

# History and Histrionics

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THE twentieth century, an age of specialization and professionalisation, is not the age of the polymath: it has no Lomonosov, no Rizal, and few who can cross the frontiers between disciplines and compartments of knowledge. But perhaps it is possible at least to be a professional in one sphere, and an amateur in another. Perhaps, too, it is permissible for one who attempts such a commitment to juxtapose the two. In what may these two countries of the mind trade with each other?

A historian has his use in the theatre, even apart from any ability he may have as an actor. He may help in creating a sense of period when a period play is being presented. He may remind those who choose the repertoire of the need to explore not only the latest fashion, not only the present; the need continually to revise the view of the past, to question tradition. Then, again, historians specialize; and there are historians of theatre, of design, costume and production. They are, of course, more likely to be of use than historians of Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, the historian may admit that the theatre is useful to him, more useful, perhaps, than he is to the theatre. For one thing, but not the only thing, some know-how may be passed on. Many historians will be called upon to cleave the public ear with horrid speech. Audibility is a prime need on the stage, too. 'The actor', wrote Stanislavsky, the great Russian director, 'must not only be pleased himself by the sound of his own speech but he must make it possible for the public present in the theatre to hear and understand whatever merits its attention. Words and their intonation should reach their ears without effort...'<sup>1</sup> That is good advice for the lecturer, though not only in history. Indeed, actor and lecturer are faced, in some measure, with a common task, enlivening the written word, bringing it off the page, conveying it with meaning to an audience. Stanislavsky stressed the importance of punctuation, too. For the comma he claimed 'a miraculous quality': your listeners would wait for you after it had lifted your phonetic line.<sup>2</sup> That sort of comment is useful to writers as well as to speakers. Practice in conveying meaning, acquired in histrionics, is useful in historiography. But the relationship of the two extends beyond these issues of communication.

<sup>1</sup>C. Stanislavski (Alekseev, K.S.), trans. E.R. Hapgood, *Building a Character*, London, 1950, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 132-3.

You must not hurry, and so 'not give yourself time to get inside of what you are saying', Stanislavsky told the actor; you must 'get around to examining and feeling what lies behind the words'.<sup>3</sup> He was, of course writing of what came to be called the Method, a means by which the actor could convincingly live his part, and relive it night after night. Stanislavsky had been conscious from his very early years of the embarrassment of aimless presence and motiveless action on the stage, and by contrast of 'the inner truth of reasoned presence and action'.<sup>4</sup> Even as he gained experience, he had felt he was relying on tricks.

In the first presentation of the Moscow Society of Art and Literature, Stanislavsky had a tragic role in Pushkin's *The Miser Knight* and a comic one in Molière's *Georges Dandin*. So far, he tells us, he had always acted by imitation: he was lost when he knew no model to imitate. Now he tried to learn from the director, Alexander Fedotov, but he still could not bring the Miser Knight alive. 'I lived through something outwardly and physically also, but this bore a relation only to the age characteristics of the role. I was also able to say the words of the text simply, but not because of the inner causes by which Pushkin's baron lived. I spoke simply just for the sake of speaking simply.' The performance was too mechanical. 'You feel the *something* that is lacking in the part; it is very near, here in yourself, and all you have to do is to take hold of it, but as soon as you stretch your hand it is gone. . . .' Live the part, said the director: but how was that to be done? The instruction only made Stanislavsky force his voice and wear himself out without producing a convincing result. In the Molière play, Stanislavsky tried to imitate Fedotov. Again he did not feel that he succeeded. 'When my imitation was unsuccessful, I left it and caught hold of my old methods of play, seeking life in the tempo of patter, and waving of arms, then in acting without a pause so that the spectator might not have time to be bored, or in the straining of all my muscles and the squeezing out of temperament, or in the loss of text. . . .' But on the night of the dress rehearsal, an accidental touch in his make-up seemed to bring the part alive. Stanislavsky felt right on the stage. It was 'a moment of great joy, that paid for all my former pangs of creation'.<sup>5</sup>

In another role, that of the uncle in Dostoyevsky's *The Village of Stepanichikovo and its Inhabitants*, Stanislavsky felt quite at home: he considered that the role had been maturing within him, that he was made for it, and it for him. For the duration of the play, he had become Rostanov. 'What a happiness it is to feel even once in a lifetime what a true actor must feel and do on the stage! Imagine that you have been granted a glance at paradise. . . . To know the paradise of art! . . . Can one make peace with anything else on the stage after an experience like that?' Stanislavsky sought to develop a method by which the actor could enter this paradise at will instead of by accident. Only when technique made this possible would stage craftsmanship become a true art.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> C. Stanislavsky, trans. J.J. Robbins, *My Life in Art*, London, 1948, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 157-8, 164-6.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 214.

The Method has been criticized. Often, as Robert Lewis pointed out,<sup>7</sup> attacks have been directed at what others made of it, rather than what its creator intended. The style of Stanislavsky's own company seemed, indeed, to become too formalized, too 'stagey'. Others, in search of realism, went in the other direction, mumbled, and failed to communicate. Every generation, a historian may suggest, has its own style of playing: one generation's naturalism is, perhaps, another's artificiality. But Stanislavsky's doctrine does seem to represent a truth about the actor's task, and his books, however irritating in their avuncularity, to assemble some of the devices an actor needs.

The only way you could hope to live a role, Stanislavsky believed, was by recreating its inner life, experiencing feelings analogous to it, each time you played it.<sup>8</sup> Much of his book, *An Actor Prepares*, is taken up with the sort of techniques and exercises that an actor might use to help him recreate a role. Stanislavsky emphasized the importance to the actor of a well-stocked mind of actual and artistic experiences, so that he might be able to call upon his emotion-memory and find something in it that helped him to imagine the role in hand. He believed that the imagination could be exercised – by means of what he called the creative 'if' – so that the actor could better put himself into the role he was playing. It was only by training and concentration that he could hope to rouse the subconscious and identify with the part instead of continuing to be simply himself. And it was only this – rather than playing up to the audience, or falling back on clichés – that would enable him to absorb the audience's attention and put the role over to it. At the same time, he must be in communion with the other actors and sensitive to the overall meaning of the play.<sup>9</sup>

A historian's task is in some sense similar to the actor's. An actor must get inside the part, and yet still be an observer, a calculator, a practiser of method, alive to play, fellow-actors, audience. Compare that with the historian's position. He has to get inside other personalities, so as to interpret speeches and writings, to fathom what they sought to do. Yet at the same time he has to observe them, to see what they in fact did. Sir Herbert Butterfield almost borrows Stanislavsky's words: 'historical students must be like actors, who must not merely masquerade as Hamlet on one night and King Lear on another night, but must feel and think so, and really get under their skins – the defective historian being like the defective actor who does not really dramatise anything, because, in whatever rôle he is cast, he is always the same – he can only be himself.'<sup>10</sup> A historian needs a Stanislavskyan method. E.R. Tannenbaum, a liberal American, wrote of the diehards of the Action Française. 'For the sake of understanding them', he declared, 'I have temporarily taken on such attitudes as antisemitism, hatred of the masses, intellectual snobbery, chauvinism', a 'Stanislavskyan ex-

<sup>7</sup> Robert Lewis, *Method—or Madness*, London, 1960.

<sup>8</sup> C. Stanislavsky, trans. E.R. Hapgood, *An Actor Prepares*, London, 1937, pp. 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, passim.

<sup>10</sup> H. Butterfield, *History and Human Relations*, London, 1951, p. 248.

ercise'.<sup>11</sup> An historian needs skill and practice; he also needs 'emotion-memory' and imagination.

The juxtaposition of history and histrionics goes beyond enlivening the written word by satisfying speech: both seek interpretation with a sense of rightness, of conviction. Historian and actor are both engaged in the task of understanding others; and they are engaged, as a result, in two civilizing trades, ultimately satisfying, if at times maddening. 'It is easy to play, and it is hard to play; it is a ravishing and an unbearable art.'<sup>12</sup> The words are Stanislavsky's; they might be a historian's. Actor and historian are engaged in acts of re-creation that are also creative. But there is a danger here for both. Both have an audience: the one, actively present; the other, actively present at a lecture, or else unknown readers in schoolrooms, in libraries or at the fireside. That is a further factor in the act of understanding. For with both there is a need for presentation. One's understanding of a second personality is to be conveyed to a third: the conveyance must not falsify but rather clarify the understanding. Stanislavsky believed that it was possible to live inside another person: that was essential if that other person was to appear convincing to a third. So, too, Butterfield. Yet the actor's or historian's own circumstances, and his recognition of the audience's, may modify that understanding. Both have to try to make the past – the imagined past of the playwright or the recaptured historical past – meaningful to the present without destroying its particularity. Both will find it easy to oversimplify. But the result of that will be neither good acting nor good history. Not only actors will be tempted to play to the gallery or to upstage their colleagues. No-one else is on the stage with the historian to prevent his doing violence to his story. But he has colleagues and critics who will watch his performance – as Hexter watches Hill's, or more mildly – and remind him of the essential need for self-discipline. That is a prime requisite for the actor, too. Both actor and historian have to be truthful without being dull. The creative element in the re-creation must not carry either away.

The comparison must not be pressed too far. The tasks of historian and actor are, of course, different. Stanislavsky, for instance, was much concerned with the problem of repetition. The actor reached an understanding of a character: how was he to re-present it night after night without either making it stale or varying it excessively? For the historian the process is different: an effort at understanding, laboriously worked out, conveyed to paper, rewritten, corrected, then spoken, or printed, proofed and published. The historian is verbally commenting on his characters, relating statements and actions, actions and outcome, structuring and interpreting his story, more or less purposefully linking past and present, offering patterns of explanation. The actor avoids *ad libbing*, remembers his lines (though that is not the thing he likes to be complimented upon), confines himself to inflection and implication, emphasis and expression, mime and movement. He has a text to

<sup>11</sup> E.R. Tannenbaum, *The Action Française*, New York, 1962, p. vii.

<sup>12</sup> *My Life in Art*, p. 62.

fill out; the historian has composed a text. The one has recreated a character; the other has also placed him in a story.

Should we then compare historian rather to producer than to actor? Perhaps that depends on the producer. The current trend seems to be to underproduce amateurs and overproduce professionals. And not only to overproduce them, but to force the audience to buy a programme in which the producer presumes to tell us at length what the play is about. There is a risk that this kind of producer will come between us and the characters, rather than promote our communication with them. The latter is the producer's proper role: to assist interpretation, not impose it. And that is not only a historian's viewpoint. The director, Stanislavsky wrote, 'must facilitate the creativeness of the actors, supervise and integrate it, taking care that it evolves naturally and only from the true artistic kernel of the play'.<sup>13</sup>

More revealing is a comparison with the playwright himself, the man who provides actors (and producer) with the text. Froude indeed compared his colleagues to playwrights. 'History is the account of the actions of men, and in "actions" are comprehended the thoughts, opinions, motives, impulses of the actors and of the circumstances in which their work was executed. . . . If *Hamlet* or *Lear* was exact to outward fact — were they and their fellow-actors on the stage exactly such as Shakespeare describes them, that was perfect history; and what we call history is only valuable as it approaches to that pattern. To say that the characters of men cannot be thus completely known, that their inner nature is beyond our reach, that the dramatic portraiture of things is only possible to poetry, is to say that history ought not to be written, for the inner nature of the persons of whom it speaks is the essential thing about them. . . .'<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare's tragedies as history: one implication is narration in the words of the participants. But even such a narration, historians will recognize, implies an interpretation. Even though the playwright does not explain or comment, he does in a sense select.

A historian must, like a playwright, select and structure. Yet the playwright has the world under better control than the historian. As Froude admits in his description of the historian's duty: 'to penetrate really into the hearts and souls of men, to give each his due, to represent him as he appeared at his best, to himself and not to his enemies, to sympathize in the collision of principles with each party in turn; to feel as they felt, to think as they thought, and to reproduce the various beliefs, the acquirements, the intellectual atmosphere of another age, is a task which requires gifts as great or greater than those of the greatest dramatists; for all is required which is required of the dramatist, with the obligation to truth of ascertained fact besides. . . .'<sup>15</sup> The playwright has delimited his world, has formed his characters: his 'selection' of events is only apparent — there are no other sources, no manuscripts awaiting discovery, no false Donations. The same

<sup>13</sup>Stanislavski's *Legacy*, London, 1958, p. 155.

<sup>14</sup>J.A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle, A History of His Life in London*, London, 1884, II, 200-01.

<sup>15</sup>*ibid.*, 201.

consideration applies to plays even on historical subjects. When playing *Poor Bitos*, I was criticized because my Robespierre was not like the Robespierre of history. That missed the point: it was supposed to be like the Robespierre of Anouilh. That is what, as an actor, I had to try to be faithful to. Playwrights may take an arbitrary view of the past, as of the world as a whole: their aim may be tragedy, comedy, farce, satire. The limit is that the play must remain in sufficient contact with humanity to be acted and to be meaningful to an audience.

The same point has been made in regard to the novelist. The world of Moreland is more completely known than the world of Constant Lambert. X. Trapnel, the novelist in Anthony Powell's *roman fleuve*, makes the point: 'People think because a novel's invented, it isn't true. Exactly the reverse is the case. Because a novel's invented, it is true. Biography and memoirs can never be wholly true, since they can't include every conceivable circumstance of what happened. The novel can do that. The novelist himself lays it down. His decision is binding. The biographer, even at his highest and best, can only be tentative, empirical.'<sup>16</sup>

The historian, unlike the playwright, but like the novelist, can comment. But he cannot define the world: he has to re-create it, by skills like the actor's and skills of his own. That world may be destroyed by a new perception of reality or a new source. The inconvenience he must accept. He is always sure to be wrong, at best no more than partly right. He cannot ignore what does not fit. Otherwise he risks being propagandist or moralist rather than historian, making the past, in Oakeshottian phrase, 'a field in which we exercise our moral and political opinions, like whippets in a meadow on Sunday afternoon'.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, some things can never be known. He cannot, like some novelists, sit inside another's mind. Froude, and perhaps Butterfield also, go too far. Inner motives are, despite Collingwood, ultimately beyond a historian's reach. 'To require a historian to rethink Brutus's thought before he killed Caesar is to require him to become Brutus. And this he cannot do.'<sup>18</sup> With the historian, as with Saul Bellow's Joseph, judgment must therefore be 'second to wonder, to speculation on men'.<sup>19</sup> Even in *Hamlet* or *Lear*, neither we nor the actor can rely on learning motives except from speeches in soliloquy. Playing Iago in the 1976 Auckland summer production I began to question whether you could believe him even then. Assume that you can, interpretation still remains difficult. Froude seemed to forget that Shakespeare needed actors. But he was right to stress the difficulty of the historian's task. It is, in fact, harder even than he surmised: 'ascertained fact' is hard to come by; and in some realms impossible. Reading some letters of Sir James Brooke at the same time as preparing Iago, I realized that not only

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Powell, *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, London, 1975, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> M. Oakeshott, 'The Activity of being an Historian', in *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays*, London, 1962, p. 165.

<sup>18</sup> David H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, London, 1971, p. 196. Cf. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1946, pp. 214-5.

<sup>19</sup> Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man*, Penguin ed., p. 24.

might other letters turn up, but that letters were always written to someone. Even diaries are not soliloquies.

Is there then – besides the stimulus of similarity – also the stimulus of difference between these juxtaposed countries of the mind, history and histrionics? That seems to be so in the case of historian and actor: the latter searches within limits, with rather more of an air of certainty than a historian can ever have, though with small hope of complete realization. And it is so with historian and playwright, too. The playwright in the end makes a world out of observation, experience, imagination; and that he may do with success, though we may not fully understand it, and he, relying on his actors, may not be able to tell us, the obliquity, indeed, being part of the fascination of the *genre*. The historian has to re-create a world. That is ultimately an impossible task, though a necessary one: a task in which progress can be made, though finality cannot be reached.

‘We are never sufficiently understanding’, wrote Marc Bloch.<sup>20</sup> History is civilizing: it treats of difference as well as of similarity, of others so that we know them, and ourselves, better. Isn’t it something that Shakespeare and Garrick might have said too? History, Bloch added, ‘includes a vast experience of human diversities, a continuous contact with men’.<sup>21</sup> So does the theatre.

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<sup>20</sup>M. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, Manchester, 1954, p. 143.

<sup>21</sup>*ibid.*, p. 144.