Constatntin Stanislavski died more than fifty years ago. Yet every time we watch TV or go to a film or a play we can still see his influence at work. Stanislavski’s real name was Constatin Sergeyevich Alexeyev, and he was born in Moscow on 18 January 1863. His father was very wealthy and gave his son a private education which included frequent vists to the opera and theatre, as well as lessons in acting, singing and dancing.

By the age of fourteen, Stanislavski was acting in plays in a theatre built by his father on their country estate. He actually took the stage name of Stanislavski from an actor he met in amatuer theatre in 1885. Stanislavski was deeply involved in theatre from a very young age and directed and acted in a large number of plays.

During this early early period of his life, Stanislavski became increasingly unhappy with the meoldramatic style of acting which was in fashion not only in Russia, but throughout the world. He formed the Moscow Art Theatre, which aimed for a new truth and relaism in Theatre. In 1906, as well as working as an actor and director, Stanislavski began to develop a system for training actors and in 1913 he set up the First Studio, which was an experiemental theatre for improvising plays and developing acting techniques. For the rest of his life, Stanislavski contuned to work on his system for training actors as part of his total involvement in the theatre.

On 29 October 1928 he suffered a heart attack whilst acting in a play. This forced Stanislavski to give up performing, and for the rest of his life he concentrated on directing, teaching and writing. Stanislavski died in Moscow on 7 August 1938, the single most influencial director in the history of theatre.

**STANISLAVSKI’S SYSTEM**

What stanislavski actually did was to apply a scientific approach to acting. He constantly used his own work to experiemnt with, Every time he trained, rehearsed or went on stage, he was experimenting. The system he developed taught actors how to use skill, discipline and will power to achieve inspiration. His aim was to train actors to be truly creative people, and the techniques he discovered through observation and experiemnt.
At the core of Stanislavski’s system is his insistence that actors must believe in what they are doing themselves, so that acting becomes the extraordinary experience of living the life of another person. Throughout his life, Stanislavski went on developing the techniques required to teach actors to achieve this experience. When he was directing a play, the stage often resembled a classroom. The actors were put through an enormous range of exercises and new techniques were invented and tried. Plays were analysed in depth as the actors worked on creating their characters.

The aim of all the techniques was the same, to develop actors who had creative intelligence, complete self-discipline, perfect control over their voices, diction and physical movement, and the ability to create and experience a whole range of human motions. Anyone who could achieve all these qualities would not only be a superb actor, but a superb human being. As you can see, Stanislavski not only revolutionised twentieth-century theatre, he also created a system which trained young people to be better actors by making them better people.

STANISLAVSKI’S TECHNIQUES

Remember that for Stanislavski, being a great actor meant being an ideal human being. Although his techniques are theatrical in nature the aim is the personal development of the individual. Most of his techniques can, and should, be practiced as often as possible, not just learned in the classroom, used there a few times and then forgotten. The challenge is for you to make effective use of them for yourself.

Concentration

Stanislavski demanded an incredibly high level of concentration, both physical and mental, from his actors. To achieve this, he trained them in a whole range of concentration and relaxation techniques. One of the most important techniques involved circles of attention. Actors were taught to begin by concentrating all their attention on a single spot, ignoring everything else. Then widen their focus to include a single object, like a chair. The circle of attention became wider still to include a whole area, and finally widened to take in the whole room. At each step, the concentration of the actors had to be total, so that they were aware of everything inside each circle of attention, and oblivious to everything outside.

Voice

Stanislavski argued that actors were far more intensely involved in communication than people in ordinary life. They therefore had to be able to use their voices more effectively. He insisted that his actors do regular voice exercises to improve their diction, projection, resonance and expressiveness. Stanislavski believed that the human voice was an instrument which could be used with great power and beauty to communicate. He regularly used singing as a way of developing the voice.
Physical Skills
Throughout his life Stanislavski emphasised the importance of physical training for actors, and he used exercises, mime work and dance to make his actors supple, graceful and strong. Towards the end of his life, he became increasingly convinced that physical movement and control were the keys to acting, a theory that Jerzy Grotowski was later to develop much further.

Stanislavski argued that on stage, and in real life, some of the strongest human feelings are signaled by small natural movements. Even complete stillness can be the result of a very strong emotion, as when people are frozen with fear, or rigid with barely controlled anger. Every physical movement we make has some reason for it, or is caused by some effect.

Emotion Memory
Stanislavski demanded that his actors actually experience the emotions of the characters they were portraying. This seems an impossible demand to make. How can a young actress who has never been a mother genuinely feel the joy of a character in a play who has just given birth to a baby? How can an actor who has never deliberately hurt anyone in his life become a vicious killer in a play?

One of Stanislavski’s greatest achievements was to solve this problem. It was Stanislavski who developed the use of emotion memory to train actors to remember and experience a whole range of human feelings. He believed that certain memories could bring back what we actually felt at the time, so that when we remember something important, such as a very exciting time in our lives, our hearts actually beat faster and we experience a feeling of excitement all over again.

Stanislavski’s actors were encouraged to use this experience of emotion memory all the time. The young actress portraying the character of the mother could use her emotion memory to recreate the joy she felt as a child when given a new pet or much loved doll. The actor portraying the character of a murderer could use the emotion memory of a time when he felt intense hatred or the urge to destroy something.

If we develop the use of our emotion memories through constant practice, we will learn to put ourselves emotionally in another person’s place, and experience what they are feeling. Stanislavski believed the more we use our emotion memories, the more sensitive we become, not only to our own feelings, but to the emotional life of everyone around us.

Observation
All of Stanislavski’s actors were encouraged to use their powers of observation to learn more about people and their behaviour. He instructed them to watch and listen with real concentration to every minute of their waking lives, and urged them to read books, study paintings and listen to music. The more they observed, the more they would learn.

Harmony
Both during rehearsals and in performance, Stanislavski insisted that his actors must be in harmony with one another. An actor might have the main role in one play and only one line to say in the next. Working like this was Stanislavski’s philosophy, and one of his most famous observations was that there were no small parts, only small actors.

On stage his actors worked together in character, making eye contact with each other and genuinely responding to the actions, words and emotions of the other actors. They were told to completely forget the existence of the audience and concentrate on working in complete harmony with each other.
Analysis
One of the most important skills Stanislavski taught his actors was the ability to analyse human behaviour. He believed that every character in a play has a particular reason or motive for his or her behaviour. Each character is trying to achieve something vitally important to him or her. Stanislavski called this motive the ‘super-objective’, and his actors were required to study their characters in depth to work out what the super-objectives were.

Once the actors had discovered this, they could understand why their characters behaved as they did. All the actions taken by the characters would make sense because they would be aimed at gaining what the character wanted. For every character there would be a clear line of action running through the play, leading to the characters super-objective.

Creativity
At the heart of Stanislavski’s system is a very simple question: ‘what if?’. Stanislavski called this question the ‘Magic If’, and he made his actors use it all the time as a stimulus to creativity. The actor asks themselves ‘What if I were this character in this situation? What would I do?’. When a group of actors use the ‘Magic If’ with real skill and total commitment to their characters, then all of them become completely involved in the imaginative reality of the play.

The ‘Magic If’ is not just an important theatrical technique. It is the key to all Drama. By visualising an imaginary situation, and then projecting ourselves into it as different people, we can live a whole world of experiences and emotions that would never be available to us in reality.

Personalisation
On stage, Stanislavski’s actors seemed to become the character they were acting, until the audience watching believed that the people on stage were real. However Stanislavski insisted that this fusion of the actor with the character must never be total. Actors must always be in control of their creations, so that a part of their consciousness remained separate observing and directing the behaviour of the character. What Stanislavski required of actors was the difficult but rewarding skill of personalisation. To achieve it, actors had to use their emotions, observations and experiences to create a character and then become that person as completely as possible on stage.Whilst they were acting, they had to seem to be the character, yet be in complete control of their performance, and return to themselves as soon as the play was over.

Putting it Together
There are no ideal human beings. We actually use the word human to mean weak, frail and full of faults. Stanislavski’s system cannot make us perfect. What it can do is make us much more aware of ourselves and much more sensitive to others. Most of all, it can help us to develop ourselves physically, mentally and emotionally. Whether we want to be better actors or better human beings, Stanislavski’s techniques are invaluable.

BREAKING IT DOWN – Beats and Units
Stanislavski’s theory stipulates that every script from monologues to scenes can be analysed and broken into units of action. A Unit is a section of dialogue where a character’s objective is established. The units may change throughout the scene as the objectives change. This creates the through-line for the character.

We can break each unit down even further into beats. Beats are the individual thoughts or moments that create the rhythmic changes in the unit. Each actor needs to keep the rhythm of the character’s actions distinct from the rhythm of other actors on the stage. This helps to create dramatic tension.