective memory. Referred to in *An Actor Prepares* as emotion memory, the general idea was to activate emotions and experiences from the personal life and use that memory to recreate that emotion on stage. Simple experiences, like the feel of money, could help ground actors. To Stanislavsky, "the broader your emotion memory, the richer your material for inner creativeness."<sup>[27]</sup> It was this idea Americans would overdevelop in years to come. Also central to emotion were the concepts of the imagination and the power of the word *if*. Imagination allowed actors to fully realize the part. In the System, the actor had to believe that they were truly living in the situation, within reason. The use of the *magic if* allowed actors to build a creative and interesting character. The idea of *if* was to pose a 'what if' question. One of Stanislavsky's examples asked students what they would do if they judged a court proceeding. The case was morally complicated, so if the actor were truly in the position, how would they truthfully react to the problem in front of them?<sup>[28]</sup> This concept could be applied to every character and has become one of the main ideas remembered and reshaped in the American version of the System.

The idea of the System was to create truth and beauty on stage. It developed out of a desire to recreate some of the happy accidents that were occurring on stages and MXT. It became a tool to teach young actors how to access parts of the spirit not needed in previous theatrical experiences. Little ideas, like how everything on stage needed to happen for a purpose, helped give breath to the artistry that Stanislavsky attempted to create through his work. He truly believed that acting was an underrated art. He knew part of the problem was that, "In our art you must live the part every moment that you are playing it and every time. Every time it is recreated it must be lived afresh and incarnated afresh."<sup>[29]</sup> Everything in the System was meant to help, not hinder the actor in their development of artistic truth. Though this is a basic explanation of the System, these terms helped provide American artists with a template on which to build. While these terms were core to Stanislavsky's teaching, not all of them made the transition to America.

## Act II: The 1923-24 Tour of MXAT

The modification of this new technique began during a multi-city international tour of Europe and North America. In an effort to open trade with the America, the Soviet Union began to ship over the best items it had to offer,

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including the pinnacle of its artistic culture, the Moscow Art Theatre.<sup>[30]</sup> As part of MXT's strategy for financial prosperity, the company sent its best and brightest actors to give over 380 performances in major American cities.<sup>[31]</sup> Coinciding with the tour was the development and subsequent publication of Stanislavsky's autobiography, *My Life in Art*. This would be his first major work published in America. American audiences and practitioners were enthralled following this first point of contact with the Soviet artists. However, the connection of the tour to the introduction of Stanislavsky's System is a fallacy. Through his own writings and productions, Stanislavsky only introduced basic elements that had developed from his experimentations. While the tour provided an opportunity to witness parts of the techniques in action and created a fervor surrounding Stanislavsky, the System gained its complete explanation through the efforts of Richard Boleslavsky.

While much had been written about Stanislavsky's new approach to theatre in industry periodicals like *Theatre Arts*, few had witnessed its implementation. At that point in time, American theatre was deeply impersonal. The main shows of Broadway were made up of reviews popularized by producers, such as Florenz Ziegfeld, that focused more on spectacle than substance.<sup>[32]</sup> The Moscow Art Theatre's tour began in 1923 and did not end until the following year. Upon their arrival, the concept of Russian realism was met with great acclaim as it was noted, "Stanislavsky had broken with the entire modern theatre movement, which lays its chief stress on stage design and mechanical efforts."<sup>[33]</sup> Instead, the System placed emphasis upon the artist, first and foremost. This break from American tradition entranced audiences, who managed to sit through performances completely in Russian.<sup>[34]</sup> The core of the performances eschewed the idea of spectacle, focusing on the characters and the emotion they experienced. Even in the early days of MXT, the emphasis of the productions rested on the emotional life of the actor, and that idea would be carried through the tour.

This style of acting would be hailed as the new wave of theatrical ingenuity, and considerable interest was given to the style and the creator himself. Profiles on Stanislavsky were included in periodicals around the country. The interest in the artist was so great that in a preface to his autobiography, *My Life in Art* (1924) Stanislavsky notes that he "wrote this book at the request of an American firm which published it in Boston."<sup>[35]</sup> The autobiography, though produced for financial gain, provided insight into the interworking of the developing creative techniques of Stanislavsky. It also delivered a look into how Stanislavsky viewed America. Stanislavsky dedicated the book to the "hospitable America as a token and a remembrance from the Moscow Art Theatre which she took so kindly to her heart."<sup>[36]</sup> Even in the immediate aftermath of the tour, Stanislavsky recognized that Western audiences had embraced his work.

The publication of his memoir coincided with the end of the tour and provided American actors with basic scraps of the System though it was in no way the comprehensive work of the artistic discoveries that Stanislavsky planned to eventually write. Though this work did not fully explain Stanislavsky's "methods of actor's creation and how to approach it,"<sup>[37]</sup> a blue print of basic tenants began to form. He detailed how he worked with members of the First Studio to develop foundations of the System.<sup>[38]</sup> Describing the basic elements of how to train a young actor, these chapters included instructions on how to introduce inexperienced actors to the stage.<sup>[39]</sup> This blue print was some of the first written instructions on how to implement the techniques being developed.

Stanislavsky first noted on the tour that "There has been a great deal spoken and written about my system of directing artists, and many people have tried to interpret it without having grasped the principles upon which it is founded."<sup>[40]</sup> The members of the press could not fully capture the theories and the ideas. Even fellow artists were attempting to break the ethereal elements of the theory down into scientific terms.<sup>[41]</sup> Concepts became imposed upon the work, creating a shaky foundation. Central to the System was the idea that "only the human personality and the human soul are endlessly interesting and diverting."<sup>[42]</sup> This concept, built upon the theatrical movement of realism, encompassed much of the work being presented by MXT. The two-year tour created a clear



dichotomy between the emotion filled acting style presented by MXT and the popular American theatre of the 1920's.

Stanislavsky did not spend much time describing the two-year departure from the Soviet Union. Though this trip would prove to be interesting to the entire troupe, he noted that it would be impossible to describe the experience fully.<sup>[43]</sup> What he did note is that the tour actually helped the System evolve. Stanislavsky, perhaps because of the separation from Nimerovich-Danchenko, was afforded the opportunity to explore different aspects of the System. He stated that he "made new and important discoveries in the sphere of sound and speech, discoveries that were of considerable interest to me at that time."<sup>[44]</sup> Upon his return to Moscow, he continued with the explorations of voice and speech. He worked to create a new way to access pure human emotion. The upheaval in Moscow caused by the rise of Lenin and the subsequent aftermath caused confusion within the theatre world. No longer were theatres simply focused on one objective, but they adopted stage tricks, satire, revues, and new-paper dramas. This allowed Stanislavsky to pull from developing artistic styles.<sup>[45]</sup> He continued to grow as an artist. With each new discovery, his System continued to change. The comprehensive System, which would be introduced over a decade later, contained ideas that were built upon a foundation formed during and after the tour.

Besides being a critical success for Stanislavsky and MXT, the tour became an inspiration for American practitioners. The theatre community welcomed the actors whole-heartedly. In New York, a small group of impressionable youngsters gained a desire to learn the techniques being witnessed on stage. However, they would find difficulty in their learning, because of the cultural divide between Russia and America. This divide was not only physical but mental, as "The Russian word for acting has no real English equivalent- deep feelings comes the nearest to it."<sup>[46]</sup> Before this point, theatre in America that was not a review show consisted of great presentational actors and melodramas. This new style of theatre was not only inspiring to watch, but also something that Americans sought to emulate. A young Lee Strasberg "saw Stanislavski's [sic] work with the Moscow Art Theatre...during the 1923-24 seasons...[and] recognized his genius and felt responsible to carry on his work."<sup>[47]</sup> This type of interest in the System led to a desire to develop this technique in America. In order to learn the concepts that were on stage during the tour Americans needed a teacher versed in Stanislavsky's method. They would find such a teacher in Richard Boleslavsky, an inaugural student in the First Studio, and by 1924 a resident of the United States.

Richard Boleslavsky took advantage of his own history with the creator of the System. He established a laboratory that would be hailed as the first school that specifically taught the works of Stanislavsky. Coinciding with the 1923 tour of MXT "Boleslavsky held courses in its theory of theatre."<sup>[48]</sup> He capitalized upon the success of the tour and out of that grew a business that would teach the students who would go on to form the Group Theater. Though they might have been given a brief and fragmented introduction by the tour, it was Boleslavsky who truly defined his vision of the System in America and influenced a generation of theatre practitioners.

The biggest irony of this tour was that many of the plays and the actors that were brought over from the Soviet Union made up the old guard, so to speak. Many of the leading actor's techniques and the productions themselves were developed without the use of the System. The famous, established actors who helped found MXT were not interested in the experimentation or new techniques that Stanislavsky developed.<sup>[49]</sup> Many of the plays were also first directed before the System had officially begun its development. The American Method began to develop off a foundation that was not rooted in the experiments of the System, but in techniques of the established artists.<sup>[50]</sup>



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**Act III: The American Laboratory Theatre**

Richard Boleslavsky's work with the System at the American Laboratory Theatre allowed it to unconsciously evolve. Boleslavsky learned the System during its inception in the First Studio. He was part of the collection of students that provided Stanislavsky with the opportunity to put his ideas to the test.<sup>[51]</sup> The First Studio, founded in 1912, included many names that would later become famous theatrical theorists in Russia and in America. Michael Chekhov, Evgeny Vakhtangov, Maria Ouspenskaya, and Richard Boleslavsky all received their formative education in the System while studying at the First Studio.<sup>[52]</sup> In addition to providing a laboratory for Stanislavsky to experiment in, the First Studio provided a shield for young actors to grow artistically without the burdens of rehearsals or performances.<sup>[53]</sup> According to Stanislavsky, "...here we gathered all who wanted to study my 'system.' I began to give a full course of study as I had then worked it out."<sup>[54]</sup> While Stanislavsky participated in the education of his pupils, Leopold Sulerzhitsky, a trusted confidant, oversaw much of the day-to-day activity. Boleslavsky held a prominent position in the studio, providing preparatory work for the early productions.<sup>[55]</sup> While Stanislavsky influenced the creation of the First Studio, his laissez-faire approach allowed it to develop outside of his purview. Through his own admission, the final phase of the First Studio's development occurred without any connection to the Russian.<sup>[56]</sup> Boleslavsky and the others continued to explore on the foundation created by Stanislavsky but transformed his ideas to fit their specific needs and experimentations.

When Boleslavsky left Russia, he carried the ideas of Stanislavsky with him, but he also was influenced by the developments made within the First Studio. Making his way to America in the early 1920's, Boleslavsky quickly became the expert on Russian technique in America. The public was quick to note his connection to the famous art institution. Coinciding with the first foreign tour, in which Boleslavsky participated: a series of lectures were held at the Princess Theatre. This series of ten lectures outlined the lessons learned at the First Studio.<sup>[57]</sup> The *New York Times* billed him as an "exponent to the American Theatre of the theory of Stanislavsky."<sup>[58]</sup> Stanislavsky supported the original lectures. By taking advantage of the tour and Stanislavsky's support, Boleslavsky generated enough interest in the System to gain support for creation of an institution where it would be taught exclusively. He would impart the wisdom he learned from the Russian master to a group of young individuals who desired to learn the new technique.

In an effort to further the education of American practitioners in the ways of the Russian technique, he created the American Laboratory Theatre with fellow émigré Maria Ouspenskaya in 1923. One of the main critics of the Laboratory Theatre and its eventual successor, the Group Theatre, Paul Mann noted that, "they developed only the part of the technique which they understood, despite the fact that in Russia Stanislavski [sic] and his followers were constantly experimenting."<sup>[59]</sup> This was not true in America, as experimentations within the Laboratory and its successors stopped. The System became a fixed ideology under the tutelage of Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya.

While Boleslavsky wrote and lectured, much of Ouspenskaya's work was done in the classroom. Known as Madame to her students, she introduced them to basic elements of the System. The American Laboratory Theatre did not produce outstanding work; however, it managed to intrigue and educate the next generation of American artists. The teachings of Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya were responsible for the creative molding of Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, to name a few. While MXT introduced the power of the System, the American Laboratory provided the first educational point of contact between American students and the technique. However, Boleslavsky left the country too early to truly develop a complete understanding of the System. His teachings focused on the basics.<sup>[60]</sup> Because he and Ouspenskaya did not receive an education in the full realization of the theory, the ideas that they taught American students included rudimentary concepts that were excised by Stanislavsky in later experiments.

Ouspenskaya's classes built a foundation based on concentration and emotion exercises helping to elevate that particular aspect of the System. Working with exercises that discussed what Boleslavsky referred to as analytic memory, Ouspenskaya would lead students through a series of exercises meant to tap into and train the senses to respond.[61] According to Strasberg's class notes, the purpose of these exercises was to allow actors to communicate emotion by feeling it and the audience should be able to "understand without your [the actor] telling us, either by words or gestures." [62] For Ouspenskaya and Boleslavsky, work with emotion became the central aspect of the lessons, and one of the most important traits that students, such as Strasberg, treated as a part of an unchangeable dogma.

Affective memory was central to the teachings at the Laboratory Theatre. Strasberg diligently notated Boleslavsky's thoughts on the subject. To Boleslavsky, the purpose of affective memory was to "not really to feel or see or touch something- that is hallucination--but to remember the mood when doing that." [63] To Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya, emotional memory was the cornerstone of the System. They provided the paints and brushes to create a colorful and true image of a character. [64] He and his colleagues were taking the ideas and concepts of Stanislavsky and adapting them to fit their needs. Knowledge of the technique remained incomplete, as Stanislavsky's ideas on emotional memory had evolved past those introduced by The American Laboratory Theatre. To Stanislavsky emotion could be found in the text and given circumstances, emotional memory provided a crutch to the inexperienced. This was not the only deviation, but during the tenure of the Lab, it remained the most egregious. In addition to misapplication of technique, the System's introduction into American society was hindered by his individual idiosyncrasies.

The classes at the American laboratory theatre also allowed for a cultural translation of language. It is important to note that extensive research has been done on Boleslavsky's language. His teaching permitted a change in the definitions of the System to occur. English was not the Russian's first language, but his third, and his accent caused confusion. Words like "affective" became "effective" and "bit" evolved into the American concept of "beats." [65] While this subtle mistranslation of words seems minor, it is indicative of a greater evolution happening to the theory as a whole. Strasberg himself found the language barrier confusing and defined the two categories affective memory as sense memory and emotional memory. [66] The students attached great importance to these 'new' words without even realizing that a change had taken place. The new words became part of the System, influencing the next generation of theatre students. This cultural transition was already beginning to occur.

The American Laboratory Theatre lasted for only ten years. By the close of the 1920's, the influence of the school on the New York theatre scene was beginning to wane. By 1933, in the culmination of his teaching, Boleslavsky was able to publish a book based on his original lectures and his experiences both at MXT and the Lab. This educational handbook provided the basics of the System, as Boleslavsky understood them. It should be noted that Boleslavsky's *Acting: The First Six Lessons* was published a full three years before the English version of Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares*. Along with providing a generation of theatrical practitioners with hands on experience, he published a working blueprint of a stunted yet useable version of the System. This publication is still in use today. While the influence of the American Laboratory Theatre was not as far-reaching as its successors, the importance of its contributions to American theatre cannot be underestimated. Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya provided an important link to Stanislavsky and his original ideas. They connect the Russian master of MXT to the Americans of the Group Theatre. It was also through their education that caused acceleration in the evolution of the System. Through their efforts, elements of the System, such as affective memory, became the staples of future American techniques.

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#### Act IV: The Group Theatre

The formation of the Group Theatre, in 1931, created new challenges as the System progressed into a completely American structure. A major difficulty in the implementation of the System in America was the different style of producing theatre. In Russia, the actors were part of one company, an institution like MXT. However, in America no similar institution existed, which "makes the use of the method difficult in American Theatre...for it is hard to practice a definite technique with partners or directors who are practicing another technique- or none at all." [67] America, with its style of producing theatre, was not conducive to the ensemble style of education and performance. This did not hinder the founder of the Group Theatre. Breaking from the American tradition, the founders formed an ensemble by pulling together a core group of practitioners who would go on to be seminal figures in the theatre world.

It was during these crucial inaugural years of the Group that the biggest deviations occurred. It was not out of malice or a desire to change, but simply a misunderstanding of the foundation. This type of transformation combined with the conscious decision to take the System and apply it to the American theatrical system adapted the technique. Through this process at the Group Theatre, the theory would become recognized and eventually accepted by American audiences. The transition of the technique was necessary to quell the naysayers who believed "that Stanislavski's [sic] method is not practical for the commercial theatre." [68] The theatre business was different; the audiences expected a specific aesthetic. The actors were young, optimistic, and a separate breed from their Russian counterparts. Their work would be directly influenced by the System in which they were working and their own personal experiences. [69] The evolution occurred because it was necessary to adapt the theory, though incomplete, in order to fit the needs of the burgeoning theatre company.

In the first years of The Group's existence, though much was made about the use of the System, true understanding seemed to elude members and large swaths of the technique remained a mystery. [70] According to Robert Lewis, the American Laboratory Theatre introduced affective memory to, "among others, Stella Adler, Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and many of the original members of the Group Theatre." [71] These actors, highly influenced by the System, believed it a vital method of training and text analysis. [72] Strasberg and Clurman believed this theory to be an effective tool to teach actors how to access emotional reserves and artistic truth quickly established the System as the main tool to be used by the Group. Though the ideas were engaged, the artistic leaders simply viewed it as a means to an end. They did not consider it special or out of the ordinary to implement the revolutionary theory.

The formation of the Group mirrored the formation of MXT. In an attempt to create an ensemble, the troupe of the Moscow Art Theatre traveled to an estate just outside of Moscow to rehearse; the Group chose to do a similar excursion to Brookfield Center, Connecticut. [73] Starting on June 8, 1931, twenty-eight actors, three directors, friends, and family made the pilgrimage from Manhattan to Connecticut to begin their experimentation. [74] At the Brookfield Center, Harold Clurman, and Lee Strasberg delivered speeches and lectures to the actors concerning truthful emotion on stage. Robert Lewis, a founding member of the Group, thought these lectures constituted the training program that would eventually "influence the acting style of a whole generation." [75] This acting style would become the Method, an interpretation often confused and interchanged with Stanislavsky's System. The key changes to emotional memory and improvisation during the rehearsal and performance process contributed to a split in thought. The application of these concepts was essentially interpreted by Strasberg and followed to the letter by members of the Group.

This summer workshop also began to add personal and American changes to interpretation of the System. Clurman and Strasberg were seen as the masters of the technique, leading rehearsals and private workshops in an attempt to provide everyone with the same training. [76] During the summer of 1931 workshop, improvisation,

and affective memory were emphasized.<sup>[77]</sup> These two concepts became central to the Method. The exercises employed in Connecticut worked masterfully and the young actors were deeply affected by the experience, treating Strasberg as a prophet. Clurman described true emotion as "something new to the actors, something basic, something almost holy."<sup>[78]</sup> The reverence given to Strasberg and his interpretation of the Method created no room for questioning or reinterpretation of the application of the System.

During the rehearsal process for the early productions of the Group Theatre, Strasberg experimented with improvisation and emotional memory. To Strasberg, "improvisation leads to a process of thought and response."<sup>[79]</sup> The improvisations allowed actors to gain insight into the characters. They would explore different areas of the character's life in order to create rounded performances. In working with these improvisations, Strasberg would lead his actors to heightened emotional states. He essentially desired his actors to trust their own emotional life to help create the experiences of the character. He relied upon this concept, and eventually his interpretation of emotional memory, or emotional recall as it would later be known, would become central to his Method. While it is true that Stanislavsky applied emotional memory, especially during the first Studio, he noted the inherent problems with relying upon this technique. To Stanislavsky, "the problem is to recapture the emotion that once flashed by like a meteor...do not count on always recovering the same impression."<sup>[80]</sup> The use of emotional memory produced quick breakthroughs, but it was a fickle technique, often producing different results on different days. Strasberg's use of this concept tied the emotional state of the performance directly to the emotional state of the actor. His interpretation of the System changed the application drastically.

Strasberg misread the purpose of the System. The Russian master envisioned that the System could be applied to many different styles of theatre. The genre of the play should have had no bearing upon its application; after all, actors sought truth in every style of theatre, not just the naturalism presented by Stanislavsky. In his work, *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky discusses his students implementing exercises on all forms of theatre, including Shakespeare. In America, Strasberg viewed the System as a viable technique for naturalistic plays only. He noted that the Group "foresaw a special problem in dealing with heightened theatrical forms such as Shakespeare, commedia dell'arte, Moliere, and musical comedy."<sup>[81]</sup> For Strasberg, the application of the natural techniques could not occur without adaptation. In order to keep the idea of inner justification and truth, the actors of the Group improvised with heightened situations, objects, paintings, and improbable adjustments to gain a better understanding on how to interpret stylized theatre.<sup>[82]</sup> Strasberg took the System in to a world of abstraction. Instead of being grounded in reality, the artist used forms of expression based outside of true emotion.

In addition to acting techniques, the Group adopted core ideas concerning art from the Russian practitioners. Central to The Group's production strategy included producing plays that spoke to the cultural and social aspects of American society. This concept opposed Stanislavsky's reasoning for producing theater. In the Russian's mind beauty helped to lift the soul, and that should be the main reason for producing art. The early plays of the Group Theatre did not focus on beauty; they sought to speak to specifically American themes.<sup>[83]</sup> As Clurman expressed, the inaugural production of Paul Green's *The House of Connelly* depicted the struggle in the South, "the emergence of a new class from among the poor tenant farmers."<sup>[84]</sup> Picking plays that dealt with social issues would soon become a tradition. Some of the greatest productions of the Group Theatre, including the collaborations with Clifford Odets, would deal with social issues. The concept that art had to actively comment upon the social issues of the time did not occur within the Russian implementation of the System. The Russian sought to create beauty by using the System. This beauty could be found within the emotions presented on stage by highly trained and nuanced actors. Strasberg's use of the System to create emotional actors undermined the Systems quest for creating beauty on stage. In order to present socially conscious theatre, Strasberg presented highly dynamic work, but placed the emphasis upon the message of the work and not the art. While these concepts were not Stanislavsky's, they worked for the Group. The greatest success of the Group implemented Strasberg's techniques.

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This inaugural production of *The House of Connelly* would further the connection between the two companies. The actors noted the striking similarities between this particular play and Chekov's masterwork *The Cherry Orchard*. The actors considered the themes and characterizations to be parallel to the Russian piece. Harold Clurman insisted that Strasberg be established as the director of this particular production. His talent, technique, and particular experience with the System made him a natural choice to lead the development of a unified technique. To Clurman, this use of the System was a natural choice because it helped in "organizing the study of parts, and above all as a means of achieving concrete results in the interpretation of plays." [85] To him, the media had placed too much emphasis upon the connection between the Moscow Art Theatre and the Group Theatre. In true form, the inaugural production established Strasberg as the leading artistic force behind the Group, just like MXT inaugural production of *The Seagull* had established Stanislavsky as the leader decades before.

Though *The House of Connelly* received strong reviews, Strasberg's handling of the acting truly began to establish the Groups aesthetic. This production provided Strasberg with the first opportunity to experiment with the implementation of the System. Robert Lewis labeled the production as where "the tiniest seeds were being sown for what was to grow into a widespread fault in the application of the Stanislavski System in American acting. That failing consisted of creating...truth." [86] This production also began fetishizing the idea of 'taking of moment' to become the character. This idea of 'taking a moment' or an actor arriving long before a cue to get in the right mindset before the scene became a central tenant of the Method. [87] Utilizing Strasberg's interpretation of emotional memory, the actors would build themselves into an emotional frenzy. They would burst onto the stage in a state of heightened emotion, and in essence, it undermined the truth of the scene. While this idea could be seen in the System, Strasberg elevated it into a position of unhealthy reliance. Though the preparation provided the actors with access to an emotion to actively pursue the part, it failed to mirror real life by providing an unnecessary complication of events where simplicity would have worked aptly. [88]

The success of *The House of Connelly* cemented the beliefs of Strasberg. His ideas concerning the techniques learned by the inaugural class defined the artistic path of the Group Theatre. He moved the Group Theatre from simply copying the success of the Moscow Art Theatre into a working artistic organism. In order to create this collective, sacrifices and changes needed to be made. These deviations provided Strasberg with emotional recall and created apprehension among other members who believed a return to the original intent of Stanislavsky was needed. Over the following season, personalities of the Group continued to clash over the interpretation of the System culminating in a schism between members during the 1934 season.

Three seasons after the inaugural production, the Group Theatre continued to develop its own artistic identity, but their use of the System was not without critics. Almost from the inception of the Group Theatre, a handful of actors questioned the lead of Lee Strasberg and his teaching. The small faction, led by Stella Adler, felt that certain elements of Strasberg's interpretation of the System combined with his bellicose personality provided an environment not conducive to artistic development. Clurman observed that Adler "hinted of a certain vague dissatisfaction she felt with Lee Strasberg's technique in regard to the actor." [89] Emphasis on the concept of affective memory allowed for easy access to emotion, but it became a crutch. Younger company members became obsessed with an often-fruitless search for artistic truth and emotion. [90] Adler and her comrades knew the importance of the System, yet they questioned the application. In 1934, as members of the Group left New York for Europe, these questions would be answered by artists from the Moscow Art Theatre and by Stanislavsky, himself. That year provided the opportunity for a decisive development of both the System and the Method, which created artistic conflict between two leading artists of the Group Theatre.

A small party of ambassadors from the Group Theatre, including Strasberg, Adler, and Clurman traveled to Moscow to view the style of theatre being developed by Stanislavsky. The purpose of this excursion was to explore the artistic achievements of the Russian theatre community. [91] This pilgrimage to the birthplace of the System

proved a seminal experience for members of the Group. Both factions journeyed to Russia, and when they returned they had both gleaned the information necessary to support their concerns and ideas about the System. For Strasberg, the trip bolstered his confidence that the Group had gone further into the understating of the System than anyone, even Stanislavsky. For Adler, the trip highlighted the concerns she felt hindered the performances of the Group. They would glean information pertinent to their own interpretation and upon their return, the dissemination of this information caused a fervor. Lewis stated, "Now there was a distinct change in attitude toward the Method in 1934 when my Group Theatre friends came back with the report from Stanislavski."<sup>[92]</sup> Contact with the original inspiration for their artistic endeavors decisively divided the two artists and created turmoil within the ranks of the Group Theatre. Approaches would be consequently changed and new ideas developed because of the discoveries made during the trip.

Lee Strasberg's stay in the Soviet Union provided him with an unexpected experience of the Russian Theatre. His remembrance of the Moscow Art Theatre was less than kind, describing how the once great theatre had decayed into a deplorable state.<sup>[93]</sup> The trip allowed him to develop the idea that his, "group in America had correctly understood and utilized the procedures that Stanislavsky supposedly stood for, that we had nothing to learn."<sup>[94]</sup> Strasberg wanted to learn from Stanislavsky's heirs and contemporaries, feeling that they produced more exciting work than MXT. He viewed the work of MXT and even the teachings of its artistic founder as from the old world and not appropriate for the Group without major changes.<sup>[95]</sup> Upon his return, Strasberg declared that though the System had provided a good foundation his work had improved it. Furthermore, he stated this evolution was necessary because his method was an American interpretation and not simply a copy of Stanislavsky's ideas. The trip provided Strasberg with the opportunity to break away from the tradition of the Russian Theatre.

Almost in complete opposition to Strasberg stood Stella Adler. During Adler's travels, she pursued Stanislavsky. Her desire to learn from the master arose out of her experience with the Group Theatre. Over the past few seasons, she started to resent, "acting with some of the principles used at the Group Theatre."<sup>[96]</sup> Adler began to isolate herself from the experiments being conducted by Strasberg, excusing herself from rehearsals and the general process. She began to hate acting and was unable to find joy in her work.<sup>[97]</sup> Her trip introduced her to something of an actor's paradise; Adler attended classes, rehearsal, and plays immersing herself into the theatrical culture of the Soviet society. She was not able to see Stanislavsky at this time, because he was recuperating from an illness in Paris.<sup>[98]</sup> After her visit to the Soviet Union, Adler and Clurman traveled home via the French capital. This trip provided the actress with a chance meeting with the master.

Stella Adler requested lessons from Stanislavsky in order to gain a proper understanding of faults being developed and to return to the source. For nearly a month, Adler and Stanislavsky worked on one scene. During this period, Adler learned a great deal about how Stanislavsky's ideas had evolved.<sup>[99]</sup> Upon her return, she set to rectify the incorrect assumptions made by The Group. As Clurman honestly described, she "...had discovered that our use of the Stanislavsky system had been incorrect. An undue emphasis on exercises concerning affective memory had warped our work with the actor..."<sup>[100]</sup> What she learned split the Group into two specific camps, those that followed Strasberg and those that wanted to learn more from Adler. These two decisive figures would effectively and consciously change the understanding of the technique.

In addition to her private tutelage, Adler's interactions with Stanislavsky and other members of MXT transformed her understanding of the System. She copied down what became the most complete version of the System in the English language. In a chart provided to the members of the Group Theatre, Adler established an understanding of the System unseen in America. She attempted to remove the emphasis upon the idea of affective memory.<sup>[101]</sup> Instead, she focused on the ideas that could come out of the text itself. She returned to the given



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circumstances of the play.<sup>[102]</sup> In order to provide a purer interpretation of technique, Adler chose to return to the beginning and the original font of knowledge.

When Adler finally returned to the Group, she brought with her the wealth of her knowledge and experiences with Stanislavsky. Sharing her newfound understanding of the System during two lectures in the summer retreat, Stella Adler became the first person to directly challenge the authority and artistic integrity of Lee Strasberg. To her the problem was clear; discovery and action had been forgotten in the troupes pursuit for the emotional truth.<sup>[103]</sup> One of the main tenets emphasized to her by Stanislavsky was how "important it was to use circumstances."<sup>[104]</sup> With given circumstances, character work and objective, the emotion should come naturally. There would be no need for extra work developing the emotion outside of the text. This contradicted Strasberg's belief in affective memory. Though this provided the choice to use the technique, she and her fellow artists were unable to fully break from the techniques of Strasberg.

In a reaction to the lectures produced by Adler, Strasberg rebranded the Group's artistic technique. The Group no longer used the Stanislavsky System; instead, they followed the Strasberg Method.<sup>[105]</sup> Lewis accurately explained that when first starting out, Strasberg "was following a method that he had been taught at the American Laboratory Theatre."<sup>[106]</sup> However, by the mid 1930's, his own ideas become the model utilized by the Group. Strasberg continued to build upon his own innovations creating what would eventually become known as "The Method." He believed that his experimentations were an improvement that created not only a new style of acting but a distinctly American technique.<sup>[107]</sup> His trip to Russia introduced him to Stanislavsky's contemporaries. Through the interpretation of these contemporaries, along with his own theories and explorations, Strasberg believed that his theories had moved past those of the Moscow Art Theatre. By incorporating other ideas into his own method, Strasberg created a new artistic theory to be utilized by the Group.

Lee Strasberg firmly believed that Stanislavsky made erroneous assumptions in the creation of the System. The disconnect between Strasberg and Stanislavsky stemmed from the belief that Stanislavsky "didn't know how to use emotional memory. He claimed there needed to be an exact correlation between remembered experience and this type of behavior...that's where Stanislavski went wrong."<sup>[108]</sup> In the end, it did not matter that Strasberg's techniques differed greatly from the source material, as he ended up using the schism of ideas to his advantage. He took what he could of his innovations and began to teach them as part of his technique. His advancements created the Method; an American system of acting that is inextricably tied to the System. The effects of the misinterpretations and the application of American techniques had created a style similar to Stanislavsky, which was strongly influenced by outside forces and the individuals who interpreted the original work.<sup>[109]</sup>

The Group would continue to utilize social theatre as a way to explore different territories. Through their acclaimed productions, practitioners in New York began to admire the acting style of the Group. After the events of 1934, Strasberg sought to centralize his leadership within the Group. The constant challenges to his power and the demand for new plays forced Strasberg and Clurman to develop new work. The pair turned to fellow Group Theatre member, and playwright, Clifford Odets. Years before, Odets had attended meetings lead by Harold Clurman on the American approach to theatre. Odets devoured Clurman's philosophy that the "philosophy of life might be translated into a philosophy of theatre."<sup>[110]</sup> These meetings began the working relationship between the burgeoning playwright and the producer. By the time of the schism, Odets had been honing his writing skills. He approached Clurman with the outline of a piece about taxi-drivers deciding upon the question of unionization. This piece would become the foundation for one of Odets most well-known works, *Waiting for Lefty*.<sup>[111]</sup> This play was seen as revolutionary. It also represented the manifesto of the Group Theatre. The works that they had presented in the past, and that they would present in the future, spoke to social issues. Beauty was not the focus. Works like *Waiting for Lefty* followed the example set by the Group's inaugural production. It was in these socially aware works, that the Group would begin to find its greatest success. *Waiting for Lefty* included a highly charged



emotional journey. The application of Strasberg's interpretation of emotional recall led to fiery performances that tapped into the psyche of the American audience.<sup>[112]</sup> This success not only popularized the new acting techniques, but it also solidified Strasberg's position as an American master. His theories could no longer be questioned as they had entered into the American theatre world as accepted practice.

The Group continued to work with Odets to produce new and intriguing works for the commercial theatre. The collaboration between the playwright, the directors, and the actors matured and developed a successful synergy, though the reputation of the company was beginning to falter. The resident playwright of the Group, Odets became akin to Chekhov and MXT. The similarities between the style and subject matter of the two authors were often noted, though not always agreed with.<sup>[113]</sup> Like Chekhov, Odets plays allowed the System to reach a new stage in its development. The following season saw the Group Theatre have, by all accounts, its greatest success. The production of *Golden Boy* revitalized the image of the Group as a producer of great theatre. This particular play provided the opportunity to Strasberg to fully solidify his control over the company.

From a critical standpoint, *Golden Boy* provided the Group with the perfect opportunity to display their skill. Organized by Clurman, the Group made use of Odets most sophisticated script to produce a piece that could be analyzed as entertainment or propaganda, depending on the personal politics of a specific audience member. The play also allowed the actors to explore complex themes. Following a concert violinist who found that prize fighting could provide a comfortable living, the play discusses the allure of big money versus the realization of a life long dream. To Clurman, the subject matter discussed "the struggle of the individual ego in a society that tried more and more to dismiss the subtleties of a mans' subjective needs..."<sup>[114]</sup> Whether it was the plot, style, or the acting, the elements of the production struck a cord with New York audiences, producing the first bona fide hit for the Group.

The production of *Golden Boy* represents the pinnacle of Strasberg and Clurman's success within the Group theatre. To Strasberg, this one production had vaulted his company to new heights. He no longer compared it to MXT simply because it utilized the System, but because the Group's new approach had elevated his work to "the same level as the Moscow Art Theater."<sup>[115]</sup> His institution, his actors, his directors, and his artists had developed in such a way, that they had equaled their predecessor. The work also solidified the comparisons between Odets and Chekhov. Brooks Atkinson, lead reviewer for the *New York Times* noted that Odets, "conjures truth out of his prize fighter's character by elliptical phrases...this has come to be know as the Chekhovian style, for Chekhov...first brought into drama the art of packing truth between lines."<sup>[116]</sup> The script allowed the actors to utilize their version of the System. Through the foundation built by previous seasons, the System provided the perfect tools to unpack the truth on stage and present the Group Theatre's own *The Seagull*.

The critical and commercial success of *Golden Boy* was unprecedented in the history of the Group Theatre. Running for over 248 performances, with consistently full houses, the play ended its run in New York in June of 1938. The rights to the play had been sold to a Hollywood producer for a respectable \$70,000, providing the Group with a \$15,000 share.<sup>[117]</sup> The play moved across the Atlantic to the West End. Clurman excitedly recounted a London review, which described that, the "acting attains a level which is something we know nothing at all about."<sup>[118]</sup> Strasberg's techniques, which had been utilized by Clurman and actors of the Group, were gaining worldwide acclaim. The phenomenon of *Golden Boy* cemented the reputation of the Group Theatre. The company had become a success in its own right.

The newfound success of the theatre was short lived. *Golden Boy* would prove to be the last major hit for the theatre ensemble. Following a string of modest works and revivals of old, the Group fell onto hard times. By 1940, after a few costly mistakes, the Group's financial situation was in dire straits. The disastrous production of Odets' play *Night Music* proved to be too much for the floundering group and left them with massive losses in

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capital.<sup>[119]</sup> Though one more production was attempted, the damage had been done. The Group Theatre was officially dissolved in January of 1941.<sup>[120]</sup> Much of the work done by the Group was an experiment. They utilized an unknown theory to produce new works in a market that was not ready to accept the change in artistic style. As Strasberg noted, "the Group Theatre was not so much a period of discovery as it was a period of utilizing previous discoveries in the process of actual professional productions."<sup>[121]</sup> The lessons learned at the American Laboratory Theatre found a new home within the Group. They allowed the System to percolate and morph into a new system. The application of the foreign theory to American productions allowed for the work to transition into an American theory. Strasberg, in turn, was able to use the platform provided by the Group to present his ideas concerning the System to the world. By the time that the Group had dissolved, Stanislavsky and Strasberg were synonymous with the new style of acting developed by the Group Theatre. The Group was able to disseminate the ideas developed by Strasberg around the world due to their success, and introduce the American method to a new generation of actors.

**Act V: An Actor Prepares**

While the Group theatre was experiencing its period of financial and artistic prosperity, the System was undergoing a radical development in Russia. By the mid-1930's Stanislavsky had set out to create a comprehensive collection of his life's work. The final act sees the first publication of Stanislavsky's work, *An Actor Prepares* (1936), in America. Published a full three years after Boleslavsky first published his findings about the System, this work provided aspiring actors with a compilation of exercises and ideas that made up the System. Instead of simple definitions, Stanislavsky constructed his work as a basic journal of a first year acting student. The young and impulsive student, Kostya, has been accepted into classes lead by the world renowned, Tortsov.<sup>[122]</sup> The school is a thinly fictionalized version of MXT. Tortsov and Kostya seem to be versions of Stanislavsky himself. Kostya asks important questions and makes many mistakes to be corrected by the master. The analysis of a play and character were broken down eloquently into little parts. The through line of action, named the super-objective, helped to validate the previous interpretation, because of the similar style of analysis.<sup>[123]</sup> However, it is his section of emotion memory that a dichotomy emerges. Stanislavsky calls for study. A creative and emotional experience, though it could be derived from the actor's past, needs to come more from the study of other people. Through study, sympathy could be found and transformed into the actor's personal feelings.<sup>[124]</sup> This differs from the renditions of the System that require the actor to live the part each time they walk out on stage. The actor does not need to delve into the psyche of the character to fully understand what is going on; they do not need to live their lives as a specific person other than themselves, but they need to study what it means to be human so they can portray it commendably on stage.

American practitioners viewed *An Actor Prepares* as "the bible."<sup>[125]</sup> However, it only traces the first year of training that an actor should go through, the subsequent years were never published during Stanislavsky's lifetime. *An Actor Prepares* was a foundation provided from the Russian. The treatise explored the meaning of art, theatre, and aspects of life. Kostya's triumphs, struggles, and discoveries were expertly detailed in the dialogue between the student and his teacher. This format freezes the thoughts of Stanislavsky at a specific point in time, but, if they can read Russian, it allows readers to access his unfiltered thoughts on acting. While it does provide access to his thoughts, it fails to provide the necessary instruction on how to apply the System. It is important to note that theory can be helpful to know, but it does not replace experience or practice.

*An Actor Prepares* and the subsequent publications compiled from Stanislavsky's work created an opportunity for people all over the world to read, interpret, and implement the System. The problem was that by 1936 the System and its leader had become a dogma. Championed by member of the Group Theatre and the theatre world for the better part of a decade, the System was viewed as immutable, and above all, the perfect tool to become an actor. As Lewis lectured, "They [aspiring actors] only have to read the two volumes; and everything's in there."<sup>[126]</sup> The

secrets of the mysterious world of acting had been revealed. What is strange about these lectures was that in later events, he noted that though he was speaking about Stanislavsky's methods he was in no way teaching them.<sup>[127]</sup> In fact, he learned this system through years of study, practice, and experimentation. Comparing the practice to the ethereal art of dance, he noted the flaws of lectures stating "...you can *describe* dance movement, for example, on a lecture platform- you cannot teach it very well from there."<sup>[128]</sup> In a way, this idea should be applied to the idea of a published work. A work like *An Actor Prepares* might provide instruction and a theological debate about the meaning of art, but it cannot truly teach a person how to act. For a person to become an actor, they need to do what every great artist does, work hard, practice, and play. The theories presented in this bible were treated as literal, and could easily be misapplied without the tutelage of a master. The publication of *An Actor Prepares* allowed the System to be frozen as an idea found within the pages of a book, instead of being treated as a living breathing theory that might change with every new student that attempts to apply the concepts to performance.

This adoption of "the bible" by an English speaking country provided another transformative effect. The result of the translation of Stanislavsky's words was similar to what had happened in the translation of Boleslavsky's words a decade prior. As Sharon Marie Carnicke detailed in her work *Stanislavsky in Focus*, the transition from Russian to English was a difficult obstacle for the development of the System. The translation by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood provided American actors with the first comprehensive look at the theory known as the System. Hapgood was not an actor, but a translator and friend of Stanislavsky.<sup>[129]</sup> Her work helped to change the structure of the System. The translation and editorial choices created deviations from the original concepts found within the System.<sup>[130]</sup> Hapgood unintentionally reinforced the ideas that were being developed by the Group Theatre. She adopted certain ideas from previous translation, such as the phrase "living the part," and incorporated these into Stanislavsky's work.<sup>[131]</sup> This work was viewed as the introduction course to learning and implementing the System. This translation effect was similar to the challenges faced by the original member of the Group, and contributed to the continued misapplication of the System.

The publication of Stanislavsky's work provided the System with a standardized platform to learn from. Allowing actors everywhere a chance to learn from the creator himself, *An Actor Prepares* provided students with a standard course of learning. Experimentations, similar to the ones that occurred at the American Laboratory Theatre and the Group Theatre, would no longer be necessary because the first publication provided instruction. This publication should have rendered Strasberg and Adler's competing opinions of 'The System' obsolete, however they had already solidified their experimentations into full techniques of their own. These new theories could provide the desired effect of truth without using the System. Hapgood's work introduced a new reference that contained differing definitions of core concepts from the theories being developed by key American practitioners.

## Epilogue

The story of the System does not end with the publication of Stanislavsky *An Actor Prepares*; it has continued to evolve into new and sometimes exciting theories. The theories presented by other actors, such as Michael Chekhov and Sanford Meisner, two people who proved influential in the development of the System in their own ways, cannot be ignored. Everyone who experimented with the System in those early days forged its legacy. It was through the work and desire to understand a new art form that the created the struggle faced by those early practitioners. They used what they understood of the lessons taught by Stanislavsky and attempted to use them to create artistic truth on stage. Individual idiosyncrasies, cultural gaps, personal interpretation, and misinterpretation all shaped the development of the System. Once introduced to America, the lessons of the master were fair game for experimentation. Stanislavsky lost control over his theory the moment he set foot on American soil.

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The different theories developed from the System all proved to be valid tools of interpretation. Strasberg Adler's interpretations provided similar results, but the process was drastically different. Other members of the Group Theatre developed their own ideas concerning the utilization of the System. In an almost ironic twist, Stanislavsky told Adler, "If the System does not help you, forget it. But perhaps you do not use it properly." [132] The Russian gave her permission to deviate from his lessons if they hindered the quest for artistic truth. The members of the Group Theatre had unknowingly followed his advice. They changed the System to fit their needs. The fate of the 'true' system in America had been relegated to the works published by Stanislavsky. Strasberg and the Group Theatre participated in a chain of transformation. For these actors, the System was not learned or published in a book, but learned from those who came before them. [133] The exposure to the oral and cultural confusion caused by the transition to America created the opportunity to create new traditions inspired by, but not necessarily a direct adaptation of the original technique. While a direct translation of the System did not exist in America, the goal of all practitioners remained the same. Each artist spoke about finding artistic truth, though they disagreed on the process of finding it.

The Group Theatre was not the end of the System's evolution in America. Following the dissolution of the company in 1941, the practitioners would continue to experiment and teach. Lewis and Strasberg went on to develop their work at the Actors Studio. [134] There it came to be learned and implemented by stage and screen stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Marlon Brando. Adler went on to teach actors how to find truth in Hollywood. These actors would help popularize the idea of the method and the idea that it was a direct descendent of Stanislavsky and his ideas. It was through the work of Strasberg and Adler that the System was spread through America and the world. The reality was, Strasberg had been working off an incomplete idea, which was misinterpreted and misapplied in almost every step along its transformative process. The tour, which supposedly introduced the System, was composed of actors who rejected the use of Stanislavsky's new ideas. Even the translations of the Masters' words provide inaccurate ideas due to mistranslation. In reality, the real System, developed by Stanislavsky, did not journey to America untainted. Consequently, the base on which the American practitioners developed their subsequent theories was fundamentally flawed.

The members of the Group Theatre provided an important link in the development of the theory in America, but they also created a new interpretation of the Stanislavsky's ideas. Using the foreign ideas upon American art, forced both the System and theatre to adapt. Through the adoption of the System, the artists of the Group Theatre pushed American theatre to new creative heights. It was through the Group that the System became an American dogma. They popularized the style through their productions. They took the lessons learned from Boleslavsky and the Group Theatre and continued to disseminate the ideas across the country. The multitude of different interpretations added to the separate schools of thought began to create a myth surrounding the System. The cultural exportation of the artistic triumphs had worked. Not only was the tour of 1924 a rousing critical success, but it was also the beginning of a cultural exchange that continues to influence American theatre. It introduced a doctrine that Americans would attempt to copy, though because of their personal experiences and culture a true reproduction of the theory could not be constructed. Instead, distinctly new thoughts using the remnants of the old were formed. The Russian artists might not have helped establishing friendly political relations, but they were able to create a cultural exchange that would influence a generation of artists and inspire American theatre for decades to come.

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- [2] *Ibid.*
- [3] *Ibid.*
- [4] Sharon Marick Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus: An Acting Master for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge Theatre Classics, 2009), 25.
- [5] Constantin Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, trans. J.J. Robbins (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), 401.
- [6] Lee Strasberg, *The Lees Strasberg Notes* (New York: Routeledge, 2010), 147.
- [7] Carnicke, *Stanislavsky*, 11.
- [8] Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 25.
- [9] Mel Gordon, *Stanislavsky in America: An Actors Workbook* (New York: Routledge, 2009), xiv.
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- [12] Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 218.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 266.
- [14] *Ibid.* 260.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 266.
- [16] *Ibid.*, 263.
- [17] *Ibid.*
- [18] *Ibid.* 262
- [19] Gordon, *Stanislavsky in America*, 10.
- [20] Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 404.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 446.
- [22] *Ibid.*
- [23] Constantin Stanislavsky, "Stanislavsky to his players" in *Theatre Arts on Acting*, ed. Laurence Senelick (New York: Routledge, 2008), 225.
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- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] Constantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc., 1936) 38.
- [27] *Ibid.*, 175.
- [28] *Ibid.*, 45.
- [29] *Ibid.*, 18.
- [30] Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 19.
- [31] *Ibid.*, 23.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 41.
- [33] "Stanislavsky Speaks," *New York Times*, January 28, 1923, X1.
- [34] Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 41.
- [35] Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 9.
- [36] *Ibid.*
- [37] *Ibid.*, 9.
- [38] *Ibid.*, 402-403.
- [39] *Ibid.*, 406.
- [40] "Stanislavsky on Actors," *New York Times*, March 25, 1923, X1.

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- [41] *Ibid.*
- [42] "Stanislavsky speaks."
- [43] Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 453.
- [44] *Ibid.*
- [45] *Ibid.*, 454.
- [46] "Stanislavsky on Actors"
- [47] Strasberg, *The Lees Strasberg Notes*, 145.
- [48] "Moscow in Grand Street," *New York Times*, October 21, 1923, X2.
- [49] Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 453.
- [50] Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 29.
- [51] Strasberg, *The Lees Strasberg Notes*, 401.
- [52] Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 35.
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- [65] Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 63.
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- [81] Strasberg, *Dream of Passion*, 91.
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- [84] Clurman, *Fervent Years*, 40.
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- [98] Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 177.
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