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Candidate session number			
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Examination session (May or November)	May	Year	2013

Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: Theatre  
(For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)

Title of the extended essay: The Impact of Stanislavski Method: How can an actor use Stanislavsky's method to positively impact their portrayal of a character?

**Candidate's declaration**

*This declaration must be signed by the candidate; otherwise a grade may not be issued.*

The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

I have acknowledged each use of the words, graphics or ideas of another person, whether written, oral or visual.

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*Please comment, as appropriate, on the candidate's performance, the context in which the candidate undertook the research for the extended essay, any difficulties encountered and how these were overcome (see page 13 of the extended essay guide). The concluding interview (viva voce) may provide useful information. These comments can help the examiner award a level for criterion K (holistic judgment). Do not comment on any adverse personal circumstances that may have affected the candidate. If the amount of time spent with the candidate was zero, you must explain this, in particular how it was then possible to authenticate the essay as the candidate's own work. You may attach an additional sheet if there is insufficient space here.*

learned a great deal through answering her research question. She definitely gained some depth of understanding of how Stanislavski's "method" can be both positive and negative, depending on the actor's use of the method. She was diligent in her efforts and revised her work based on her research and learning.

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I have read the final version of the extended essay that will be submitted to the examiner.

To the best of my knowledge, the extended essay is the authentic work of the candidate.

I spent  hours with the candidate discussing the progress of the extended essay.

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## Assessment form (for examiner use only)

Criteria	Achievement level					
	Examiner 1	maximum	Examiner 2	maximum	Examiner 3	
A research question	1	2		2		
B introduction	1	2		2		
C investigation	1	4		4		
D knowledge and understanding	1	4		4		
E reasoned argument	1	4		4		
F analysis and evaluation	1	4		4		
G use of subject language	2	4		4		
H conclusion	0	2		2		
I formal presentation	2	4		4		
J abstract	0	2		2		
K holistic judgment	1	4		4		
Total out of 36	11					

Extended Essay

**The Impact of Stanislavski Method:**

**How can an actor use Stanislavsky's method to positively impact  
their portrayal of a character?**

IB Subject: Theatre

By

Candidate

Supervisor:

School:

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Stanislavski Method requires actors to recall and possibly re-experience emotions from their past to mirror those of the characters they play. The repeated recall of such emotions, in a long-running production especially, can cause severe psychological damage, but while this realization has changed the use of the Method, it is still greatly utilized in theatre.

This essay will explore the Stanislavski method and how it affects actors in both positive and negative ways. Example application processes are given using the play *'Night Mother* by Marsha Norman. This will explore how to apply the method during the rehearsal process, mid-production, and the lasting effects after the work comes to a close. Leaving the question of how to apply the method and how beneficial it can be.

“Every person who is really an artist desires to create inside of himself another, deeper, more interesting life than the one that actually surrounds him.” (1) This assertion, by Russian theatre theorist Constantine Stanislavski, explains the essence of his method and its application. He undeniably produced some great actors, but at what cost? This is the question surrounding Stanislavsky’s method. How can an actor use Stanislavsky’s method safely to have a positive effect on their portrayal of a character?

Stanislavsky’s method deals with psychological realism. According to *Webster’s Dictionary* “psychological” means “mental or emotional as opposed to physical in nature,” and “realism” means “fidelity to nature or to real life; representation without idealization, and making no appeal to the imagination; adherence to the actual fact.” These words together then mean genuine emotion or psychological realism, which is very evident in the Stanislavski Method. (4)

The Stanislavski method was viewed as promoting inside-out acting. The opposite of that is outside-in acting. Outside-in actors believe they should concentrate on developing the language, actions, and personality they think are suitable for their characters. It is an approach of the actor being an outside observer looking in. This study will eventually have the emotions surface later for the actor. This development of a character’s appearance, how a character appears and sounds to an observer, is supposed to reflect the character’s emotions. Inside-out acting starts with the emotion and everything builds on that. It is an approach of becoming the person and then

looking into that character's emotions. The language, motion and personality are supposed to come naturally once the emotion has been established.

The theories behind these two types of acting claim that they bring different effects and emotions to the audience. Inside-out acting is said to create more of an emotional bond to characters and what is happening to them. Therefore, when something negative occurs to a character, such as death, the audience will feel much more remorseful, because in that moment it all seems overwhelmingly real. The audience is inside the character feeling and experiencing what is happening.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, however, is the belief that it is better if the audience doesn't get involved on personal levels, but merely be entertained for the duration of the performance. This is said to occur when the outside-in method of acting is applied, causing the audience to merely watch the story take place and not be pulled into it. The audience is outside looking in on what is happening.

Stanislavski wanted the audience to be invested. To gain this for the audience Stanislavski would take his actors through steps of emotional recall to make it real for both themselves and the audience. He would have his performers reflect on past experiences that provoked an extreme emotion. Whether the emotion was one of happiness, sadness, anger, depression, or jealousy, the performers would try to recall the most intense occurrence of this emotion they had ever experienced. Then every time that emotion was needed during a performance they would recall that memory, causing the

intense emotion now linked with it. Often times this method is used in very intense, high emotion plays. So how does one keep the character and one's personal life separate while using Stanislavsky's method to the point where one wasn't just portraying an emotion, but mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally embracing and living it?

Many believe Stanislavsky's method is what led to the death of Heath Ledger, an American actor. He played the Joker in the Batman movie *the Dark Knight*. Many of the stories told about the Joker explain that he has powers often related to chemicals and drugs such as cigars, cyanide and acid. Some believe this is what led Ledger to his overdose just before the movie's release. He mixed several prescription drugs causing the overdose. He had been trying to relate to the psychopath he was portraying and accidentally took it too far. This is a twisted, extreme interpretation of the Stanislavski method. Ledger however, positively received the Academy Award for best supporting actor for this role and today it is still his most famous. This is a prime example of how Stanislavsky's method both helped and ended an actor's career. (6)

This topic was chosen to explore the very difficult question of how an actor should approach a role using the Stanislavski method has never been answered in specific terms. Stanislavsky's method is compelling, but calls for analysis of not only the information but also of oneself and how far one would be willing to go with something to enhance a performance. The method has caused great conflict and discussion from the time it came around in the early

1900's up till the present. Many have attacked it, but many also praise the method. These widely differing views have caused much contemplation and analysis. The study and evaluation of Stanislavsky's method form the subject of this essay.

Perhaps the first question is how an actor can use Stanislavsky's method to enhance an actor's portrayal of a character. The answer can be explained in several parts and from several different points of view. The first part is an analysis of how the method is used prior to the performance, during the rehearsal process. Then, an examination of how it is used during a performance and how the method enhances that performance for an audience. Finally, an inward look at the performer after the show is complete and at the lasting effects the use of the Stanislavski method may have on the actor.

To show this method specifically, a character from a play will be analyzed and how an actor could use the method will be explained. The character of Jessie from *'Night Mother* is a good example. *'Night Mother*, a two-character, one-act realism play written by the American Marsha Norman, is set in the present, entirely in a single house. The audience can see a kitchen connecting to a living room, and between the two is a hallway with a door at the back. The rooms look lived in and comfortable.

The play is about two women, Mama and her daughter Jessie, and a decision Jessie is choosing to make after years of struggle with depression. Jessie is a grown woman, but lives with her mother to help take care of her,

because it appears Mama suffers from some dementia, and she has a hard time getting around and doing some stuff requiring physical exertion due to her old age. Mama also helps take care of Jessie, who has epilepsy and suffers from seizures; this is why Jessie never leaves the house. (3)

The play takes place over the span of a few hours on a Friday night in the household. Jessie begins to ask for very random and strange objects and wants to know where her deceased father's gun is kept. Mama, not knowing the reason for the questions, tells Jessie it's in the attic, and Jessie proceeds to retrieve it. After Mama questions Jessie as to why she needs the gun, Jessie reveals that at the end of the night she is going to go in her room, lock the door, and shoot herself. Jessie explains that she wants to kill herself because then it will be quiet and she likes that; it is her choice. Mama can't understand this, but also can't change Jessie's mind. (3)

The rest of the play is about their final evening together. It includes Mama begging her not to commit suicide, compiling a to-do list Jessie has to get through to make sure all her and Mama's affairs are in order, reflecting on the past, and drinking hot cocoa. (3)

It is gradually revealed to the audience that these two women have not had the easiest of lives and many secrets have been kept. The audience learns they have some financial trouble. Also that Mama never truly loved her husband and that he didn't talk. Jessie, however, adored her father. The audience learns Jessie used to be married and has a son who has committed multiple felonies. Mama blames Jessie's seizures on her father, saying he had epilepsy but did not

realize it because he only experiences minor seizures. Over cocoa is also when Jessie finds out she had them as a child and what happens to her when she does. (3)

The play is called *'Night Mother'* because that is the last thing Jessie says before going through the door at the back of the hall. The audience hears the gunshot go off. Before it goes off the audience sees and hears Mama pounding on the door screaming for Jessie not to do it. After it goes off the audience sees Mama's shock as she asks for forgiveness and proceeds to follow Jessie's last instructions, to call her brother. It is a very powerful, poignant scene.

The emotion in this play is constantly changing, but has an eerie underlying emotion the entire time. This is very difficult to act out and make real for the actors and audience. Jessie goes from sad, to angry, to content, and many more emotions. Stanislavsky's method would be very interesting to apply to her character and would require an intense application of his exercises. The character of Jessie is depressed and suicidal, but ok with this. How would someone portray this state of mind if they have never experienced something similar? How does one channel emotions possibly never experienced?

Stanislavsky's method, if properly applied, would begin to take place right at the beginning of the rehearsal process. The sooner one could begin the intense emotional recall, the more fluid and natural it would become, so by the time of performance it is automatic. To get his actors to this point Stanislavski had many exercises to train them or prepare them for a new emotion. Most had to do with inner reflection on past emotion.

The actors would clear their minds with deep breaths and relaxation for several moments. Then they would think through their past for their most intense experience of that emotion and then think through that entire memory. From that they would push out their images of location and action and focus solely on the emotion they felt. They would embody that emotion from their toes, to their core, to their finger tips. After this emotion has been embraced they perform the scene it will be applied to, so they can directly infiltrate the emotion into it. This triggers their memory so every time the scene occurs this intense emotion will be experienced again and placed directly into the scene.

(5)

The earlier this process of recalling and re-experiencing is started the better it can be applied. Before the first read-through of *'Night Mother the* actress would already have begun exercises. She would understand what takes place in the play and the overall emotion of her character. To start with the actress would do some relaxation exercises. For these she would just lie in a dim quiet room with one person instructing and watching. She would begin with rhythmic breathing, to get a steady pulse and relaxed mind. Then, upon instruction, she would begin releasing any tension in her muscles starting with her toes and finishing with her head. From there, she would be asked to think of different scenes. For example, she would be asked to think of the happiest memory she could and think of every detail of the scene she is seeing, including smell, color, temperature, sound, light, action, feel, and anything pertaining to the emotion of her memory. She would then go back into relaxation and continue this

for every emotion needed to portray Jessie, including; confusion, contentment, anger, sadness, and happiness.

She would want to have an image for all these emotions. After she has settled on the emotions required she would be asked to recall one of these images. For example her image of confusion. She would recall every detail from the image she had associated with that emotion. This time she would take the emotional process one step further. She would be asked to place herself in that image and move her body according to the sense it provided her. This would create a visual change in her body and give the raw sensation of the emotion felt. After this stage is complete the use of the script could begin. During the first read-through of *'Night Mother* the actress portraying Jessie would recall the images created in the first exercise. Every time there was an emotional change she would note on the script which image her mind jumped to.

After completing this stage she would go back and do the relaxation exercise again. Then someone would read her the script and tell her at what points she wrote down which images. She would repeat the second exercise when she physically portrayed the emotion with the memory. Each time a different picture is recorded in the play she would physically portray that emotion as she had earlier. This exercise should occur several times over a long time. After repetition this would cause the memory to automatically jump to the emotion needed when rehearsing and performing the play.

For example Jessie goes from being irritated with Mama to trying to calm her down in a scene during *'Night Mother*. This would require a quick change of

emotion from anger to concern. Using Stanislavsky's methods in repetition during performance would make this transition seem natural and add another layer to the character of Jessie. These emotional changes occur very often between Mama and Jessie requires extreme focus and a good relationship between the two actresses. Another example in which it would occur for both characters occurs right before Jessie goes to her room. There is a physical struggle between Mama and Jessie in the hall, as Mama tries to stop her. Jessie ends up getting past her mother and going to her room. Before the struggle Jessie is very calm and Mama is hysterical. When Jessie gets by she becomes calm again, whispers "night mother," and proceeds to disappear behind her bedroom door. This emotional change happens very quickly and requires great control over the emotions, but the action must still feel raw and real to the audience. Also, during the struggle Jessie does not say anything so her emotion can only be portrayed physically. The actress must rely on those prior exercises. This play requires a lot, and it would be very interesting to apply the Stanislavsky method to the production. If properly applied the method could make the emotions very raw and believable for the audience, drawing them in and investing them fully in the story.

The question left is whether the Stanislavski Method should be commonly used today. To this question there is not a clear right or wrong answer. The method has both its positive and negative effects. Audience members often feel that the method should be in use, because it leaves a strong impression on them. For a performer however, it can sometimes be more damaging than beneficial. For some actors it is a better option to use a

different technique to reach the same emotional height. It merely depends on what technique the performer would rather use. In choosing to use this method, however, extreme precaution should be used when first submerging oneself in it. The raw, real, stunning, overpowering emotion that often occurs while using the Stanislavski method can overwhelm and surprise actors by the psychological depth to which it reaches.

Psychological issues are always present during the creation and presentation of theatre, because theatre mimics life. Often situations in plays mirror something in an actor's past and make him or her deal with all the associated emotions again. This causes pondering to occur that does not always end at the conclusion of the production. Often the issues left after the conclusion of the performances are much more severe than they were originally, because these past situations have been brought to the forefront of one's mind for months. This, however, is usually not considered because people forget how emotionally exacerbating performing can be. There have been reports of nightmares, continued depression, and many more effects after the completion of shows because of the recall performers experienced during it.

Performers have to be careful not to blur the boundaries of the real with those of fiction. They must remember that the problems and emotions present in a performance are not, or are no longer, present in current reality. Emotion is a very human thing and has a constant place in life, not however, always to the extremity that theatre sometimes presents it. This separation is hard to

remember and control. When one can achieve it, it is amazing, but it takes years of practice and honing to develop that skill.

Many actors have not been able to keep that separation clearly defined. For example Charlie Rose and Val Kilmer. There are reports of both of these actors not being able to separate themselves from their characters. They went to the extent of wanting only by the name of the characters they were portraying. Some people have gone to the extent of gaining weight or trying drugs or excessive alcohol to match this nature to their character. So how far is too far? How far can one go without crossing a fine line between dedication to work and obsession with work?

After a production is complete everyone typically goes his or her separate way to start a new project and performances. However, this can sometimes be very difficult for those who use the Method. For an extended period of time these people have thrown themselves into extremes, and when this ends its hard to forget what was tapped into and brought to the surface. Often times what is brought to the forefront are some of the worst, hardest, most difficult and ugly times a person has gone through. It is hard to be submerged in these emotions for an extended time, and then when the production is complete to just forget what is there and move on. This is what causes many people to swirl into extreme dreams, hysteria, depression, suicide attempts, and a slew of other medical difficulties.

This brings to light the idea that if actors are going learn these methods they need to learn the control that has to come along with them to ensure

their safety. This would prevent the boundary blurring that often occurs while using the method. When the shows are complete, although the actors may think they are themselves again, the emotional extremes stay attached and cross over into their real lives. Something that would usually seem insignificant could suddenly seem like a huge ordeal, because for the show they were living in emotional extremes, and it takes hard work and practice to be able to keep one's performance emotion separate from life emotion.

Stanislavski brought a new way of thinking and designing acting to entertainment. Much of his intelligence and innovation is still applied in the American theatre and entertainment in general. The Method is not used as often in Europe, where shortly after its introduction it was rejected. Stanislavski and his methods were no longer accepted in Russia after their lasting effects were discovered. The method traveled to America by immigrants moving to the states and taking their knowledge with them at the time. Many actors had learned the methods before they had been shooed out of Europe and immigrated to America.

Stanislavski has inspired thousands. His methods are still frequently used in America and have evolved with modern times and technology. The Stanislavski method is used more frequently in prerecorded entertainment such as television and movies than in live entertainment such as plays and musicals. This often occurs because in live theatre the audience is usually a distance from the stage where the action is taking place. This is unlike recorded entertainment, in which people are watching very close up on a big

screen. Often shots of just the face or even eyes are viewed and when this happens the emotion has to be expressed in every detail of your body and soul. The belief is, this can be more successfully achieved with the method. Also one thing recorded performance offers that live performance doesn't is the capability of rewinding and watching again. In live theatre time is fleeting. Once something happens it will never happen the same way again. On recorded entertainment, however, the same clip can be viewed many times with no alteration making that chance at achieving an emotion that much more critical.

Later in life Stanislavski realized the extremity of his own method and began to advise the use of methods focusing more on the physicality of theatre than its emotional aspects. "Create your own method. Don't depend slavishly on mine. Make up something that will work for you! But keep breaking traditions, I beg you." (2) This quote by Stanislavski himself was telling actors to venture out, try different methods, and figure out what works for them as individuals, because it is not going to be the same for any two people; no two people, think, act, or are otherwise the same.

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