**Advice to the Players**

***Peter Hall, Shakespeare and Antipathy to the Method***

Paper for the John Barton & Peter Hall memorial conference, British Shakespeare association/Kingston Shakespeare Seminar. Presented 8/9/18 at the Rose Theatre, Kingston.

The first time I was in this space was with Peter, and it was a shell. Hard-hatted amidst choking concrete dust, Peter was gleeful. Glee was an emotion he expressed often in the relatively short time that I knew him. Glee in the creation of a new theatre, glee dispensing his advice on Shakespeare in workshops, glee showing the chorus of *Bacchai* frenzied and ecstatic dance moves in Rehearsal Room 1 at the NT, and most often, glee in the successes of his children, conquering as they still are the worlds of theatre, film and TV.

I’m going to be a little critical of one element of Peter’s thinking, so I do feel that in these surroundings, I should begin by stating unreservedly how much I owe to Peter. Learning from him was a defining step in my career. He taught me an incalculable amount about directing, about theatre, and about Shakespeare. His devotion to the Word, with all its religious, St Johnian baggage, has profoundly influenced my approach to teaching Shakespearean text for over a decade.

Nonetheless, I intend to speak a little heresy, which I learned subsequent to working with Peter, when I undertook or underwent a Stanislavskyan and Method training at that nest of witchcraft, Drama Centre.

One of the times I saw Peter most gleeful was when his publisher had given him permission – or rather, given that Peter was not someone one gave permission to – his publisher had acceded to Peter’s desire to subtitle his forthcoming book, on the cover of the first edition, “You can’t improvise this shit!”

The story of Dustin Hoffman’s Damascene conversion, from the Method to Peter’s method –or the method Peter called ‘Shakespeare’s method’ – was much on Peter’s mind as he composed the book; he kept returning to this story. There was without doubt a missionary zeal to his desire to drive the influences of Stanislavskyan acting out of the Shakespearean theatre.

For those of you who can’t remember the story in detail, in Peter’s words.

*[Dustin Hoffman] tried, great actor as he is, to get in touch with the character’s feeling by improvisation. It is a common and valued technique among modern actors. He tried to make Shakespeare meet the Method. The improvisations were very much alive. But they weren’t Shakespeare. Would this contemporary businessman, delightfully Jewish and full of wit, ever want to say the words of Shakespeare?*

*One morning, Dustin arrived looking haggard. He had finally come to a conclusion. ‘You can’t improvise this shit,’ he announced. I agreed: ‘First comes the form and then comes the feeling,’ I said, trying to keep the note of triumph out of my voice.*

*From now on, Dustin’s whole attitude changed. He became a convert to Shakespeare’s Method.*

I won’t dwell on the religious terminology, though I note that it’s a common feature of both the Method and Peter’s ‘English tradition’. Both claim genealogies, reminiscent of the lineages of Hasidic rabbis or of prophetic traditions in Christianity. In the case of the Method, via Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya through Vakhtangov to Stanislavsky; in Peter’s case via Edith Evans, William Poel, Macready, Kean, Garrick and thence to Betterton and supposedly to Shakespeare. These genealogies are undoubtedly problematic. I will return to them.

Peter unpacks the Parable of Hoffman over the next page or two.

*Shakespeare uses all the ancient techniques of rhetoric. This is the reverse of modern practice. The first question that an actor must ask about a speech is not who he is playing or what the character wants; first he must ask* what *the character says and* how *he says it.*

*In modern naturalistic drama, the feeling is often more important than the form. And unfortunately, a hundred years of Stanislavski and the elaboration of his acting techniques into the American Method have resulted in many English-speaking actors believing that if they feel right, they will speak right … They don’t.*

It could be said that the whole history of modern Western actor training is a series of footnotes to Stanislavsky. There are actor training traditions which exist independently – the *commedia* tradition as taught in the great French clown and physical theatre schools, the German expressionistic approaches of Laban and Brecht. But even these are now inflected by Stanislavsky. Who am I? and what do I want? are fundamentally present, explicitly or implicitly, in every contemporary actor’s conception of their craft; and they are ancient questions.

Peter doesn’t go into much more detail about the particular Stanislavskyan acting techniques of which he disapproves. Just these two notional predicates: that Stanislavskyan acting prioritises feeling over form, and that it principally entails improvisation; leading to a singular conclusion: you can’t apply Stanislavsky to Shakespeare. I can hear exactly what Peter would say when driving this point home: “You can’t do it! It just doesn’t *work*!”

However neither of these notional predicates are really true.

In describing Hoffman’s improvisational approach, Peter is describing exactly that: Hoffman’s particular approach. And it’s not even really improvisational; what Peter calls improvisation seems instead to be mostly paraphrasis. Though both the System and the Method do propose some improvisational and paraphrastic exercises, this work is far from being a foundational tenet or central preoccupation of either.

Nor is improvisation, in and of itself, a particularly Stanislavskyan approach: there is, for instance, a modern English tradition of improvisation, as taught by Keith Johnstone, contemporaneous to Peter’s work and doubtless an influence on some of his actors. Peter Brook used extensive improvisation. There’s even an improvisation scene in Shakespeare: Falstaff and Hal. Improvisations are simply frameworks within which the actor’s imagination is specifically stimulated, as either a training exercise or a rehearsal tool.

All Stanislavskyan improvisation is in response to specific stimulus.

Some such exercises, part of the actor’s training, are about honing the way the actor experiences lived reality, so as to be better able to imitate it.

Improvisations leveraged in the service of rehearsal, on the other hand, are always employed as a response to text. Fundamentally, they are stimulated by the ‘Magic If’, the foundational Stanislavskyan idea: what if the Given Circumstances (i.e. everything the text tells us about the dramatic situation) were actually true? What would I do? For Stanislavsky, this ‘if’

*arouses an artist’s dynamism through nature itself. The word ‘if’ is a stimulus to inner and outer creative dynamism. All you have to do is say “What would I do …. ?” and immediately you are dynamic and alive.*

Furthermore, Stanislavsky makes it clear that the Given Circumstances include authorial choices like style, as well as the decisions of the creative team working on the production, and indeed the particular circumstances of performance. This is the fundamental innovation and universality of Stanislavsky: his System is not, unlike prior approaches to training actors, dependent on one particular style, nor does it lead ineluctably in the direction of so-called ‘naturalism’. Stanislavsky merely asked that lived experience and dynamic creativity are always leveraged by the actor as a response to all their theatrical circumstances. In other words, “form” also precedes and stimulates “feeling” for Stanislavsky: it is part of the Given Circumstances.

Stanislavsky’s other great innovation was to create a logical thought-structure through which actors might conceive of the totality of their performance as an artistic creation, attending to super-objectives as well as the objectives of each distinct dramatic moment. For some actors, work of the kind Peter describes Hoffman doing is indeed a preferred way of mapping out these underlying psychological themes.

Peter wrote of it:

*While Dustin’s improvisations might be helpful for charting his inner life, they would be of little help in speaking Shylock.*

Hoffman ended up speaking the text, as Peter gleefully says, immaculately (with all the conceptual connotations of that word). Is it not probable, or at least possible, that this ‘charting of inner life’ was a crucial predicate of Hoffman’s impeccable verbal performance?

Problematically, Peter was rhetorically situating his approach, which relates only to the speaking of Shakespearean text, in forceful opposition to a system or set of traditions designed to do something else entirely: to give the actor agency. Agency relating to their own performative self, and agency relating to the task of performing. As a director with an academic training and a prescriptive bent, Peter, I think, didn’t entirely appreciate this, though John Barton certainly did.

In Peter’s own brief words, from the section, “The Actor’s Work on Himself”:

*When the actor is sharp in mind and alert in body, he can now proceed to the work on the text.*

Creating the circumstances which lead to sharpness of mind and alertness of body – dynamism and aliveness – is exactly what Stanislavsky and the Method teachers were first and foremost trying to achieve. As actors themselves, they recognised – and contemporary neuroscience bears this out – that the fundamental psychological task of the actor is empathetic: what if this were true? What would I do? Peter’s work *depends* on the kind of preparation a Stanislavskyan training entails.

Peter tended to conflate the work of Stanislavsky and the Method teachers, especially Strasberg; and he associated the conflation too closely, I think, with a particular acting style appropriate to American theatre and film writing of the mid-20th century. When he opined that Stanislavsky and Shakespeare were miserable bedfellows, what I think he really viscerally meant was that it doesn’t make sense to import an acting style appropriate to *Kramer vs Kramer* to Shakespeare.

And not one of the inheritors of Stanislavsky would have disagreed with this. Hoffman’s teacher Lee Strasberg:

*The style of the play requires a different kind of expression, but the reality of feeling remains the same.*

This is from Strasberg’s ‘A Dream of Passion’. Both Hall and Strasberg turned to *Hamlet* – as have we all – as the source text to underpin their philosophies of acting. But Strasberg’s attention, like Stanislavsky’s, is more intrinsic than the structure of the iambic line: he’s concerned with forcing the soul to a conceit in order to produce observable physical effects.

Peter, it seems to me, contradicted himself when he considered the relationship between Hamlet’s instructions and those he associates with Stanislavsky and his inheritors. On the one hand, the System and Method allegedly prioritise naturalism, and Shakespeare is not naturalistic. On the other hand, the System and the Method produce overwrought feeling, and Shakespeare demands that the actor ‘o’erstep not the modesty of nature’. These positions seem to me essentially incompatible.

I am not sure why Peter’s tolerance of the work of Stanislavsky and his inheritors was so attenuated. Part of me suspects that he just hadn’t paid much attention to Stanislavsky, perhaps hadn’t more than skim-read parts of it. I don’t think he’d paid much attention to Strasberg’s writing or teaching either, both of which show Strasberg to have been a sophisticated and *theatrical* thinker. Maybe, like we all do, Peter was just shrugging off something he didn’t really understand and, perhaps reasonably, felt he had better things to do than try to understand. Like creating the entire architecture of the modern British theatre.

In these Brexity days, though, it’s difficult to avoid perceiving an element of cultural puritanism in Peter’s tone, not least due to the religious language. Not that he decries Russian or American styles or approaches *per se*, just that they have no place infiltrating the English tradition. I wonder if Peter, despite his philosophical reverence for Brecht’s ensemble principles, never connected very viscerally with non-English acting traditions; even his Greek mask work was his own and invented, largely uninflected by living mask traditions. I once asked him, when he was passionately decrying the state of artistic funding in the UK and describing enviously the opportunities Brook had as an artist in Paris, why he’d never upped sticks and gone elsewhere. It was perhaps the only time I saw him look vulnerable, and a little sad. “I suppose I’m just too English,” he said.

I said I’d come back to lineages. One of the most interesting and indeed influential things about the Stanislavskyan tradition is that it’s extremely well-documented: Stanislavsky created the environment in which acting teachers write their methodologies down. That means that we can trace the elements of the Stanislavskyan tradition very precisely, seeing exactly when and by whom new ideas, formulations, terminology or exercises were introduced.

This cannot be said of Peter’s ‘English tradition’ in *Advice to the Players*.

According to his Introduction, quoted in the blurb:

*Shakespeare tells the actor when to go fast and when to go slow; when to pause, when to come in on cue and when to accent a word … He tells the actor* when *but never* why *or* how.

Why and how, of course, are the aim of Stanislavskyan training.

Anyway, none of the specific rhythmic provisions that Peter lays out, though they may lead to an interesting and effective style of Shakespearean performance, can be traced back to the 16th century, let alone, of course, to Shakespeare. Peter received William Poel’s principles direct from Edith Evans, she got them from Poel. We can’t in all honesty go back further. Peter’s tradition is of roughly the same antiquity as Stanislavsky’s. This is Peter’s Advice to the Players, not Shakespeare’s. When he describes the tradition further back in its presumed history, the most precise Peter can be is to call it a “rapid, witty speaking technique.” Sounds a bit like Dustin Hoffman.

Abigail Rokison has done important work on this verse-speaking tradition and shown, elegantly, that it doesn’t really exist, though she does infer some fascinating clues as to Early Modern practice by reading the scraps of evidence closely. Theatre scholars have of course been rightly cautious about making too-precise judgements of what Early Modern acting looked or sounded like in the dark backward and abysm of time. There has though been a tendency to interpret Early Modern sources as describing a formalistic rather than realistic acting style.

I would dispute this assessment. I believe that much EM writing on acting stresses the high value accorded to truthfulness if we learn how to read it. The problem is simply that EM writers had inadequate language to accurately describe interiority in any context, let alone the performative. That, though, is a deep rabbit hole which I should avoid hurling myself into.

Acting values, or styles, are after all a different thing from the methodologies which help actors achieve them. Is it simply true that Stanislavskyan methodologies cannot be applied to Shakespeare, as Peter maintained, that as a later imposition on an English tradition they simply have no place in the Shakespearean theatre?

The most frequently adduced example of a quasi-or proto-Stanislavskyan methodology in Early Modern acting is Richard Flecknoe’s famous report, forty years after Burbage’s death, that Burbage

*was a delightful Proteus, so wholly transforming himself into his part and putting off himself with his cloathes, as he never (not so much as in the "Tyring House") assum’d himself again until the Play was done.*

This sounds rather like Daniel Day-Lewis, requiring that everyone calls him Mr President on the set of *Lincoln*.

If Burbage is still playing Hamlet in the tiring house, then he’s certainly embracing proto-Stanislavskyan practice. He’s empathising with his character even off-stage, consistently engaging with the question “what if this were really true?”. He’s also deliberately maintaining his focus and concentration – his dynamism and aliveness, as Stanislavsky would say. From Harbage on, some have argued that the story is apocryphal. Even so, its importance does not necessarily lie in whether it is factually true of Burbage’s backstage deportment: it clearly expresses a value that transformative acting might aspire to in the Early Modern period, and describes a backstage habit credible, if exceptional, to Flecknoe’s audience.

This anecdote has been about the only specific evidence for “realistic” psychological acting methodologies operative in Shakespeare’s theatre. One piece of contested hearsay. Slim pickings for the Stanislavskyan. I think we can go a bit further.

The heart of Stanislavsky’s System is based not on improvisation but on questions; essentially, you, the actor, ask a series of logical questions of the text you must perform, which together form the structure by which you answer performatively the fundamental “what if this were true?”. The Stanislavsky System is often adumbrated in what’s called the “Seven Questions”:

* Who am I?
* Where am I?
* What time is it?
* What do I want?
* Why do I want it?
* What can I do to get what I want?
* What must I overcome to get what I want?

In his brilliant study of Shakespeare’s intellectual influences, *Soul of the Age,* Jonathan Bate drew attention to an educational manual of 1612, *Ludus Literarius* by John Brinsley. Brinsley, a disciple of the great Elizabethan humanist educator, Roger Askham, was describing best practice in rhetorical training in the grammar schools of his day. He set out a clear method for ‘construing’ a text. The teacher must remind the students to

“labour to understand and keep in fresh memory the argument, matter and drift of the place which they are to construe … To consider well all of the circumstances of each place, which are comprehended most of them in this plain verse:

*Quis, cui, causa, locus, quo tempore, prima sequela.*

That is: who speaks in that place? what he speaks? to whom he speaks? upon what occasion he speaks, or to what end? where he spake? at what time it was? what went before in the sentences next, what followeth next after?

This verse I would have every such scholar to have readily; it is a very principal rule for the understanding of any author or matter whatsoever.”

A very principal rule for the understanding of any author or matter whatsoever. Seven questions:

* Who speaks? or thinking empathetically, *Who am I?*
* What he speaks? *What do I want?*
* To whom he speaks? *What must I overcome to get what I want?*
* Upon what occasion he speaks, or to what end? *Why do I want it?*
* Where he spake? *Where am I?*
* At what time it was? *When is it?*
* What went before in the sentences, next, what followeth next after? *What can I do to get what I want?*

I’m not, of course, suggesting that Stanislavsky was following Brinsley; nor could any direct connection between Shakespeare and Brinsley be proved, other than their contemporaneity. But all are representatives of a broader and more ancient Western tradition which ties together performance and rhetoric. As Quintus wrote to Cicero: “when you go down to the Forum each day, say to yourself, “I am a novus homo and I seek the consulship of Rome”. Who am I, what do I want, and what is in my way? These questions are as fundamental to the tradition of rhetorical drama in which Shakespeare partook, as are the questions of form and rhythm which underpin Peter’s approach.

Peter’s principle and precision, his musicality and missionary attention to text have been of infinite importance in my work. But as both an acting teacher and an Early Modern specialist, his representation of his tradition in *Advice to the Players* is unsatisfying to me; the rhetoric is forceful, but unpersuasive.

Contrary to what Peter clearly felt deeply, and as John knew well, there’s no reason at all, that the two ‘traditions’ cannot be married, or at least flirt outrageously, in training, rehearsal and performance. Indeed, it is simply inevitable that they will: almost all contemporary actors are consciously or unconsciously deploying Stanislavskyan approaches.

I worried for years that by so totally rejecting Stanislavskyan principles, Peter had excluded himself from the most important practical and theoretical discourses in actor-training. So to be here now, in such esteemed company, thinking about Peter’s work from that particular perspective, and exploring a philosophical tension at the heart of my own training which has provided the torque of my entire career, is a great privilege. And I hope entirely in the spirit of the critical assessment of his work, and that of John, that we’ve been undertaking.

The ongoing gleeful provocation Peter provides makes me love the man and once more salute his memory.

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