**The samovar and the steam train: an interview with Albert Filozov**

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Published online: 14 Mar 2018

David Jackson (2018) The samovar and the steam train: an interview with Albert Filozov, Theatre, Dance and Performance Training, 9:1, 99-113, DOI: 10.1080/19443927.2017.1417155

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2017.1417155>

**Abstract**

During the Soviet era, there was very limited contact between the rich training traditions of Russia and the UK. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, mutual exchange became easier. Bella Merlin, for example, has documented her difficult but inspiring year at the State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). Merlin’s teachers at VGIK influenced a number of other English-speaking practitioners at a series of summer schools in Birmingham in the mid-1990s. These schools were known as the ‘Russian School of Acting’. The senior RSA teacher was Albert Filozov, the celebrated actor and People’s Artist of Russia, who died in April 2016. Steeped in the Russian tradition, Filozov trained at the Moscow Art Theatre under Kedrov, and was strongly influenced by Maria Knebel. During the first RSA, Filozov was interviewed by three participants, Asher Levin, David Jackson and John Albasiny. An edited reconstruction of the discussion is published here in ‘Sources’ for the first time. The introduction summarises Filozov’s achievements and contextualises three questions he considers which are of particular interest to performance training: what is the difference between life and stage emotion, what is the relationship between emotion and action and is it possible to teach acting at all?

Keywords: [Albert Filozov](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Albert%2BFilozov), [actor pedagogy](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Actor%2BPedagogy), [Russian School](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Russian%2BSchool), [acted emotion](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Acted%2BEmotion), [theatrical action](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Theatrical%2BAction)

**Introduction**

The actor and teacher Albert Leonodovich Filozov died in the spring of 2016. He was celebrated in his home country and honoured as a People’s Artist of Russia (Kremlin,1994), but his name is barely known in the English-speaking worlds of professional theatre, UK training and critical literature. Nevertheless, he had a considerable impact on a number of practitioners now working in Britain and the US, including Bella Merlin, now at the University of California, Davis. She offers a detailed account of the inspiring training Filozov provided to a group of foreign students at the State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in *Beyond Stanislavsky* (Merlin 2001, 151-227). Merlin positions Filozov’s work in terms of his response to three influential teachers. Michael Kedrov was artistic director of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) when Filozov was in training at its associated school. Kedrov adhered rigidly to the version of the Method of Physical Actions approved by the Soviet authorities, which did not admit of the slightest reference to internal psychology or notions of ‘spirit’. Another MAT teacher, Evgenia Maryes, balanced Kedrov’s strict focus on external action. Following Stanislavsky, her work used emotion memory to develop an imaginative connection between the actor and the role. Merlin argues that Filozov was not entirely satisfied with either of these extremes and that it was not until he left drama school and encountered Maria Knebel that he was able to find a synthesis of action and emotion, by acknowledging a spiritual dimension in acting and discovering a Chekhovian sense of play. One of Filozov’s long-term collaborators is now in a permanent post in the UK conservatoire. Katya Kamotskaya worked closely with him at VGIK and a series of summer schools held in Birmingham, which were known as the ‘Russian School of Acting’. Kamotskaya now teaches at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. I participated in the first ‘Russian School’ in 1996. I learned the rehearsal method of Active Analysis from Filozov and my work in the UK conservatoire has been informed by his approach ever since, originally at the Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts, more recently at the Birmingham School of Acting (BSA) and currently at the Drama Centre London (Jackson 2011). In recent years, Active Analysis has become more familiar in both academy and conservatoire. Knebel’s detailed description of the approach as both strategy for actor training and rehearsal method was published in French in 2006. It has also been analysed by, amongst others, Pitches (2006, pp. 38‒41) and Carnicke (2009, pp. 194‒202). The Active Analysis symposium at York University in 2012 attracted a wide range of academics and acting teachers, who collectively approached the topic from both a theoretical and practical perspective. It was Knebel herself who first coined the term ‘Active Analysis’ (Carnicke, 2009, p. 100). Therefore Filozov, as her former student, is arguably the most authoritative teacher of this method who has ever worked in the UK.

During the 1996 Russian School three of the participants, Asher Levin, John Albasiny and myself, conducted an interview with Filozov in order to gain a better understanding of his process. The interview, published for the first time here in *Sources,* is to my knowledge the only interview with Filozov available in English. The methodology employed was a simple one. Albasiny is both an actor and Russian speaker, so while Levin and I asked questions, Albasiny provided a simultaneous translation. Levin later transcribed the interview and distributed typed copies. Mine sat in a drawer until the death of Filozov last year. The vagaries of simultaneous translation, the eccentricities of a hastily transcribed conversation, plus the passage of time had rendered much of the discussion opaque. However, Albasiny and I met in March 2017 to review the material to see if we could extract an accurate sense of Filozov’s reflections on actor training and performance. The text presented here is therefore an edited reconstruction of the original conversation*.*

During the discussion, Filozov touches on a wide range of theatre topics. He addresses three questions of particular interest to actor trainers: firstly, what is the difference between acted emotion and emotional episodes experienced in life, and secondly, what is the relationship between emotion and action in training, rehearsal and performance? He offers some fascinating insights into his pedagogical approach, but elsewhere is sceptical about the value of actor training. This apparent contradiction raises a third fundamental question: is it possible to teach acting at all? In order to provide some cultural and critical context for Filozov’s remarks, I devote the remainder of this introduction to a concise discussion of four areas. Firstly, I provide an outline of Filozov’s biography and career, including Russian perspectives on his work. I then propose a working definition of a key term, ‘acted emotion’, and briefly summarise how acted emotion has been viewed in theatre history. I position Filozov’s comments on actor pedagogy in relation to comparable arguments in UK training. Finally, I contextualize Filozov’s contribution to the debate about the relationship between emotion and action.

In many ways, Filozov was a quirky and paradoxical character. From an English point of view, he appeared to be the quintessential Russian man of the theatre. But to Russian eyes, he looked like an Englishman. He was, in fact, of Polish–Ukrainian extraction (Filozov 2016). His slight build, ginger hair and sickly appearance as a youth hardly marked him out as a matinee idol, but in later life his peers regarded him as a handsome leading man (Vedneeva cited Filozov 2016). Although he was a consummate teacher, Filozov publicly stated that acting could not be taught and that most drama schools should be scrapped Filozov 2017). His journey to the centre of Russian theatrical life must have looked extraordinarily unlikely when he was growing up in Sverdlosk (now Yekaterinberg), nearly 900 miles from Moscow. As a young man, he worked as a lathe operator in a ball-bearing factory and there were few hints of any artistic leanings, although he was a talented singer and was fond of reading (Filozov 2016). However, the fact that the possibility of an acting career never occurred to him may have stood him in good stead. When the Moscow Art Theatre visited Sverdlosk and conducted auditions, Filozov was persuaded to go by friends. Unhampered by anxiety, Filozov delivered a series of relaxed performances, successfully progressed through the rounds and was accepted at the MAT School Studio in 1955. The audition panel included Viktor Stanitsyn, who became Filozov’s course leader and, according to Russian conservatoire practice, remained with Filozov’s cohort throughout their training. Despite a stuttering start to his screen career, Filozov went on to make more than 120 films. He also enjoyed long associations with several theatres, including the Stanislavsky, Yermolova, Taganka and the Theatre of the Contemporary Play. Filozov was a respected teacher at both VGIK (1991‒1995) and the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts (1995‒1997) (*Obituary* 2016). He therefore worked at the highest level of Russian theatre, film and training for more than 50 years.

Two extended interviews for Russian TV provide ample illustrations of the esteem in which Filozov was held. In an edition of *My Hero* (Filozov 2016), director Vladimir Fokin comments on Filozov’s attention, not just to the end result but to the creative process. He highlights Filozov’s precision, his listening skills and his characteristic ‘plasticity’, a term frequently used in Russian training, which I would define as a state of free-flow and physical expressivity. According to Fokin, Filozov ‘gives of himself and what he gives is so unexpected’. Filozov had a particularly long and happy association with the Theatre of the Contemporary Play. Tatiana Vedneeva, an actress from the company, praises him as a great actor and attributes to him what she suggests is a rare quality even in other fine actors, ‘Russian intelligence’. In another interview recorded for the *Lifeline* series in 2007, Filozov encounters the playwright Viktor Slavkin. Filozov appeared in two of Slavkin’s plays, *Adult Daughter of a Young Man* and *Cerceau*, which was directed by Anatoly Vasiliev.[[1]](#footnote-1) Slavkin articulates his reasons for respecting Filozov’s work:

Albert is a complicated person, closed. There’s more on the inside than you can see on the outside. It makes him a unique actor. At a rehearsal, I once heard Vasiliev say that when an actor speaks the audience shouldn’t understand everything; when the actor stops talking, when there’s a pause, then the audience can sit and guess what’s going on. That is Albert’s strength. (Slavkin cited Filozov 2007.)

The interview begins with Levin’s question about ‘real life emotion’ and the ‘equivalent emotion on stage’, or acted emotion. For the purposes of this discussion, I define ‘acted emotion’ as the strategy used to embody an emotional episode experienced by a character and to communicate that experience to an audience. It is an issue with an ancient pedigree. The spine of the debate can be traced back to the classical era and Aulus Gellius’ anecdote about the actor Polus. Gellius was a second century grammarian and lawyer, who collected both Greek and Roman writings. According to Gellius, Polus drew directly on personal experience in order to generate real grief during a performance of *The Oresteia*, which in turn had a profound effect on the audience*.* In the role of Electra, Polus brought on an urn which, in the fictional frame, contains the ashes of her brother, Orestes. In fact, the urn contained the ashes of Polus’ dearly beloved and recently deceased son (Gellius cited Cole and Chinoy 1970, pp. 14‒15). This account seems to support Quintilian’s observation that ‘if you wish to move others, that which is most essential, […] is to be moved yourself’ (Quintilian cited Benedetti 2005, p. 21). It is tempting to label this strategy for moving the audience as the ‘classical’ approach, one that requires the actor to focus on arousing their own emotions in order to ‘infect’ the audience with similar feelings. This view of acted emotion has much more recent exponents. Writing in the nineteenth century, Tolstoy defines art in comparable terms, suggesting that arousing an emotion in oneself, then communicating it to others, is the defining feature of artistic activity:

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. (Tolstoy [1897] 2014, p. 63)

Famously, this ‘classical’ view of acted emotion was challenged by Diderot in his *Paradoxe sur le Comédien*, first published in 1820*.* Using the device of a Socratic dialogue between ‘The First’ and ‘The Second’, Diderot insists that the most effective actors feel nothing at all during moments of apparent crisis, but have complete command of the external, visible features of emotional response. In an oft-quoted passage, The First remarks that the actor’s ‘talent depends not, as you think, upon feeling, but upon rendering so exactly the outward signs of feeling, that you fall into the trap’ (Diderot 1883, p. 16). Archer, in turn, rejects Diderot’s argument. Drawing on an extensive survey of nineteenth century acting practice, he asserts that acted emotion is real emotion appropriate to the character, but felt through ‘sympathy’ with the character, not experienced in the overwhelming way it would hit us in life (Archer 1888, p. 91). Furthermore, Archer usefully identifies the polar opposites in this debate as the ‘emotionalist’ and ‘anti-emotionalist’ positions.

In a lecture on the Stanislavsky system delivered in 1917, Vakhtangov develops the notion of ‘affective emotion’, a theoretical proposition which avoids the simple opposition of emotionalism and anti-emotionalism. He argues that what the actor experiences when s/he embodies the emotions of a character is neither the cold technical exercise which Diderot seems to advocate, nor the direct application of actual emotion employed by Polus. He posits a form of emotion unique to the stage which is derived from the human capacity to re-experience feelings, conditioned by a process of artistic filtration and distillation. Such feelings, according to Vakhtangov, can be readily dismissed at the end of a scene and are joyous to play (Vakhtangov cited Benedetti 2005, pp. 133‒36). Like Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov avoids both direct use of personal experience and a mechanical application of technique, although he shows little interest in re-experienced emotion. In a chapter entitled ‘How Shall We Develop Our Emotions and Our Bodies?’, Chekhov (1985, pp. 49‒58) discusses the creative use of emotion in terms of, for example, imagination, atmosphere and a feeling of ease. In *To the Actor*, he quotes Steiner, indicating his preference for drawing on imagination rather than actual experience: ‘Not that which *is* inspires the creation, but that which *may* be; not the *actual*, but the *possible’* (cited Chekhov 2002, p. 21). Filozov’s position is consistent with this strand of the Russian tradition. Following Chekhov, he places the origin of acted emotion in the imagination. In an argument reminiscent of Vakhtangov’s account of affective emotion, he asserts that ‘on-stage emotion’ is not related to ‘normal human life’. He cites an example drawn from Slavkin’s *Cerceau*, a play which deals with the generation that failed to take advantage of the ‘thaw’ in Soviet Russia in the mid-1950s to early 1960s. Filozov played the character of Rooster, who addresses a group of friends at a dinner party, lamenting their wasted lives.[[2]](#footnote-2) Here, Filozov explains that this challenging speech only achieved a satisfactory artistic form ‘when everybody loved one another, when there weren’t any conflicts in the company’. Arguably, Filozov’s stance on theatrical relationships is a sentimental one, but I take it his essential point here is unexceptionable: painful life experiences might conceivably be useful in rehearsal, but painful emotions in the present don’t help with a current performance.

One of the paradoxes of the UK conservatoire is that many key figures in its history have insisted that acting cannot be taught. For example, the attitude of Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who founded the Academy of Dramatic Art in 1904, was summarised by his widow Maud:

Herbert did not believe that acting could be taught. Of course, it cannot be, any more than a poet, a painter, a musician can be made. But he believed in stage training – believed in giving opportunity for the *feu sacré* to burn. (Cited Tree, M. 1917, p. 130)

Much more recently, actress Jane Lapotaire, who trained at Bristol Old Vic in the mid-1960s, expressed a similar point of view. She insists that ‘you cannot teach acting, you *cannot*’ (Lapotaire cited Zucker 1999, p. 79). At a time when many British professionals adopted a sceptical stance towards Stanislavsky,[[3]](#footnote-3) Michael Redgrave (1983, p. 153) believed in a systematic approach to acting and described himself as a ‘disciple of Stanislavsky’. He demonstrated his thorough knowledge of the System in a series of lectures delivered at Bristol University in the early 1950s ( Redgrave 1953).  Notwithstanding his belief in the System, Redgrave agrees with Tree and Lapotaire, but develops a more nuanced position. He explains his argument by referring to Talma’s suggestion that the two indispensable qualifications for acting were intelligence and ‘sensibility’. Redgrave defines these faculties as follows:

sensibility, the power to apprehend emotionally the entire content of character and action; and intelligence, the power to reduce that emotional experience to a technical formula which can be repeated at will. Sensibility cannot be consciously acquired, which is why acting cannot be taught. (Redgrave cited Cole and Chinoy 1970, p. 406)

Prior offers an alternative explanation for the paradox of acting teachers claiming that acting cannot be taught. In his study of drama schools in the UK and Australia, he draws on Polanyi to suggest that much of the knowledge inherent in drama training is tacit and therefore cannot necessarily be made explicit through language. Similarly, he employs Phenix’s term to define the types of meaning generated by interactions between acting teacher and student. He refers to these transactions as ‘synnoetic’, i.e. ‘direct, personal and experiential’, and therefore difficult to articulate (2007, p. 303). Prior argues that it is the tacit and synnoetic nature of the acting process that explains teachers’ ambiguous attitude towards pedagogy: ‘whilst it appears that most informants accepted the “teacher” label, their ideology that suggested that acting was not so much taught but inspired was at odds with the term’ (2007, p. 297).

As stated above, Filozov was a superb teacher but shared his UK counterparts’ ambivalence about the possibility of actor training. He suggested it would be preferable to have only one theatre academy followed by a traditional apprentice system. He argued that acting cannot be taught but it can be learned (‘нayчить нeльзя, мoжнo тoлькo нayчитьcя’) (Filozov 2007). In an interview a few months before his death, when asked if he still taught, he replied ‘unfortunately, yes’. However, during the Russian School, there was no sign of these reservations, perhaps because he enjoyed teaching foreigners. He bluntly remarked that non-Russian students, who have to pay for their courses, are much more active in their studies (2007).

In the conversation, Filozov considers a range of pedagogical issues. He demonstrates a finely tuned awareness of the varied demands of each phase of the acting process: training, rehearsal and performance. He speaks of adjusting his teaching interventions to each stage and each individual. His principal aims are to nurture the creativity of the student (‘фaнтaзия’) and to enable them to discover their own process. However, the time constraints of a three-week summer school compel him, on occasion, to abandon the principle of guiding students towards making their own discoveries. Occasionally he offers short-cuts to the form of the character, using his long experience as justification for dictating an intonation or gesture. Perhaps his most memorable pedagogical analysis is in relation to what he calls the chief ‘co-ordinates’ of acting: emotion and action. Filozov deploys two images, the samovar and the steam train. The actor who has no difficulty responding to the emotional potential of a text but is not active is described as a ‘samovar’. They might be steaming or boiling inside, but this inner life is of little use if it is not translated into observable physical action. His second image is of a steam train. The emotional ‘fuel’ is essential to motivate and drive the train, under the control of the driver-actor. A key element of Filozov’s pedagogy, then, consists of two parts. Firstly, he seeks to assess the student’s work on an individual basis, placing them on a continuum between two extremes: a strong emotional response with no physical expression on the one hand and vigorous movement with no purpose on the other. Secondly, he seeks to stimulate whichever component is underdeveloped, searching for lures to coax the ‘emotionally available’ into action and to awaken the inner life of actors who are active but lack ‘steam’.

Discussion of action and emotion in the Stanislavskian literature is so familiar it barely requires citation. However, a brief sample of references give some indication of current discussion topics. I have argued that Stanislavsky’s primary source for his conception of emotion memory, Théodule Ribot, provides him with a model that links emotion and action at a fundamental, biological level (2017). Stanislavsky himself stresses the importance of dynamic action as a stimulus to the imagination, and the creative development of emotion memory for artistic purposes (Stanislavsky 2008, pp. 37‒59, 195‒228). Lee Strasberg asserts that one of the most important achievements of the Group Theatre was to extend the investigation of emotion memory initiated by Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov. He argues that Stanislavsky ‘never fully expounded the procedures of … emotional memory’. Although by no means the only element of his training, he does not dispute Clurman’s view that this was a particular area of focus (Strasberg 1988, pp. 90‒91). Carnicke contrasts the American Method project to consciously control emotion with the Russian tradition, which, she argues, regards emotion as subtly enmeshed in all aspects of the acting process, including action. Invoking Tolstoy’s definition of art quoted above, Carnicke (2009, p. 150) remarks that as ‘theatre’s very content, emotion naturally infuses all aspects of the System equally’. Whyman (2008, pp. 238‒248) argues that both action and emotion remained part of Stanislavsky’s thinking from the beginning to the end of his career, thus contesting the notion that an initial focus on emotion and the unconscious gave way to a Pavlovian interpretation of the Method of Physical Actions.

In the period immediately following Stanislavsky’s death, much of the debate about the relationship between emotion and action, and the ‘true’ interpretation of Stanislavsky’s final phase of work crystallises around two members of the Opera-Dramatic Studio, Kedrov and Knebel. In Carnicke’s analysis, Kedrov represents Soviet orthodoxy, while Knebel represents a more holistic interpretation of the Method of Physical Actions, incorporating emotional, psychological and spiritual elements. If Russian theatre artists from this period can be divided into two camps led by Kedrov and Knebel, there can be little doubt where Filozov’s loyalties lay. In his view, Kedrov’s approach ‘in effect killed Russian theatre’ (cited Merlin 2001, p. 158). Although Stanitsyn was Filozov’s course leader, he regarded Knebel as his main teacher. Filozov explains:

I didn’t previously understand the nature of creativity. I don’t mean the Stanislavsky system, but a way of existing. It’s not about marching towards some goal like a soldier, but searching like a hunting dog: you need freedom on stage. (2007)

In the interview, Filozov emphasises Sulerzhitsky’s spiritual contribution to the First Studio. It is only relatively recently that Western scholarship has acknowledged what Benjamin Lloyd has called Stanislavsky’s ‘relentless examination of the spiritual component in acting’ (cited Carnicke 2009, p. 183). Carnicke (2009, pp. 167‒184) argues that the significant influence of yoga and transcendental philosophy on the System has been obscured by American preoccupation with psychology on the one hand and Soviet materialism on the other. Merlin (2012) also comments on the absence of terms such as ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ from Benedetti’s 2008 translation of *An Actor’s Work.* In a short interview with Kamotskaya, she probes how these terms are used in Russian. Kamotskaya explains that Russians use the term ‘soul’ much more frequently than their English counterparts and that it doesn’t necessarily have a religious connotation. She does, however, associate the word with a transition from the conscious to the subconscious. Kamotskaya elucidates further:

In the Russian language, you would describe someone as a very spiritual person if they read a lot, think a lot, read poetry for fun – not because they have to perform it or they’re looking for a quotation or it’s part of their job. They just open the poetry book and read it. And it does something to their soul, because it works on a subconscious level. This is where in Russian you might use the word ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’. (Cited Merlin 2012, p. 55)

The role of Eastern mysticism in the development of the System and the Russian use of ‘spirit’ inform Filozov’s discussion of the First Studio below.

**Interview**

**Asher:**

What do you see as the difference between real life emotion and the equivalent emotion on stage?

**Albert:**

On stage, emotions come from your imagination. The emotions that you get on stage which come from life are very often less artistic, they work less well because on-stage emotion doesn’t relate to normal human life. In my experience, you could say that I’ve successfully played moments of intense drama when everything in my life was okay, but when I was unhappy, these dramatic moments didn’t work out. The show that we brought to London, *Cerceau*, raised a lot of important issues.[[4]](#footnote-4) There was a monologue about the human condition during a specific period in the Soviet Empire. It was a tragic monologue, but it only worked when everybody loved one another, when there weren’t any conflicts in the company, when we were solely concerned with art. So, a dramatic situation in real life doesn’t help at all, that’s not art. It *can* help to understand nature. After all, Stanislavsky said there are analogous situations that you draw on, from life. But they don’t help when you’re actually performing a play.

**Asher:**

You often demonstrate a way to act a scene using real relationships … the relationships already in the room. Is this the kind of analogy you’re talking about?

**Albert:**

It’s so you can understand the nature of that feeling. But when you’ve grasped the role, then there are different laws: performance doesn’t have anything to do with the actual preparation of the role. Stanislavsky spoke about that, as did Michael Chekhov. They said that when an actor plays a part he gets the inspiration, the emotional and spiritual power from the spirit of the world, not from this or that particular technique. It’s like an energy that comes from the air. There’s a crucial moment of contact when the actor must win over the audience with their energy. It’s a very complicated process. When we rehearse, we’re trying to stimulate our imagination and then once you’ve got the role prepared, then there are different laws in place.

**Asher:**

From what I’ve read of Chekhov, he seems to think that when you start the rehearsal process you should look at the *differences* between yourself and the character.

**Albert:**

Michael Chekhov was a genius. There’s an image of a bull running away with Europa. There’s a painting of it by Rubens.[[5]](#footnote-5) The bull doesn’t normally get what’s given by Zeus: that’s some kind of Latin saying.[[6]](#footnote-6) There are laws for a genius and for ordinary people there are completely different laws. When Chekhov had an image in front of him he fantasised and he could use that fantasy, because in this place here [indicating his own body] everything worked. It was like pressing a button and he could get any kind of emotion. But we’ve got a different problem, all normal everyday actors, *how, how* can you get the emotions to work? That’s what I’m talking to you about every day. You’re doing it alright, but there’s not enough love, not enough emotion. So, there’s Zeus and there’s Chekhov … but, we’re just normal actors. Basically, the laws of Michael Chekhov aren’t for everybody.

Figure 1 *The Rape of Europa* by Pieter Paul Rubens ([1628‒1629](https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/c5fKNJnpBcx7eHJYcI65/full)).

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**Asher:**

You said that the work is successful when the company loves each other. Chekhov talks about the need for the actor, even when they are experiencing hate, to feel love for this emotion.

**Albert:**

When Chekhov was a young actor in the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, he and Vakhtangov were together and Sulerzhitsky was the person who trained them. He was the one who could support the loving atmosphere; he nurtured it. The First Studio wasn’t just like an everyday theatre, there wasn’t anything quite like it at all. He was an extremely religious person, a Tolstoyist who was very active spiritually. He had a profound influence. Thanks to him, they were very spiritual people. And *then,* this quality transformed itself into external details. But they’d developed their spiritual life to such an extent, that there was something lacking in the *form,* in the way that we’ve got something lacking in *emotions* […] Unfortunately, we’ve not had a chance to study a characterisation, or form in general at all. That’s what Stanislavsky called the second level. That’s when an actor works *on the role.* What we’ve done is the first bit, an actor’s work on *himself*, there’s very little time so we’ve just not had a chance to look at some of the problems because characterisation, it’s a question of image, form; but on the way, I’ve tried to coax something from you. When I say ‘this person can’t behave in this way, can’t hold themselves in that way, he’s got to do it like that or like that’, I’m doing part of the work for you, but I’m trying to make you different from yourselves; and the work we’re doing at the moment is different from the improvisations which we started with. In improvisations, they’re your own living feelings, how would *you* do that, but what I’m trying to do with you is bit by bit trying to get you to ask ‘how would Raskolnikov do that? How would Astrov do that?[[7]](#footnote-7) So an awful lot of yourselves can be taken off, as it were. So, this is more like a director’s work than the work of a teacher because I’m an actor myself and I feel how it should be played. If I was just a teacher, not a working actor, then maybe I’d leave things that you’ve suggested yourselves, but because I’m an actor myself I’m always trying to understand how you can play [certain roles]. So, the question of looking there, turning your head there … if you’d studied for half a year with me, I’d explain it in such a way that you could do it for yourselves and you would understand it for yourselves.

**David:**

At the moment, we’re finding it difficult to recapture the vitality of the original improvisations. Do you think that’s because we haven’t had time to work on the characterisations?

**Albert:**

It’s because we haven’t had time and also, it’s practice in the theatre. Stanislavsky said that we read a play and it’s like a wonderful crystal vase. First, we read the play. Then we smash up the vase and then, bit by bit, collect the pieces and try to put it back together. Then it’s *your* creation, from your own soul, from your own body. You create something in you. And there has to be a certain amount of time for that so that it becomes something easy, something that you’re used to, and then beautiful. That’s also something Stanislavsky said: ‘It’s difficult to make it easy, it’s difficult to make what’s easy something you’re used to, and it’s difficult to make the thing you’re used to into something beautiful.’ Do you understand? There are three steps. At the moment, we’re in the process of making it easy and something that we’re getting used to. That’s what I’m talking about when we work on the monologue.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Asher:**

You said that you need to intervene in the blocking and the positioning, the mise-en-scene.

**Albert:**

I’m doing that now because it would take forever to learn. I could work two or three months to get that. Because when you’re used to it yourself, you can see the principle, you can understand the proof of it … today already you were playing … it was expressive, the way you were acting today.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Asher:**

And that’s through having some guidance with the blocking, then the feelings come?

**Albert:**

Yes, of course. Volodya’s[[10]](#footnote-10) spoken about that, it’s absolutely true: when you’ve got the physical relationship that you have as the character, it gives you *true* feelings. Like when David is saying ‘Anyway, I must go if I’m going’,[[11]](#footnote-11) it’s done *physically.* So, the blocking is done from the point of view of the character relationships. I’m just acting it out because I’m not a director myself. A director will have a different way of thinking. They see a picture, but I feel the relationships.

**Asher:**

You see the mundane business of the characters as crucial to …

**Albert:**

Yes, of course. If you’ve noticed, when there’s some kind of tragic event, in real life people very often laugh. That’s a defence. So, you’ve got to look at life very attentively, you’ve got to see how people behave in critical situations, how they sometimes don’t behave in what you would regard as a traditional manner at all. And you’ve got to use that in the theatre. There was a friend of mine who was in Cuba at the time of the missile crisis. They were waiting for the Americans to fly over, and it was very warm. He went to a puddle to wash his socks ‒ he hadn’t washed his socks for two days. And then the Americans flew over and started to drop bombs, but purely out of fear he continued to mechanically wash his socks in the puddle. It would have been absolutely pointless to run away because they would have shot him, so he just sat there and washed his socks. After that, the Commandant said to him: ‘Signor, I beg you, our soldiers are ashamed. You’re such a brave person, we’re a bit ashamed. Please could you not do that anymore.’ And it was from fear, his behaviour was just through fear. You know he should have run away, shouted, but he just sat there washing his socks. So, *observe.* If you intend to be actors, you’ve got to observe a lot: in the underground, in the street, observe how people behave in different situations. It’s very interesting and there are some very unexpected behaviours. And *then* you’ve got to use that in the theatre.

**David:**

The Astrov/Sonia scene is very interesting because it’s not about eating, but eating is a crucial element in the scene.

**Albert:**

Exactly true. The scene’s about how he doesn’t *see* that next to him is a person who would be a wonderful partner for him. He can’t see that. He’s thinking about something completely different, and that’s not because he’s stupid, but because he’s decided that he’s behaving badly, like a parasite. All of his life he’s used to working and working well, beautifully. He speaks about that as a doctor. When he decides ‘that’s it, I’m going’, like a person who is habitually active, he needs to get his energy back. So, he’s talking, talking, talking, and it’s just from habit, you know, *doing something* to energise himself, so it’s a very important moment. I’ve seen it done badly in the theatre and that’s how I know how to play it. Usually they drink a little and then for half an hour they philosophise and it’s very *boring.*

**Asher:**

A few days ago, you talked about the particular qualities of *great* actors: the way they do things very precisely, for example. What other qualities does a great actor have?

**Albert:**

First of all, the most important quality: they think in images. They can see almost every action from that point of view: how would that be *as an image*? What would the action *look like*? I’ll give an example from Stanislavsky’s last studio.[[12]](#footnote-12) He very much loved using animal studies, because they enable you to find the exact *form* of the person. That’s why the form is so important in the études that we’ve done. You haven’t done animal work with me because there’s so little time, but in Moscow Katya does it.[[13]](#footnote-13) There are certain habits that people have that make them similar to an animal or some kind of plant. You might get some healthy person like a bear, or somebody that’s quick, like a hare or rabbit. Great actors know the essence of the character, they can feel it inside. They can also see how to show this inner life. As a rule, they do something very well defined, so that any person in the audience can see it and recognise it. Do you understand? What is important is the quality of their fantasy: great actors have got a very different imagination. I would say that the most fundamental quality I want to develop in you is your *fantasy*. And when you’re playing people, to make your work specific, very well defined, so that the audience could recognise it and *remember* it. Think of the details in the performances of some great film actors. In Russia, for example, there was a film called *Cemerka*. It was a remake of *The Magnificent Seven*.[[14]](#footnote-14) So there’s one cowboy lying like this [Filozov sits on the floor in a relaxed position]. He had his hat over his [eyes] … [Filozov demonstrates]. All the actors used to play that, like a superman. It’s details like that that give an actor quality, give him his glory, his image. If you see something in life that nobody apart from you has seen, some kind of detail, and if you can show that on the stage you’re getting closer to the great actors.

**Asher:**

The work I’ve done with animals, and a lot of the work with Katya, seems to be an attempt to bypass the intellect and logic...

**Albert:**

If we were putting on a production and you were working on a role, I would get you to do various études to show what kind of human being this is at a certain point. But before that, you’ve got to live the psychological life of this animal. Do you understand? Those aren’t my words. Stanislavsky opened that up and the Americans have used it very well. Lee Strasberg did those kinds of études and he taught a whole generation of American film actors. All of them went through his school. He did an awful lot of those kinds of études, either animals or objects: ‘I am a match, I am a match that’s been lit’ [Filozov’s whole body lights up], ‘I am alight and then I burn out’ [Filozov withers]. Those psychological exercises, they’re to understand one second, *one second* of human life. What is it to be like that match? What is it to be young? What is it to be brave? What is it to be tired? And all from the example of a match.

**David:**

I teach young students something about Stanislavsky but I’m conscious that it’s probably very, very simplified. The other day Katya introduced an exercise and I asked ‘is this an emotional memory exercise’ and she replied ‘I don’t like that terminology’. Do you think it’s easy to misunderstand Stanislavsky, or to misuse him?

**Albert:**

Just about everybody doesn’t understand him. Only, maybe, Michael Chekhov understood him. The Soviet authorities tried to put down anything spiritual, because it’s a materialistic approach. But his system is about the *spiritual* life of people. So, without that quality, the rest loses its point, loses its meaning. Technique loses its meaning without that spiritual element, because conflict alone, question‒action, action, action, that bears no relationship to Stanislavsky, even though he did speak about that.[[15]](#footnote-15) When a person feels and is very spiritual, that needs then to be expressed in a dramatic way so that the audience can understand the character’s inner state. Sometimes these purely technical methods help you to get closer to the spiritual state, but that’s because they’re very closely connected. That’s why I say to you and to English students who go to Russia, ‘there are two coordinates which arouse each other in the actor: what I *feel* here and what I am *doing* here’. I’m guided by the *feelings.* I can pick up what the person is feeling at any particular moment and I can tell when they’re ready for the feelings of the character. But they’re like a samovar in terms of expressing it, as opposed to a steam engine. The feeling then needs to be moved along the path of action, like a steam train. It’s a very complicated process and it’s very individual. It’s as though any rules or exercises that Stanislavsky proposed are only of any use when they allow you to express the spirit, the subconscious, and direct them towards action. That’s the task. So, every time you go up to your students, some of them might be very clever, they might understand [and move into action] and so that they *think less*, you have to put them on the right path: ‘sit down, don’t move’. Then the organism itself will develop a feeling of whether it’s right [to move] or not. But people who start with the feelings, you need to get them to think more, develop their brain. We’ve got very emotional actors who are without a head. To those people, you need to explain in a different way. It’s all very individual, and I work with you in an individual way. One person I’ll explain it to for a long time; another person I’ll just turn the head there [Filozov turns his head], or say ‘stand there, stand there’, because I teach you according to your *state.*

**Asher and David:**

Thank you very much.

**Acknowledgment**

Translations from Russian sources by John Albasiny.

**Notes**

1 The Russian title of the play, *серсо* (‘Serso’), is derived from the French ‘*cerceau*’ or hoop. During the play, the characters play a game of ‘hoop-la’.

2 This monologue was posted on YouTube as a tribute to Filozov soon after his death: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fcqi_9hdLA8> [Accessed 18 May 2017].

3 Redgrave’s isolation on this subject is illustrated by a clash with Tyrone Guthrie (see Strachan 2005, pp. 192‒193).

4 Filozov appeared as Rooster in the original production and subsequent film of Slavkin’s *Cerceau*. The play was first performed at the Taganka Theatre in 1985 and later toured Europe, including the Riverside Studios in London. See Gussow, M., 1987. Critic’s Notebook; Vividly Staged ‘Cerceau’ Takes London by Surprise. *The New York Times*, 30 July. Available from <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/30/theater/critic-s-notebook-vividly-staged-cerceau-takes-london-by-surprise.html?pagewanted=all> [Accessed 13 June 2017]; Pitches, J., 2006. *Science and the Stanislavsky System of Acting*. London: Routledge, p. 193.

5 Filozov is referring to *The Rape of Europa* by Peter Paul Rubens, which depicts Zeus taking the form of a bull and running off with her on his back (see Figure 1). Filozov’s meaning is fairly clear: one law applies to a deity and another to a beast. In this image, the bull is temporarily able to behave like a god because it is possessed.

6 Filozov is thinking of the Latin tag ‘quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi’: what is permissible for Jove is not permissible for a bull.

7 The group worked on scenes from Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and Anton Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya.*

8 Filozov refers to Astrov’s monologue in the scene with Sonya in Act Two, played by Jackson (see Chekhov, A., 1993. *Uncle Vanya*. Translated from Russian by Michael Frayn. Rev ed. London: Methuen, pp. 149‒153).

9 Referring to a successful rehearsal of the scene in which Sonya and Raskolnikov, played by Levin, confess their crimes to each other in part four, chapter four of Dostoyevsky’s novel (see Dostoevsky, F., 1989. *Crime and Punishment*. Translated from Russian by Jessie Coulson. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, pp. 266‒280).

10 Vladimir Ananyev, actor, director and movement specialist (see Merlin, B., 2001. *Beyond Stanislavsky*. London: Nick Hern, pp. 27‒98).

11 Chekhov, A., 1993. *Uncle Vanya*. Translated from Russian by Michael Frayn. Rev ed. London: Methuen, p. 153.

12 See discussion of the Opera-Dramatic Studio in, for example, Gordon (1986), pp. 206‒230; Toporkov (2001), pp. 104‒158; Carnicke (2009), pp. 13‒14, 189‒190.

13 Actress and teacher Katya Kamotskaya, now at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (see Merlin, B., 2001. *Beyond Stanislavsky*. London: Nick Hern, pp. 99‒150).

14 It is not clear if Filozov is referring to a remake of Sturges’ film or a dubbed version of the original. He seems to be thinking of James Coburn’s performance as Britt. At the beginning of a memorable duel scene, Coburn sits leaning against a post with his Stetson tilted forwards to protect his eyes from the sun in a pose of complete calm, whilst a rival attempts to provoke him into a fight (*The Magnificent Seven* 1960)*.*

15 This passage is obscure in the original transcript. I take it that Filozov is referring to the arguably reductive view of the Method of Physical Actions promoted by Michael Kedrov (see Merlin, B., 2001. *Beyond Stanislavsky*. London: Nick Hern, pp. 152‒158; Carnicke, S.M., 2009. *Stanislavsky in Focus*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, pp. 189‒194; Jackson 2011, pp. 168‒171).

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1. The Russian title of the play, серсо (‘Serso’), is derived from the French ‘cerceau’ or hoop. During the play, the characters play a game of ‘hoop-la’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This monologue was posted on YouTube as a tribute to Filozov soon after his death: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fcqi_9hdLA8> [Accessed 18 May 2017]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Redgrave’s isolation on this subject is illustrated by a clash with Tyrone Guthrie (see Strachan 2005, pp. 192‒193). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Filozov appeared as Rooster in the original production and subsequent film of Slavkin’s *Cerceau*. The play was first performed at the Taganka Theatre in 1985 and later toured Europe, including the Riverside Studios in London (see Gussow 1987; Pitches 2006, p. 193). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Filozov is referring to *The Rape of Europa* by Peter Paul Rubens, which depicts Zeus taking the form of a bull and running off with her on his back (see Figure 1 below). Filozov’s meaning is fairly clear: one law applies to a deity and another to a beast. In this image, the bull is temporarily able to behave like a god because it is possessed. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Filozov is thinking of the Latin tag ‘quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi’: what is permissible for Jove is not permissible for a bull. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The group worked on scenes from Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and Anton Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Filozov refers to Astrov’s monologue in the scene with Sonya in Act Two, played by Jackson (see Chekhov 1993, pp. 149‒153). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Referring to a successful rehearsal of the scene in which Sonya and Raskolnikov, played by Levin, confess their crimes to each other in part four, chapter four of Dostoyevsky’s novel (see Dostoevsky 1989, pp. 266‒280). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Vladimir Ananyev, actor, director and movement specialist (see Merlin 2001, pp. 27‒98). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Chekhov 1993, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See discussion of the Opera-Dramatic Studio in, for example, Gordon (1986), pp. 206‒230; Toporkov (2001), pp. 104‒158; Carnicke (2009), pp. 13‒14, 189‒190. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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