

# STANISLAVSKI

## Who was Stanislavski?

Constatin Stanislavski was born in Moscow, Russia in 1863. He was a director and actor and is often referred to as the father of modern theatre. It is said that Stanislavski had a more profound effect on the process of acting than anyone else in the twentieth century.

In the late 19th century Stanislavski found the theatres styles of his day fairly dull to watch. Actors simply spoke to the audience, and did not interact very well with each other. They simply walked on stage and delivered their lines, and no effort was made to make the performances realistic. Sets were simple and unchanging, while costumes were whatever people could find or bring.

Stanislavski believed that this was not a good approach to performing. Instead of acting mechanically (with no feeling) he believed that actors should feel the emotion of the play and express it to the audience. He worked towards improving the actor's own skill, rather than him or her just using shallow acting techniques. In order to do this he created what is referred to as the 'system', which we will look at and understand in more detail over the following pages.

**FACT**

He co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1897.

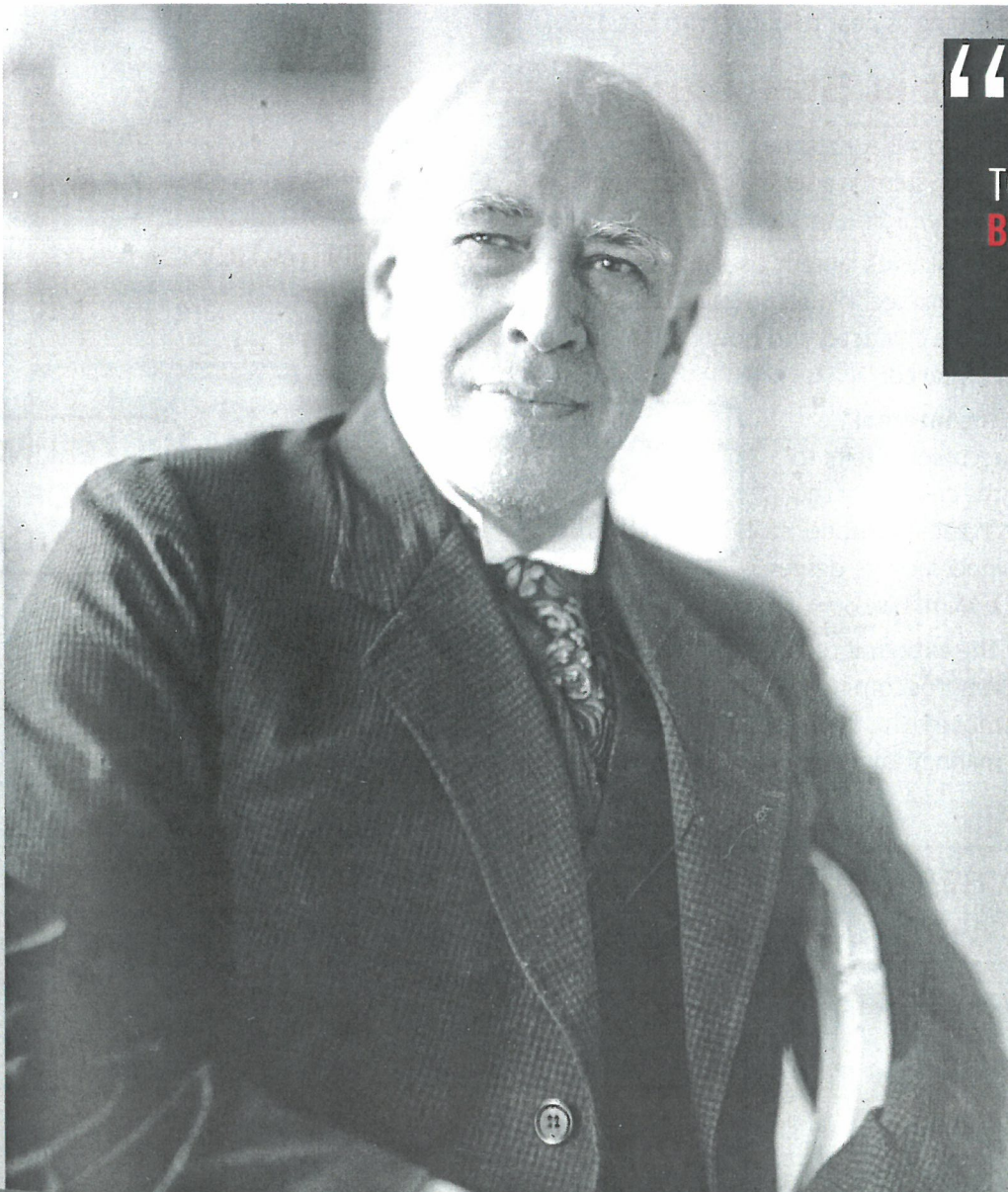
Three of his most famous and important works are:

*'An Actor Prepares'*

*'Building a Character'*

*'Creating a Role'.*

Constantin  
Stanislavski:  
(1863–1938)



“ WHEN YOU  
PLAY A **GOOD** MAN, TRY  
TO FIND OUT WHERE HE IS  
**BAD**, AND WHEN YOU PLAY  
A **VILLAIN**, TRY TO FIND  
WHERE HE IS **GOOD**. ”



## What were his ideas for the theatre?

Stanislavski viewed theatre as a means of artistically expressing things, and that the audience's role was to 'look in' on the action on the stage. He favoured the idea of the 'fourth wall', which separated the audience and the actors, to re-create total realism on the stage. This 'fourth wall' was an imaginary wall between the actor and the audience designed to keep the actor's attention on the stage.

It was a common practice during his time for the stars of a play to make their entrance and head straight to the front of the stage. There they took a number of bows, while the supporting cast froze in mid-action. Having received their adulation, the stars would return to the drama of the play, at which point the supporting cast unfroze and the performance would continue.

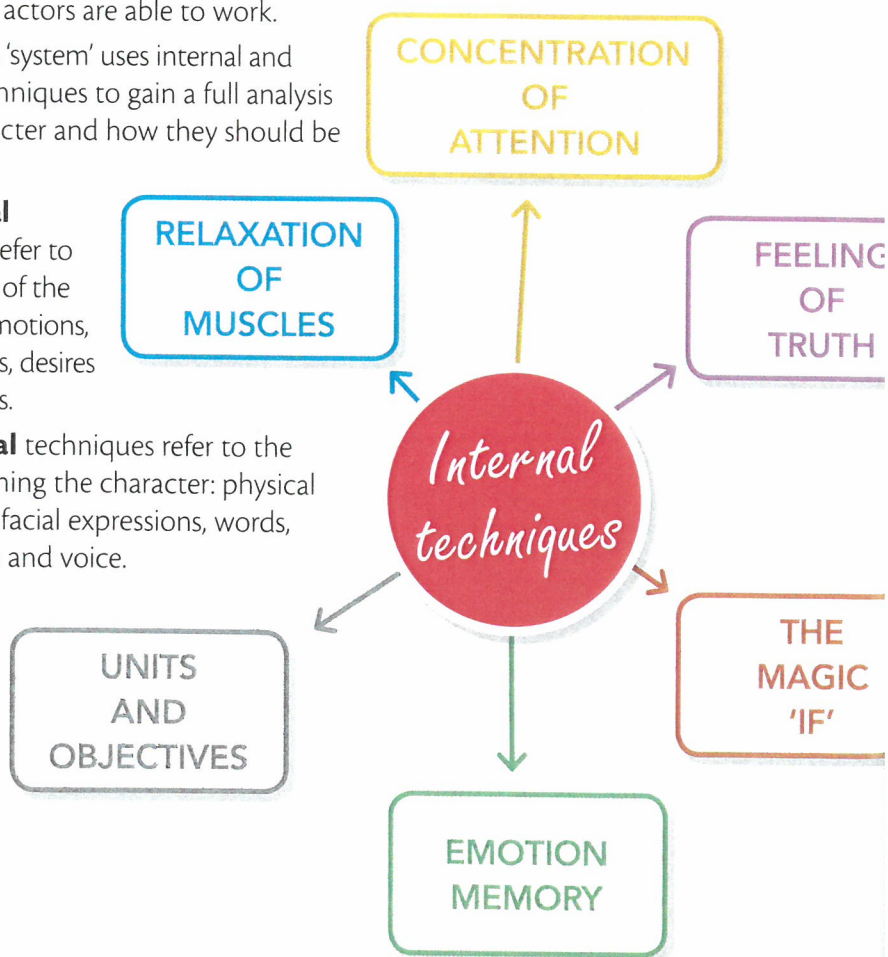
Stanislavski wanted to get away from this star system, and away from the habit of the time that the actors play to the audience rather than to each other. He felt that a new approach to theatre would move it away from one which – in his opinion – lacked artistic **integrity** and inner substance. He wanted the audience to feel the pain or joy of the actor, and that watching a performance would bring out a feeling of empathy in the person in the audience.

Stanislavski believed in **ensemble acting** and wanted to take theatre away from the idea of having a star who was the most important in the show. His belief was to create something as near to naturalism as possible.

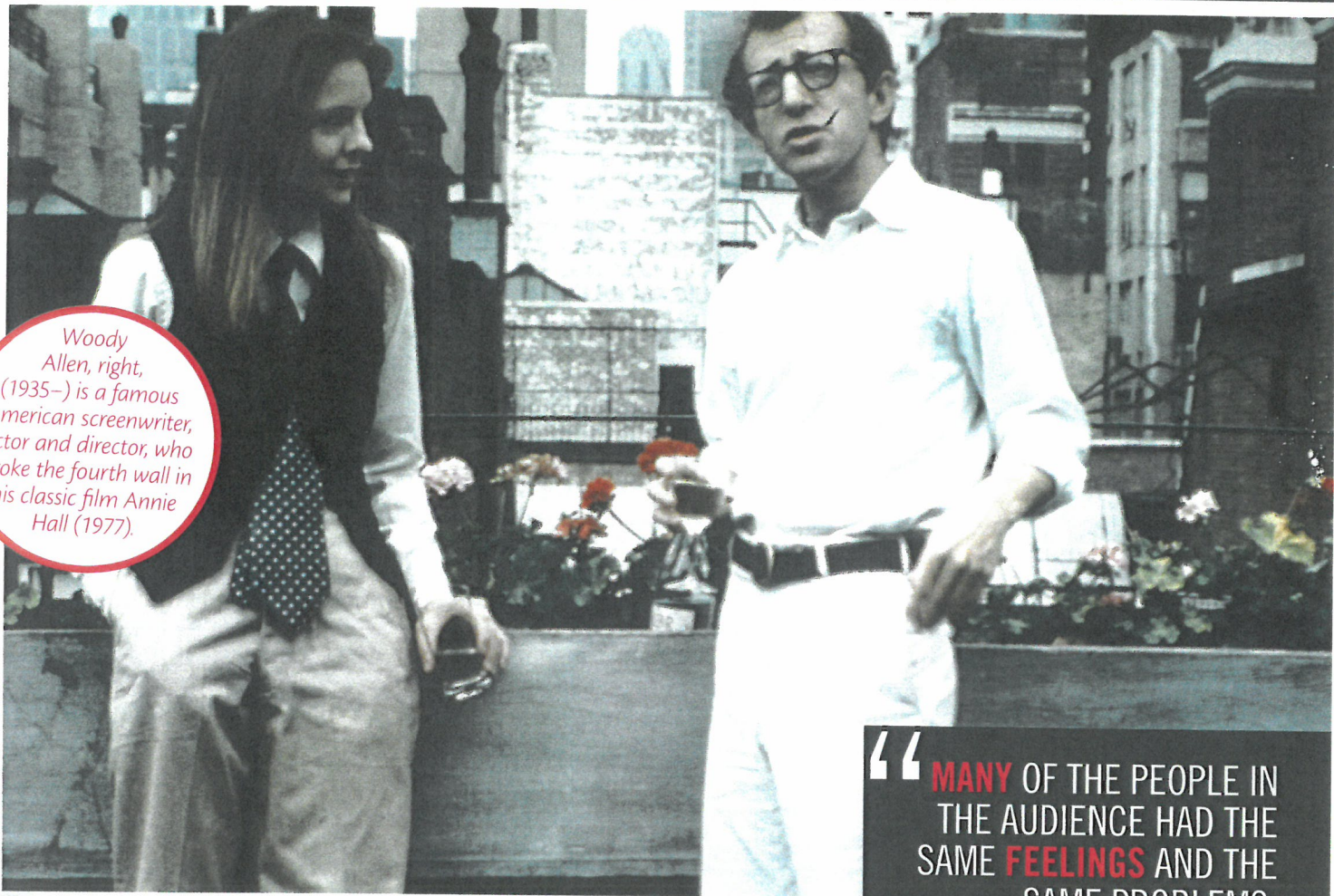
## What is Stanislavski's 'system'?

The system is sometimes referred to as 'the method'.

- The 'system' is a set of rules and exercises which create a foundation from which actors are able to work.
- Stanislavski's 'system' uses internal and external techniques to gain a full analysis of the character and how they should be portrayed.
- The **internal** techniques refer to the creation of the character: emotions, inner-feelings, desires and impulses.
- The **external** techniques refer to the actor becoming the character: physical movement, facial expressions, words, mannerisms and voice.

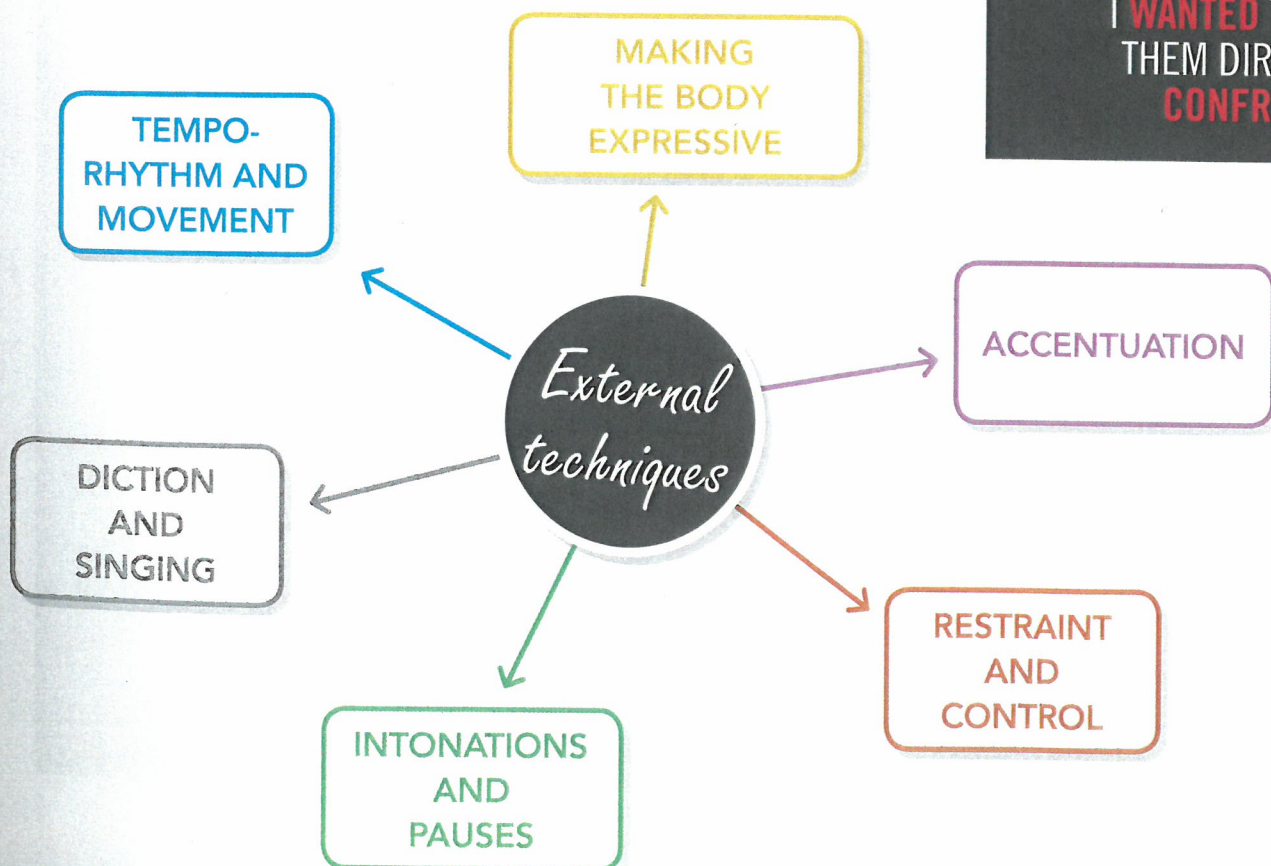






Woody Allen, right, (1935–) is a famous American screenwriter, actor and director, who broke the fourth wall in his classic film *Annie Hall* (1977).

“MANY OF THE PEOPLE IN THE AUDIENCE HAD THE SAME **FEELINGS** AND THE SAME PROBLEMS. I **WANTED** TO TALK TO THEM DIRECTLY AND **CONFRONT** THEM.”





## Internal techniques in detail

### Relaxation of muscles

Stanislavski believed that muscular tension did not help the actor when they tried to enter into the feelings of the part. If the actor was in a relaxed state of mind then they could focus and concentrate upon the play fully. This is why Stanislavski placed relaxation at the foundation of his 'system'.

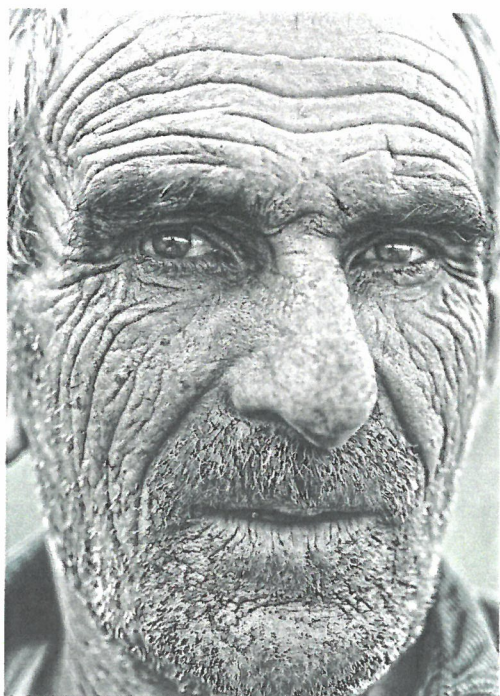
#### Activity

Ideas for relaxation exercises:

1. Lay on the floor with your eyes closed and imagine you are lying on a beach, slowly sinking into the sand. Allow your muscles to sink into the floor, your tension draining away. Tense each of your lower leg muscles, then relax. Work your way up your body tensing and relaxing the different muscles. Notice the difference in your overall relaxation before and after the exercise.
2. 'Rag doll': an exercise in total relaxation. Imagine you are a rag doll, hanging from nails. Someone picks you up and throws you down to the floor. How does your body react to this?
3. Imagine a wooden fence, the bottom of which is quite low to the ground – say about 40 cm or so. First crawl under the imaginary fence, gradually pushing your head and shoulders under it. Then when you are all the way through, crawl back under the fence but this time go through backwards.
4. Get down on all fours. First lazily roll on to your back and stretch, like a cat, and then contract. Then, arch your back, hiss and adopt a defensive position.

### Concentration of attention

This element is about concentrating on the stage and ignoring the fact that there is an audience watching. Stanislavski wanted his actors to separate themselves from the audience, and use their imagination to overcome the sensation of the audience acknowledging their existence. It is obvious that concentration was important to Stanislavski because his work is riddled with references to it.



#### Activity

Ideas for concentration exercises:

1. You are given an object and asked to study it. You then have to describe its shape, colour, use, special features. The object is then removed and you are asked to tell the group what you remember, what caught your attention. You are then given the object again and a comparison is made between the real object and the remembered object.
2. Study a person in a picture. The picture is taken away. Describe what you saw. Compare your description with the picture. Use the picture on the left as an example.



**Activity**

Now you are asked to concentrate and pay special attention to detail:

3. Arrange a number of objects on the table – books, pencils, pens, papers, mirrors, etc. Four or five students go to the table and study the arrangement. Then, while they have their backs turned, or are out of the room, rearrange everything. On their return, they must put everything back as it was.

**HINT**

Remember when responding to a picture or photograph to look in more detail at what is shown – not going just for the obvious!

**Activity**

In this next task your concentration and paying attention to detail will lead to action:

4. In groups of four or five, look at a reproduction of a well-known painting, or a newspaper photograph. Study the people in it carefully, the way they are behaving, sitting, standing. Decide on the situation that led to this point. Then act out the situation.

Here is one example you can start with.





### Emotion memory

With emotion memory the actor remembers a situation when they felt the same – or very similar – emotions as their character. Recalling the situation leads to emotion. For Stanislavski, an effective emotion memory is the actor's 'store-room' because it is piled high with all sorts of experiences and emotions. Recalling how you felt during a certain situation in the past, and looking for the comparisons with the situation of your character, helps you to create a more believable character.

#### Activity

1. Choose a two-person scene. Determine the emotion in the scene. For example, envy.
2. Recall a memory from your own life where you felt envy. Write the memory down. Be specific. Try to use the five senses in your description. For example:  
*'My best friend and I tried out for the same part in the school play. She got it and I didn't. I tried to be happy for her, but I wasn't. I couldn't look her in the eye. I made my voice sound happy, but I knew I was exaggerating and I think she did too. My stomach hurt and I had to hold it. I thought I was going to throw up.'*
3. Devise a scene involving envy. It does not have to be the scenario of your memory. But, keep your memory in your mind. Remember how you felt and behaved.
4. Perform the scene.

### The magic 'if'

Stanislavski encouraged his students to use the magic 'if' to believe in the circumstances of the play. Actors use their imagination to answer questions like:

- What would I do **if**...there were a mad axe-murderer behind the door? (This is one of Stanislavski's own examples.)
- What would I do **if** I knocked someone over in my car?
- What would I do **if** I were nominated for an Oscar?

Answering such questions makes the actor use their imagination and since Stanislavski devotes a whole chapter to imagination in his book *'An Actor Prepares'*, it's obvious that he considered it to be an important tool in any actor's 'toolbox'.

#### Activity

A volunteer is to act as though they are walking down the street. The other students then ask... 'What if...' and make a suggestion to the volunteer to act out a situation. This may be, 'What if you were attacked by an old lady?'. It may be appropriate that the other student becomes the old lady.

The reactions to 'What if...' need to be spontaneous and need to be as realistic and naturalistic as possible. Other examples could include: 'What if you were hit by a bus?', then 'What if you fell over and had broken your leg?'



The other two internal techniques in Stanislavski's system were:

- **Feeling of truth:** the actor must believe in what they are doing. Only if the actor believes, will the audience believe.
- **Units and objectives:** units are units of action, which involves breaking each scene down, looking at the character's speech, intention and movement. The objectives are what the character wants to achieve.

## External techniques in detail

### Making the body expressive

Stanislavski thought that an actor's body should be physically prepared for the performance. He felt the body should be toned and agile, with stamina and flexibility. Any physical exercises carried out by the actor should make their body more expressive, because this would help them to pay particular attention to the movements, mannerisms and gestures of the character.

#### HINT

Before you try any exercises or activities using the body, why not repeat the rag-doll activity from page 32. This will help get your body relaxed.

#### Activity

1. To focus on agility: walk in a clockwise/anti-clockwise direction. Then touch your toes and turn round twice. Then touch your shoulders, knees and the floor in quick succession. Finish with a combination of all four moves.
2. Use your body to express the following:
  - a. Writing a letter – what kind of letter is it, happy, serious, important?
  - b. Packing a suitcase – where are you going, for how long, what is the climate, what kind of clothes will you need?
  - c. Reading a newspaper – what will you find in the newspaper, bad or good news about one of your friends, news about a famous person, a national tragedy?
  - d. Moving a heavy table from one end of the room to another.
  - e. You are in a library where absolute silence is required. You and your friend are sitting in different parts of the room. Use your body to indicate very discreetly that you both have to leave because you have an appointment.
3. In pairs, choose one of the pictures below and act out the conversation that you think is going on between the two people shown BUT you can use movements, gestures, hands and facial expressions only. Do not use words!





### Accentuation

Emphasising the incorrect word in a sentence can change the context and meaning of the whole story. Being clear of what is to be accentuated is vital.

#### Activity

1. Take a sentence like this one: 'What are you doing?' and say it in as many different ways as possible – emphasising different words. Each time, the sentence should convey a different meaning.
2. Take the following two sentences and again say them in as many different ways as possible:  
'Please go away. I'm waiting for someone.'
3. Look at this short dialogue adapted from the play '*Tartuffe*' by Moliere:

[Valere and Mariane have quarrelled]

**Valere:** All right, if that's the way you want it....

**Mariane:** Fine!

**Valere:** You'll never set eyes on me again.

**Mariane:** Suits me!

**Valere:** (*turning to the door*) What?

**Mariane:** Well?

**Valere:** Did you say something?

**Mariane:** Me? You're dreaming.

**Valere:** Well, I'll be off then. Goodbye.

**Mariane:** Goodbye!

After reading the dialogue together, in pairs play around with it so that words start to have different emphases, or stand out suddenly. Decide how quickly you are going to speak and what particular word or line you are going to emphasise or draw attention to.

### Tempo-rhythm and movement

Tempo is how quickly or slowly something is said, or the speed of a piece of music, for instance. The varying speeds and timings of both actions and speech on stage coincide to produce a rhythm. At its most simple, 'tempo' is the speed at which you carry out an action, and 'rhythm' is the intensity with which you carry it out.

#### Activity

1. Thinking of the speed and intensity of your action, sit down when you are bad tempered, and then sit down again just after hearing bad news.
2. Thinking again of the speed at which you will carry out the action and the intensity with which you carry it out, create a situation around the following tasks:
  - a. Looking for something you have lost.
  - b. Tidying your room.
  - c. As a thief, open a window, listen, enter quietly and quickly; stop to listen; open a door; go along a corridor, up the stairs and turn to listen.
  - d. Hiding.



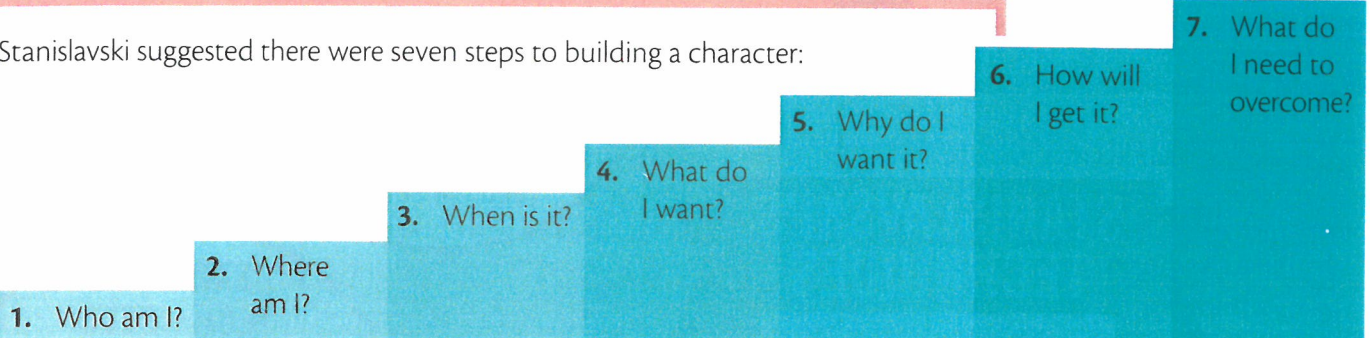
## Activity

3. In a group of four or five create a situation in an airport. You are waiting to meet someone off their plane when the flight is delayed or cancelled. See how your mood dictates changes in tempo-rhythm. How is your own tempo-rhythm influenced – if at all – by interaction with other people?

### The other external techniques in Stanislavski's system

- Restraint and control: an actor must avoid unnecessary gesture, and must avoid over-acting.
- Diction: Stanislavski believed that every actor must have excellent diction and pronunciation.
- Intonation and pauses: Stanislavski warns against **monotone speech**, unless it is in the character's portrayal. An actor must use pitch, pace and pauses to give more meaning to what the character has to say.

Stanislavski suggested there were seven steps to building a character:



Using these seven questions will help you recognise the purpose of your character and your movement on stage.

## Activity

Use Stanislavski's seven steps idea – and any of the other Stanislavski techniques you have learnt – to help you create your own devised scene. Do this in groups of four or five people. Use your imagination to create realistic scenes and characters based on the following stimuli:

1. Take two or three different objects and link them together to form a scenario. Select, for example, a mirror, a watch, a shirt, a bouquet of flowers, a handkerchief, a lottery ticket, an umbrella, house keys or some cash.
2. Consider the following title:

#### I WAS LOST!

What does that convey to you? Create a scenario based just on those words. Where were you lost? What had happened and how did you feel? Who was with you – if anyone? Who are the other characters in your story?

In the process of creating these scenes take your turn to be in the hot seat and have other members of the group or class ask you questions and you answer in character.

[Some of the exercises in this section were borrowed and adapted from 'Stanislavski and the Actor' by Jean Benedetti (Methuen) and 'The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit' by Bella Merlin (Nick Hern Books)]



## SECTION 2: WHAT HAVE I LEARNT?

# STANISLAVSKI

### WHO WAS STANISLAVSKI?

A theatre practitioner from Russia

### STANISLAVSKI'S IDEAS FOR THE THEATRE

The audience's role was to look in on the action on stage

The fourth wall – which separated the audience and the actor

### STANISLAVSKI'S TECHNIQUES

#### INTERNAL TECHNIQUES

Feeling of truth  
Relaxation of muscle  
The magic 'if'  
Emotion memory  
Concentration of attention  
Units and objectives

#### EXTERNAL TECHNIQUES

Making the body expressive  
Accentuation  
Restraint and control  
Diction and singing  
Intonation and pauses  
Tempo-rhythm and movement

If I want to show Stanislavski's influence on my devised piece I would:

Use the technique of emotion memory – in order to create a believable character.

Use the technique of concentration on stage.

Use the 'magic if' in order to believe in the circumstances of the devised piece.

Avoid monotone speech and acquire excellent diction and pronunciation.

