

Title: ***Stanislavski, emotion and the future of the UK conservatoire***

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ABSTRACT

Understanding Stanislavskian practice in the UK conservatoire is a complex task for at least three reasons. Firstly, there is the challenge of grasping the system itself. Secondly, there is the complexity of tracing the multiple branches of the Stanislavski "family tree." Finally, as David Shirley explains, the transmission of his ideas to the UK was a "piecemeal" process extended over many years, often obscured by imperfect translations and limited contact with Russian practitioners. The additional task of revitalizing the system for the twenty-first century is, therefore, highly problematic. This paper explores how cognitive science might provide some powerful tools for such a task. I begin by discussing some of the aesthetic and scientific ideas that shaped Stanislavski's view of emotion, including the widely-reported influence of Théodule Ribot. I then consider how Stanislavski departed from Ribot and developed a distinctive, multi-faceted theory of emotion in the creative process, a conception that incorporated Vakhtangov's notion of "affective emotion." I pose the questions, what exactly is "affective emotion," how widely is it understood in the UK, and is it supported by the current science? I then turn to contemporary theories of emotion, drawing particularly on Damasio's updating of Jamesian psychology. I propose a link between "affective emotion" and Damasio's "as-if" body loop. Furthermore, I discuss some key questions relating to future actor training: how might we need to reconfigure our practice in the light of the science and what alternative models of acted emotion have emerged to compete with the Stanislavskian paradigm?

Our general goals for *Performance and Cognition* are to invite theatre and performance scholars to incorporate many of the insights of cognitive science into their work and to begin considering all of their research projects from the perspective of cognitive studies.¹

In recent years, it has become relatively commonplace to hear about cognitive science at theatre and performance conferences. Many have responded to McConachie and Hart's invitation to use cognitive studies to illuminate performance issues. There are several such contributions at the S Word conference. In my paper, I'm proposing a connection between one idea from the world of acting and another from the world of neurology, namely, Stanislavski and Vakhtangov's conception of "affective emotion" and Antonio Damasio's hypothesis of the "as-if" body loop. But to start, it might be worth playing Devil's Advocate. Why should performance scholars and practitioners bother with cognitive science at all? Western theatre practice has its own 2500-year-old history, so why should it need interventions from other disciplines? Surely what counts is not what is empirically provable, but the subjective experience of performer and audience. As Stanislavski remarks, "in the theatre, knowing means feeling."² Finally, isn't it extraordinarily dangerous, arrogant even, to attempt to dip in to highly complex fields without in-depth specialist knowledge? As Rhonda Blair remarks, "it is easy to misappropriate complex material such as that produced by scientific research; we must be mindful of being non-expert."³

It might be healthy to acknowledge these and other objections to the use of science, but without doubt, practitioners have turned to one branch of it or another in search of insights, particularly the fields of psychology and neuroscience. Stanislavski's use of French psychologist Théodule Ribot to expand his understanding of emotion has been widely acknowledged. Uta Hagen sought scientific verification for her adaptation of Stanislavskian exercises from two psychologists, Jacques Palaci and Harvey White.⁴ More recently, theatre director Katie Mitchell drew on Damasio's work to develop a new approach to emotional expression.⁵ The motivation seems to have been a search for a better understanding of natural processes and a desire for a foundation for acting practice that goes beyond the subjective, that is both durable and universal. McConachie himself argues that performance scholarship would benefit from the secure epistemological foundations offered by cognitive science. In particular, he applies Popper's idea of "falsifiability" to theatre studies. Science no longer claims to have discovered truth for all time, but it does produce highly reliable theories that explain the available evidence. These theories have the additional virtue of being subject to challenge and replacement, if they no longer provide adequate explanations of the data.⁶

My reasons for drawing on neurology are influenced by the context of twenty-first century actor training. In the post-modern world, we are aware of a bewildering variety of training strategies, theatrical styles and potential platforms for the exercise of the actor's professional skills. How might we best prepare actors for this complex and challenging environment? If there are cognitive and emotional processes that are inherent in our biology, might this knowledge form a reliable and flexible basis for an approach to actor education that is applicable to all modes of training, styles of performance and media channels? Moreover, could discoveries in science act as a driver for deeper reflection, renewal of practice and innovation in drama schools?

My contention is that the ability to arouse and communicate an apparently authentic emotional response to imaginary circumstances is as important today as it was in Stanislavski's era, albeit for different reasons. One such instance is provided by acting coach Rocco dal Vera, who has prepared many actors for Hollywood screen tests. He reports that when casting directors select scenes for

actors to play for audition purposes, they invariably choose the extracts from the film or TV drama that have the highest stakes and the most extreme emotional demands: a father discovers his beloved daughter has been kidnapped; a police officer tells a mother that her only child has been killed.⁷ Evidently, what they want to test is the actor's ability to produce intense displays of emotion on demand, knowing that is what is required by director and audience alike. In my experience of working in the UK conservatoire, currently the Birmingham School of Acting, students are frequently anxious about how to generate a convincing emotional response, an anxiety that is often focussed on a dread of what they see as the ultimate acting challenge: having to cry on cue. In this respect, these American and British actors are facing the same challenge that Stanislavski tried to address in early twentieth-century Russia: how do you control the uncontrollable? How do you consciously generate a response that is normally automatic and frequently subconscious? Although there may be elements of continuity in the challenges confronting actors from different eras, it is equally clear that the context of their work has changed radically. This means the reasons for the centrality of emotion have shifted. Today our TV screens are populated with images of suffering on an apocalyptic scale, whether caused by natural disasters or man-made catastrophes. On a more trivial level, reality TV shows deliberately manipulate contestants into displays of arrogance, disappointment or grief. They are under pressure to produce extravagant displays of emotion in order to stay on the show and remain the centre of public attention. Actors working in a realistic vein must compete with genuinely traumatic events and flagrant performances of emotion on prime-time TV. Stanislavski's conception of emotion evolved in a very different context, which I will outline very briefly, citing just two of a number of aesthetic influences which also include Pushkin, Gogol and Shchepkin.

Benedetti argues that the critic Vissarion Belinski "set the agenda for all discussion on the relationship between art and society for a century or more."⁸ Belinski's view that the arts and sciences had a joint responsibility for improving society was shared by Tolstoy. Tolstoy suggests that the role of science is to discover what is important and true and that of art is to transform this knowledge from "perception" to "feeling." Furthermore, for Tolstoy, the civilizing effect of the transmission of emotion is the very purpose of art:

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling – this is the activity of art.⁹

Ribot's view of the role of emotion in art was consistent with the thinkers and practitioners who influenced Stanislavski. In his work on the creative imagination, he remarks that "the emotional factor yields in importance to no other; it is the ferment without which no creation is possible."¹⁰ In some respects, Ribot's influence on Stanislavski is obvious, not least in the chapter of *An Actor's Work* entitled "Emotion Memory," which mentions Ribot by name.¹¹ The title is taken from Ribot's article "La Memoire Affective," first published in Russian in 1899. Ribot passed on a number of key ideas, for example, that there are two types of emotional memory: one that is the intellectual recall that an emotion-provoking event took place, which Ribot calls "abstract," and a rarer form that involves a full reproduction of the original physiological response, which Ribot calls "concrete." But while Ribot regarded concrete memory as extremely rare, Stanislavski saw it as a trainable faculty that is essential for the actor. A less obvious connection between the two men is the idea of a link between action and emotion. Ribot constructs a hierarchical model of the evolution of affective life¹²:

Complex, 'abstract' emotions (religious, moral, intellectual and aesthetic)
Simple, innate emotions (associated with childhood)
Survival needs (including hunger and thirst)
Protoplasmic sensibility (attraction, repulsion, arrest of movement)

Occupying the base level is the pre-conscious sensibility of micro-organisms. At the next level, we find drives related to survival such as hunger and thirst. This provides the foundation for the so-called "primitive" emotions, such as fear and anger, and finally, at an advanced stage of development, the human experiences "complex" emotions, including a sense of moral discrimination and aesthetic appreciation. Within this model, the fundamental constituent of affective life is the protoplasmic attraction towards and repulsion from other objects. Ribot describes this activity using an action-based vocabulary reminiscent of the rehearsal room: the life of feeling consists of a "tendency" towards movement or arrest of movement. Tendency embraces both psychological and physiological aspects and is synonymous with needs, appetites, instincts, desires, inclinations.¹³ In other words, Ribot proposes a fundamental biological connection between action and emotion at the end of the nineteenth century. In the scope of this paper, it is impossible to offer a full account of Stanislavski's complex conception of emotion. I will mention only a few key points. First of all, emotion memory as the basis for experiencing remained an essential element of his thinking, well into the 30s.¹⁴ Although recurring emotion is essential to experiencing on stage, Stanislavski offers only the vaguest definitions of emotion and feeling. As Sharon Carnicke remarks: "Stanislavsky never gives a firm description of how a secondary emotion actually differs from the first time it occurs except that it is more controllable."¹⁵ What we can say with some confidence is that Stanislavski had little interest in the raw emotion of an actual traumatic event. The famous episode of the trolley car vividly illustrates the point. Fictional student Kostya Nazvanov describes how his feelings change in the course of repeated visits to the site of the accident. At first, he is revolted by the sight of the fatally injured beggar. On his second visit, he feels compassion and indignation on behalf of the victim. Finally, he experiences a sense of awe inspired by the symbolic properties of the tragic scene. Later still, he associates the event with apparently less serious incidents: a previous non-fatal trolley car derailment and a Serb grieving for his pet monkey. Tortsov comments on this process, contrasting the "crudely naturalistic" details of Kostya's first impression with the symbolic quality of the transformed images, illustrating the difference between the raw material of life and what is suitable for the stage:

Time is a wonderful filter, a powerful purifier of memories, of feelings one has had. Moreover time is a great artist. It not only purifies, it lends poetry to memory.¹⁶

Although Stanislavski's thought is sometimes opaque, some of the features of his idea of acted emotion are evident here. Raw experience is only suitable for artistic purposes when it has been transformed by a process of distillation, elevation and association. Emotion memories are useful when they have been processed to the point of being controllable. Elsewhere, he also states that acted emotion can be more intense than real life and that the joy of public solitude is an experience unique to the stage.¹⁷ What begins to emerge is a conception of acted emotion that is governed by specific principles, distinct from those that condition emotional response in life. This idea is more

fully articulated by Stanislavski's protégé, Yevgeny Vakhtangov. In a lecture delivered in 1914, Vakhtangov poses the question, "where do feelings come from and what is the essence of experiencing on stage?", making a distinction between "real life" feelings and "stage feelings."

... in life our feelings are always aroused by real causes. No such causes exist on stage. They always demand and we can do no more than accept them. The question then arises: can these conventions arouse real feeling in us? Under no circumstances. They not only cannot evoke real feelings, they should not, otherwise the stage would cease to be art. The origin of our stage feelings, which are not similar to our normal, real feelings, is not the conventions, but our capacity to repeat experiences I spoke of earlier. And this repeated experience is not the same as real-life experiencing. And so, in opposition to real-life emotions, we will define our stage emotion as affective emotion. They are governed by quite different laws from those that guide our emotions in life itself.¹⁸

Vakhtangov goes on to discuss the properties of this hypothetical stage emotion. Unlike life emotions, "affective emotions" can be rapidly dismissed on leaving the stage. Affective emotions do not engulf and exhaust actors in the same way that actual fear or other basic emotions might do, so it is possible to play a demanding role without undermining one's physical or mental health. Vakhtangov also cites the example of a botched stage-fight, in which the actor accidentally strikes their partner. In such cases, the audience feels sympathy for the wounded actor rather than the affronted character and is thus removed from the fictional world. So an additional "law" of affective emotion might be that it belongs exclusively to the aesthetic realm. Creative joy is also an essential element of Vakhtangov's practice.¹⁹ Here, I summarise what seem to be the principal features of the Stanislavski-Vakhtangov conception of Affective Emotion:

- Affective emotion consists of repeated feelings experienced in the present, whose source is the personal life of the actor.
- All people have experienced the full spectrum of emotions, so their own emotional repertoire can always be adapted to the circumstances of the play.
- Affective emotions can be readily dismissed, to be replaced rapidly by another emotion as required.
- Affective emotions are enjoyable to play and do not leave the actor physically or mentally damaged.
- Affective emotions can be more intense than those experienced in life.
- Affective emotions belong exclusively to the aesthetic realm.
- Affective emotions can co-exist with "life" emotions, because of the phenomenon of dual consciousness.

Affective Emotion, understood as a type of emotion specific to the stage, has, to my knowledge, received little or no attention in the West. Its relative neglect in the literature leads to a new set of questions. Is it an issue of theoretical or historical interest only, with little application to contemporary training? Regardless of scientific validity, is it a useful construct for actors, perhaps helping them preserve their psychological health? Or is it an idea that has some resonance with contemporary science and might it, therefore, as I suggested earlier, provide us with a relatively secure and flexible basis for the emotional component of actor training in the future?

Since the days of William James and Ribot, emotion science has branched out in a bewildering variety of directions, including psychology, aesthetics, ethology, linguistics and anthropology. Research tools have been developed which were undreamt of in Stanislavski's era: voxel-based

morphometry, functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging and Magnetoencephalography, for example, enable studies of brain anatomy and processes, including emotional response.²⁰ In one paper, it is impossible to do justice to the wide range of discoveries that this explosion of activity has generated. Here, I can only mention some of the major debates:

- Are there any such things as basic or universal emotions or are all emotions socially constructed?
- How does the interaction of genetic heritage and cultural influence condition our emotional expression?
- Do emotions have an identifiable physiological “signature?”

One of the features of some of this work is a convergence between the preoccupations of artists and scientists. Memory, the unconscious, a sense of self derived from the body and the nature of creativity are just some of the issues of mutual interest. For example, Damasio’s frequent use of theatrical metaphors is indicative of his preoccupation with both cultural developments and scientific practice as manifestations of human consciousness. His remark that all “emotions use the body as their theater” is typical.²¹ He thinks of human institutions, such as the arts, as extensions of the homeostatic function. Above all, he insists that understanding the biological foundation for artistic activity in no way diminishes the wonder of human creativity.²²

In order to illuminate the concept of Affective Emotion, I propose to focus on one, or to be precise, two of Damasio’s hypotheses, the body loop and the “as-if” body loop. But first, I need to briefly define some terms. Damasio makes a distinction between “emotion,” meaning the cascade of somatic responses that ensues automatically in response to an “emotionally sufficient” stimulus, and “feeling,” which is the conscious perception of the subjective state triggered by the bodily changes.²³ The body loop is a relatively straightforward idea. It refers to the constant exchange of neurological signals between brain and the remainder of the body via the upper brain stem. This perpetual traffic enables the brain to construct what Damasio calls “maps” of the ongoing condition of the body. These maps consist of patterns of activated neurons that can represent not just changes in bodily states, but also external objects and even maps of maps. The principal way we generate a feeling of emotion occurs when our brain maps the bodily changes caused by a stimulus. These maps then form the substrate for the conscious subjective experience of emotion. However, Damasio proposes an additional mechanism which he calls the “as-if” body loop. I will let Damasio describe this himself:

As the name suggests, it is a sleight of hand. The brain regions that initiate the typical emotion cascade can also command body-mapping regions, such as the insula, to adopt the pattern they would have adopted once the body signalled the emotional state to it. In other words, the triggering regions tell the insula to shape up, to configure its firing “as if” it were receiving signals describing emotional state X.²⁴

Simply put, Damasio suggests that the brain is capable of simulating a body state. It’s tempting to describe it as the neurological equivalent of the “magic if.” He accounts for the existence of such a mechanism in evolutionary terms. Smart brains, he argues, are lazy, so search for means of streamlining processes. Full-scale emotional response is time-consuming and saps precious energy, so if the same ends can be achieved with less effort, why not, as he puts it, “cut to the chase?”²⁵ Moreover, Damasio links his hypothesis with Rizzolatti’s well-known experiments with macaques. He describes mirror neurons as the ultimate “as-if” device, suggesting that our ability to experience the body states of others is grounded on our ability to simulate our own body states. To put it

another way, we are hard-wired for empathy. A number of features of Damasio's hypothesis are intriguing for the actor. If we can simulate a body state using neural maps, as the evidence suggests, then this could be the mechanism that supports the actor's belief in imaginary circumstances. If the as-if loop can create accurate simulations that are not quite as exhausting as the full-blown emotional state, it has obvious advantages for the actor who must move rapidly from one scene to another with entirely different demands, not to mention repeating the whole exercise the following night. If, for example, the actor successfully activates a neural map of fear in the brain and this helps to create a convincing portrait of Macbeth, but the process is not accompanied by the cortisol release characteristic of real fear, could that explain why the sensation of acting fear is pleasurable but the experience of actual fear is not? In short, is there a potential convergence between two hypotheses: affective emotion and the as-if body loop? Bearing in mind Blair's warning about misusing cognitive science, I decided to ask Damasio himself if he thought these two ideas might be connected. His reply was unequivocal: "You are correct, the most effective way of accounting for 'affective emotions' (a bad term, by the way), is by invoking my as-if-body-loop."²⁶

Notwithstanding Damasio's certainty about the relationship between the two concepts, the link is, of course, currently unproven and remains an intriguing hypothesis. I do, however, agree that there seems to be something unsatisfactory about the term "affective emotion." Doesn't all emotion have an affective quality, so isn't non-affective emotion a logical impossibility? If so, "affective emotion" is tautology. I prefer to borrow the Russian term "scenic," often used in phrases such as "scenic movement" or "scenic speech," i.e. movement or speech that is suitable for the stage. I suggest that the generation of scenic emotion is one of the targets of training systems in the Stanislavskian tradition, which are so dominant in the UK Conservatoire. But derivations of the Stanislavskian approach are by no means the only way of producing similar results. I discovered this from personal experience of an Alba Emoting course in August 2014. Alba is an actor training technique that consciously avoids the "Method" approach of drawing on personal experience. It makes use of three controllable elements of emotional expression, breathing, facial expression and body posture. Alba identifies six basic emotions, fear, anger, tenderness, erotic love, joy and sadness, each of which has a characteristic pattern of expression.²⁷ In the early stages, executing the patterns can feel mechanical and artificial, but persistent and accurate practice can result in the experience of what is known amongst practitioners as "induction," i.e. the subjective experience of the target emotion. I remember executing the pattern for sadness while lying on my back with limbs waving in the air in what FitzMorris practitioners call the "happy baby" pose. I experienced the induction of sadness, with no recourse whatever to emotion memory and no ensuing chain of associations. I simply experienced the quality of sadness, which to an extent I could make come and go according to my execution of a physical exercise. Although the state had the distinctive quality of sadness, it was enjoyable to play. A different route, it seems, to the same end.

To sum up, subjective experience and actor training lore generates anecdotal evidence of a type of emotion that is unique to the stage, which I have called "scenic emotion." Contemporary neurology suggests there could be a biological foundation to what acting practice began to explore some hundred years ago. A fuller understanding of how the art and science of emotion might connect, could provide a firm foundation for an approach to the emotions that extends beyond specific training traditions and beyond national training cultures. This is an area that convergent research has only just begun to explore.

Notes

1. McConachie and Hart, *Performance and Cognition*, ix.
2. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, xxiv.
3. Blair, "Introduction," 136.
4. Hagen and Frankel, *Respect for Acting*, xiii, 48.
5. Mitchell, *Director's Craft*, 231–2.
6. McConachie, "Falsifiable Theories for Theatre," 553–78.
7. Dal Vera made these comments during an actor training course called the "Alba Method for Emotions" at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama on 14 August 2014.
8. Benedetti, *Stanislavski Life and Art*, 35.
9. Tolstoy, *What is Art?* 63.
10. Ribot, *Essay on the Creative Imagination*, 31.
11. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 197–9.
12. Ribot, *Psychology of the Emotions*, 1–22.
13. *Ibid.*, 2.
14. See Whyman, *Stanislavsky System*, 75–6.
15. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 159.
16. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 206.
17. *Ibid.*, 294.
18. Vakhtangov in Benedetti, *Art of the Actor*, 133.
19. *Ibid.*, 133–6.
20. Voxel-based morphometry uses a statistical approach to analyse neuroimaging data relating to brain anatomy. fMRI monitors the activation of brain regions. Magnetoencephalography measures the duration of emotions and feelings.
21. Damasio, *Feeling of What Happens*, 51.
22. Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 290–7.
23. Damasio, *Feeling of What Happens*, 71–81; and Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 109–10.
24. Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 120.
25. *Ibid.*, 121.
26. Personal email communication, 11 May 2015.
27. See Bloch, Orthous, and Santibáñez, "Effector Patterns of Basic Emotions"; Bloch, "Alba Emoting"; Bloch, *The Alba of Emotions*; Rix, "Learning Alba Emoting"; and Beck, "Alba Emoting and Emotional Melody."

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