

## Section Eight: Teaching Stanislavski at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (Case Study)

*In this fifth case study, Jane Boston, Head of Research at RADA examines the influence of Stanislavski on the teaching there. Evidence is provided from interviews with teachers Dee Cannon, Alex Clifton, Chris Heimann and Brigid Panet and a postgraduate student. A film by Peter Oyston, who directed at RADA for many years, in which a working introduction to some of the basic tenets of early Stanislavski are demonstrated, has also provided material.<sup>37</sup>*

*The current work of Dee Cannon, senior acting tutor at RADA for over fifteen years, was chosen as the particular example of work with students and examples of that work can be found on the Stanislavski Project DVD.*

The story of Stanislavski's emergence as the main theoretical underpinning for the actor training at RADA is one intimately connected to the history of the twentieth century. The patterns of migration which took many artists from Europe to the United States and back again via the UK, on both sides of the two World Wars, played a huge part in both the spread of his 'system' and in the range of interpretations of it that took root. To understand how Stanislavski's ideas eventually arrived at RADA it is important to look at some of the key figures who were responsible for bringing a training 'system' to students far removed from those in Russia for whom it was initially created.

Dee Cannon, one of three acting teachers currently at RADA, traces her own connection to the teachings of Stanislavski directly back to her mother, Doreen Cannon (1930-1995). Doreen inherited much of her knowledge from studying with Uta Hagen and Herbert Berghof. They in turn were part of a generation who had been in contact with teachers who worked with Stanislavski and, in the case of another teacher in this community called Stella Adler, actually had direct contact with Stanislavski himself. Doreen Cannon was Head of Acting at RADA for many years and her daughter Dee speaks of herself as being a direct descendent of a tradition that is both familial in nature but also international in its reach.

Dee says that to the best of her knowledge it wasn't until Drama Centre was formed in 1963 that the influence of Stanislavski really began to take hold. I asked Dee to elaborate on the actor training methods prior to that date that tutors at Drama Centre took issue with. She answered that the teaching had been based principally on rehearsal and the performance results sometimes lacked veracity and impact.

Dee explained that whilst the writing in the British dramatic canon, including Bennett, Stoppard, Wilde, Shaw and so on, isn't inherently superficial, it could easily be interpreted as being less than emotional and, at its worst, as psychologically shallow. Although a lot of the writing could be regarded as being clever and witty, in which any 'good' actor might discover the depth by instinct,

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Oyston *How to Use the Stanislavski System* (Victoria: Full Moon Films 2003).

many rehearsal processes had focused on textual analysis and the physical externals and, as such, had been more related to a literary approach than to examining the psychological depth of character. In these rehearsals, the world of the character and their emotional life could easily be regarded as providing a less significant motor and therefore it remained possible for stage life to be lived from the 'neck' up. A three dimensional approach to character, based upon Stanislavski, has enabled Dee, on the other hand, to best train students to counter this as well as to use the text effectively as part of the process.

Acting tutor Brigid Panet has an angle on the teachings of Stanislavski that takes a different stance to the one adopted by Dee. She refers to the permission to experiment and to fail granted in Stanislavski's approach that can be regarded, perhaps, as less of a 'system' than a philosophy.

Her background was initially as a movement teacher, after having trained at Central School of Speech and Drama from 1954-1957 as an actor, followed by professional work in the theatre for over fourteen years. This then led to her directing students at Rose Bruford College where she was also able to learn more about Laban's ideas from Maxwell Shaw. Shaw had originally worked with Joan Littlewood under whose tutelage he learnt from Jean Newlove who had, in turn, studied under Laban.

Brigid Panet's approach, unusual in the British system, was intensely physical and she brought this perspective with her when she was invited to RADA by Principal Oliver Neville to do work on Jacobean drama in the mid eighties. In answer to a question about the place of Stanislavski in her teaching, she replied that she felt her approach was much more simple than his. As opposed to his thirteen basic questions, she said she has just three: simplicity, the taking away of any excuse and the consistent provision of the experience of success. This simplicity, she feels, marks a real difference in her approach that can be very useful for feeding the joy back into the work whenever it gets too dense or systematic. Her belief in the necessity of joyful work is also part of her wider view that teaching should not be invasive. Brigid's teaching also calls for specificity. In her approach, nothing can be generalized. Initially all that is required is the slowing and quietening down of the actor to enable work to begin. Accordingly prepared, she feels they have no need to impose an acting voice and can utilise, instead, a constant stream of bright images from their switched on imaginations. Brigid explicitly draws upon Stanislavski in this way and has built this sensibility into her training vocabulary. She cites as a critical influence the text *Stanislavski in Rehearsal: The Final Years* by V Toporkov.<sup>38</sup>

Toporkov was an actor who went to work with Stanislavski after having been hugely struck by his direction on Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. In the last ten years of Stanislavski's life, between 1928 and 1938, Toporkov wrote down these later rehearsal processes and the resulting book about this period provides all the insightful quotes utilised by Brigid as the basis for her teaching.

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38 Vasili Toporkov, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, (London: Methuen 2001)

Drawing primarily on his method of physical actions, Stanislavski had by this time, jettisoned emotional memory and the long process of analyzing the text for months on end and had come out with a method of physical action in which action and emotion fused simultaneously. Brigid connects William James's work and the work of Rudolf Laban to Stanislavski to provide a psychophysical approach to performance but not a set of rules.<sup>39</sup> The definition of acting that emerges from this fusion is one of being able to take one's "entire attention from the truth of daily life to the truth of imagination". Brigid believes that the well-trained actor should be able to do this at will, immediately, consistently and deeply.

Acting tutor Alex Clifton first learnt about the work of Stanislavski as a director working with Phyllida Lloyd and these ideas were later linked by Jennie Buckman to the tradition of actor training at RADA. Jennie Buckman, a senior acting tutor, had also studied with Doreen Canon before teaching at RADA. Jennie had discussed with Alex the core of the actor-training curriculum at RADA, the body of exercises that take the students through to playing verbal actions, with a consciousness of inner and outer obstacles. Although these might be taken at a different pace and rhythm, according to the teacher involved, they were substantially the same exercises as those passed down by Doreen Cannon.

Chris Heimann, RADA's current improvisation tutor, comparing the different interpretations of Stanislavski's work in Russia and in the UK, said that he thought the focus in Russia was more on the physical behaviour of the character within the given circumstances. From experiences in improvisation, the actor would then be able to arrive at reasons for the language to be spoken, whereas in the UK, the actor would be invited to explore the language of the text at the outset, without as much focus on the body in action.

Interestingly, with each teacher there was no clear evidence offered that any of their students were invited to consider that they had been working with Stanislavski's ideas. Caroline Jay Ranger, the student, said his theories were not explicitly mentioned at all during her experience of the work whilst in Dee's rehearsal. This is very likely to be representative of an approach found in conservatoire training. The methods and processes utilised are viewed as being very much the result of the tutor's own experience in the field – ideas they have absorbed in a professional context rather than ideas they have adopted as a theoretical stance.

The narrative about the relationship of Stanislavski to the prevailing pedagogy at RADA continues with a look back to the formation of Drama Centre in 1962-3, in which a 'new awareness of movement was harnessed to the work of Stanislavski, providing a more revolutionary European focus to British theatre' under the leadership of Yat Malmgren and John Blatchley.

*'A casual encounter on a bank holiday evening led to Yat Malmgren being introduced to Harold Lang, a maverick advocate of the work of Stanislavski. Lang coerced almost everyone he knew into attending Malmgren's movement classes, including Bill Gaskill...*

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<sup>39</sup> William James 1842-1910. Rudolf Laban 1879-1958. See: *The Writings of William James* ed. J. McDermott (USA: Phoenix 1980) & Karen Bradley, *Rudolf Laban*, (London: Routledge, 2009).

*In 1960, Lang's influence once again proved decisive. Invited to join the staff of the Central School of Speech and Drama by John Blatchley, Lang made his acceptance of the offer dependent on the appointment of Malmgren as director of movement. Here at last the doors to European theatre were opened. Fascinated by rumours reaching them from students on the acting course, other students expressed dissatisfaction at their own syllabuses. The management lost its head, and sacked Malmgren on the trumped-up charge of creating "neck tensions".*

*Within days seven other teachers, including Lang and Blatchley, had left, to be followed by three quarters of the students. A call to Olivier to save the day was firmly, if politely, rejected, and Drama Centre London was born."<sup>40</sup>*

Doreen Cannon was brought in at the outset to become Drama Centre's new Head of Acting in order to complement the textual work of Blatchley and the new movement work of Malmgren.

Originally from NY, Doreen had studied there for ten years as an actress under Uta Hagen (1919-2004) and Herbert Berghof. (Uta Hagen, interestingly, had previously spent a brief spell training at RADA in 1936.) In New York, Cannon also benefited from a dynamic training culture that included Stella Adler (1901-1992), Meisner (1905-1997) and Strasberg (1901-1982), in which it was a well-documented fact within their Group Theatre history that Adler went to Paris and later Moscow in order to seek out the work of Stanislavski.

In the Spring and Fall of 1923, Stanislavski toured with the Moscow Art Theatre to the USA and it was at this time that Adler saw his performances. This was to have a lasting impact on her career, and also on the 20th century American theatre. She joined the American Laboratory Theatre School in 1925, and was introduced to Stanislavski's theories by the Russian actor-teachers and former members of the Moscow Art Theatre, Richard Boleslavski and Maria Ouspenskaya. In 1931 Adler joined the Group Theatre, founded by Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford, who were all leading interpreters of the method acting technique based on the work and writings of Stanislavski.

Doreen eventually arrived in England in 1958, for personal reasons, and came to live in London at the same time as Uta Hagen was in the UK performing in the West End production of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Uta began to provide Saturday workshops for the English and American actors in the company and for outside professional actors. When she eventually went back to the States, Doreen carried on her classes. This prompted Yat Malmgren and Christopher Fettes to notice her work and, as we have seen, she was subsequently invited to be the first Head of Acting at Drama Centre.

Doreen eventually left Drama Centre after twenty years when she was invited to be Head of Acting at RADA under principal Oliver Neville. Her appointment was, in part, prompted by director Bill Gaskill who was frustrated that RADA was "stuck in the dark ages" and only teaching acting through rehearsal, with a facility for language and little else. This was in direct contrast to Drama Centre where

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<sup>40</sup> Christopher Fettes, *Guardian Obituary* Thursday June 13, 2002

actors such as Frances de la Tour, Pierce Brosnan and Colin Firth were emerging, stamped with the distinctive breadth and depth of Doreen's approach. Whilst it was obvious that RADA was also producing good actors, they were regarded as being more associated with the classical repertoire, with its bias towards the language of a character and less towards their psychology.

Dee Cannon, in turn, learnt everything by watching her mother in rehearsal, finding great fascination in the process and the atmosphere, and absorbing everything without necessarily realising it. By the age of fifteen she had decided she wanted to be an actress and started to take her mother's Saturday classes and by so doing put herself in a professional workshop with actors prior to her own actor training experience.

Dee's development of her system of actor training was then much enhanced by her move over to the Arts Educational School in West London where she studied with John Blatchley. Many teachers from Drama Centre had by this time moved to Arts and so Dee was able to complete aspects of her own training as an actor whilst also continuing to study with Doreen. She then worked on and off as an actor whilst running theatre workshops for children, as well as other taking directing and teaching jobs until in 1993 the new Principal at RADA, Nick Barter, invited her to become an acting tutor alongside Doreen Cannon and Jennie Buckman.

Dee has spoken about her approach to teaching and how important it has been to her that her students are able to both demonstrate a curiosity about learning and an ability to reveal their talent. Talent is something Dee defines as the ability to breathe life into a character and to transform, adding, that it can be very easy to recite but very hard to make acting truthful because both the language and the inner life needs to be reflected. Dee feels that the RADA approach succeeds because the wide range of movement and vocal opportunities, coupled with the acting classes, make for a really good synergy.

She compares this to training in the USA where students she says are only taught about the emotions to the detriment of their being heard or being able to move. This approach she regards as indulgent and of no interest to an audience. In her view, the skill is to be able to analyse the text in order to create a fully rounded character, which is then able to inhabit the world required at a level of heightened reality appropriate for the theatre context.

The video clip that accompanies this report shows part of an exercise experienced by trainee actors towards the end of the second term, after approximately fifteen weeks of exposure to the training principles. Their previous work had involved, amongst other things, the study of the student's own life recreations, in order to test the emotional triggers in their worlds, an awareness of the obstacles they faced in getting their needs met and in the use of animals to allow them to stretch into playing emotions outside their immediate range. This latter approach was side-coached by Dee to ensure that the use of animals kept the individuals away from their 'known' centres and allowed them to move beyond normalisation towards something exciting and visceral.

The exercise shown on the *Stanislavski Project* DVD reflects a common pitfall that Dee often sees student actors fall into when they are required to play characters in a very impoverished world who assume that whatever they set up has only to reflect this impoverishment. Dee lets the students play this out on the so they can experience the fact that four weeks into the work they have still not developed and have only clutched onto what the text has literally said instead of being challenged to think outside the box. Here, she tries to get them to use their imaginations – for her the crux of Stanislavski’s work – since the imagination can only be used effectively if it comes out of the world of the play and has been underpinned by solid preparatory research.

The postgraduate student said that this detailed building of a reality really worked because it provided specificity for her life as an actor in a role and at all times provided the bedrock of her reality. Dee later enlarged upon this idea, saying how essential it was to be clear about the objects on stage which always involved reassuring the actor by giving them something believable to do. I asked about the meaning of the word “object” and Dee replied that items used were called “objects” as opposed to “properties” because a “prop” means nothing to the actor who is concerned with creating a credible reality on stage. By the same token Dee doesn’t call the clothing used costumes but rather garments or clothes as they might be called in everyday life.

In Dee’s acting room there are many storage lockers in which she keeps the materials out of which the students can create real rooms and real environments. The lockers are literally crammed with living room stuff, kitchen utensils, office bits, pieces of furniture and so on which provide the objects that will enable the actors to feel secure. Dee believes that if the actor doesn’t feel secure it will always show.

Dee asks that students bring in their own personal stuff for the first term in order to set up their first object exercise. In the second term, when they are playing characters from dramatic texts they are permitted to use these materials. This approach relates to Stanislavski’s system of rehearsal in which the actor needed to ‘know their characters’ biographies so they could place their choices in the right context’... and ...‘Visitors were permitted only when the actors felt secure, otherwise, extreme privacy was maintained.’<sup>41</sup>

In the first term Dee requires that the students work from their ‘own truth’, even though it is heightened and the possession of an objective puts them in a realm beyond naturalism. Here, the purpose is not to wait passively for something to happen but to be actively involved in what is happening moment by moment. Dee recounts that this work is helpful to the actor because they want to be stretched to experience the three dimensionality of character moment to moment and they know that her process offers them no short cuts.

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41 Samuel L. Leiter, *The Great Stage Directors*. (London: Infobase Holdings Company, 1994) p276

The detail can be seen in actors such as Michael Sheen and Michael McFadyen, both trained by Doreen Cannon, who use this approach and are successful actors. Dee expresses her frustration with actors when what she calls “the work” doesn’t seem to be used and they appear to be distracted by directorial demands and forget the approach they could apply to the process. She teaches them, she says, above all, to be independent actors. Particularly in the light of the working reality that directors expect the character work to be done outside the rehearsal process where it can be, therefore, easy to cut corners. She points out Edward Bennett who in his recent Hamlet provides the perfect example of someone who has worked out the actions within his text, figured it out intellectually and physically and absolutely nailed the character as a result.

In conclusion the current teaching at RADA has very clear routes back to earlier teaching of the Stanislavski ‘system’ and can lay claim to a rich connection with both the philosophical imperatives for its use as a teaching tool and for its links with other major theories such as Freudian psychoanalysis and Laban’s ‘Effort actions’.

In short, the mind, the emotions and the interior are significantly valued in the teaching and, alongside an understanding of the expressive body and the verbal language of the dramatic repertoire, they together make a rich foundational synergy for the training actor. As to whether the work closely follows any of the route maps laid down by Stanislavski, we can see that at different times even Stanislavski ditched his own work in favour of the on-going necessity of letting new processes evolve.

The example he offers by so doing provides a fine case in point when considering the requirements of the assessment needs of pre-degree familiarity with Stanislavski. Since Stanislavski himself moved on with his thinking then so must we and the more we allow space for exploration in that pre-degree environment then the closer we are to the kind of thinking that Stanislavski actually advocated.

# Teaching Stanislavski

An investigation into how Stanislavski is taught to students in the UK

A research project initiated by SCUDD (the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments) in conjunction with PALATINE (the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Dance, Drama and Music) and funded by a PALATINE Development Award.

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