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Stanislavsky: Acting Lessons for Life and Leadership

Harrison Long

Abstract

An artist's creative work can become the primary lens through which he or she sees the world; it is a fundamental tool for interpreting life. But artistry can also teach a great deal about effective leadership. Based on the principles of Konstantin Stanislavsky, the father of modern acting, this essay reflects on five important lessons for life and leadership: The Power of Purpose, The Power of Context, The Power of Listening, The Power of Partnerships, and The Power of Community. After a year of studying Russian culture, history, and foreign policy, I believe these lessons can be applied on the international level as well as the personal. How might a Russian actor advise our leaders in Moscow and Washington? Read and find out.

A Brief History of the Stanislavsky System

European and American culture of the late 19th century touted science as a social panacea. As early 19th century Romanticism gave way to modern science, overblown, melodramatic acting began to fade, and a new dramatic form emerged: Psychological Realism. For the first time, theatre artists were social scientists, recreating life on stage to examine and diagnose society's ills (Bert, 1991, p. 363).

In March 1906, Konstantin Stanislavsky, co-founder of the world-famous Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), experienced a crisis on stage that would forever change the direction of modern acting. While playing the role of Dr. Stockmann in Henrik Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* (Benedetti, 2000, p. 35), Stanislavsky found himself thinking of business matters rather than living fully "in the moment" (Tcherkasski, 2007). Disturbed that he was cheating the audience, Stanislavsky nearly retired from the stage. Thankfully, he did not. Instead, he began to formulate an objective, *scientific* approach to performance, one that addressed the psychological complexities of the latest dramatic forms. Before that time, actor training consisted of "tricks of the trade" taught by experienced actors who merely indicated the results they wanted, but not the means to achieve them (Benedetti, 2000, p. 4). Stanislavsky's ideas, research, and his resulting actor training "System" transformed the art of acting and continues to do so in the present day.

Stanislavsky experimented with the actor's craft for over 60 years, attempting to identify an empirically derived, unified theory of acting. In theory, any actor can apply Stanislavsky's practices to achieve a highly developed, emotionally truthful embodiment of a living character. As Stanislavsky's ideas developed, his students

began teaching what they knew of “the System” throughout Europe and America (Bartow, 2006, p. xxiv).

In 1923, when the MAT appeared on Broadway, American acting schools slowly began to proliferate, each offering its own version of Stanislavsky’s System; thus American “Method” acting was born (Gordon, 1994, p. 188). While there are many American branches of the Stanislavsky System, the three main schools were formed by Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner (Bartow, 2006, p. xxiv). All three teachers began with the intention of *revealing* Stanislavsky’s System rather than developing their own. In truth, each highlighted a different developmental stage of Stanislavsky’s 60-year process (Judd, Long, Maloof, Patillo, Wallace, & Wiernik, 2008).

Through the years, the Stanislavsky System has continued to evolve through teachers like Jerzy Grotowski, Michael Chekhov, Uta Hagen, and others. Sergei Tcherkasski (2007) of the St. Petersburg Theatre Arts Academy, suggests that studying various American acting techniques is like taking your family to Disney World: one day you might visit the Magic Kingdom, the next the Epcot Center, the next Animal Kingdom, but it’s all *Disney World!* Similarly, the techniques of Adler, Strasberg, Hagen, or Meisner are all “*Stanislavsky World!*” (Tcherkasski, 2007).

Transferrable Skills

The benefits of Stanislavsky training reach far beyond the classroom or the proscenium arch. Actor training encourages students to observe the social forces governing the roles they play from day-to-day, both on and *off* the stage. Acting exercises sharpen a student’s ability to critically observe the world. A foundation of solid performance skills not only helps students understand the fundamentals of theatrical artistry, it teaches the social consequences of human behavior. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that actor training, and other arts-based curricula cultivate transferrable skills that are highly sought after in the marketplace.

According to Steven Tepper (2014), dean of the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University, arts training develops the skills business leaders desire most, including creative problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration, the ability to deal with ambiguity, the ability to adjust or revise work, and associational and analogical thinking. A study conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers Global (2016) reported that 77% of CEO’s surveyed consider it difficult to find employees who possess essential creativity and innovation skills, skills we develop every day in artistic training. The Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (2011-2013) reports that, of 92,113 arts alumni surveyed, 80% believe artistic technique is important to their work, regardless of the nature of that work. The survey also notes that those who have worked or are currently working as professional artists score higher on a list of important professional competencies and skills, especially in the areas of business and entrepreneurship.

In 2016, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published a popular essay by Tracey Moore entitled “Why Theatre Majors are Vital in the Digital Age.” The

article, which celebrates the broad value of Stanislavsky training, points out that many theatre majors find their livelihood teaching presentation skills, conflict resolution, and collaborative problem-solving to corporate clients. Moore's argument in support of actor training, however, goes deeper than artistic merit or even the marketability of actor skills: "The actor's ability to envision multiple outcomes or motivations in a play must be based on the character's circumstances, not the actor's. That requires a kind of stepping into another person's shoes that social scientists say is dwindling among college-age students" (Moore, 2016, p. 2). As technology increasingly dominates our ways of relating in the world, actor skills such as concentration, self-reflection, imagination, and empathy help us to remember what it is to be human.

Powerful Lessons for Life and Leadership

Like many people who are passionate about their work, I see my craft as a metaphor for my place in the world; my identity as an actor and acting teacher shapes the way the world appears to me, and the means by which I function within it. Stanislavsky's ideas are the core of what I teach regardless of textual style or period. The wildly different plays of Tennessee Williams, George Bernard Shaw, Bertolt Brecht, Shakespeare, and Moliere all come to life effectively through Stanislavsky's approach. Moreover, Stanislavsky's lessons for actors provide a vehicle for self-examination and human understanding, as well as a way of interacting and collaborating with greater awareness. For me, the System has become far more than a method to approach my work as a teacher and professional theatre artist; it permeates all of my interactions, both in life and in the workplace. Simply put, actor training can teach us a lot about life and leadership.

The following five lessons are derived from Stanislavsky's System with examples of their efficacy provided from my own experiences as an actor, director, teacher, and administrator following in the footsteps of numerous theatre professionals trained in the Stanislavsky System.

Lesson One: The Power of Purpose

"Whatever happens on stage must be for a *purpose*." (Stanislavsky, 1964, p. 35)

One of the first things a new actor has to contend with is stage fright, the fear of looking foolish in front of an audience. We've all experienced this at one point or another - your knees shake, your mouth gets dry, your palms sweat. You're so worried about *how* you're doing you can't focus on *what* you're doing. Sometimes a less experienced actor allows his ego to take over: he gets so involved in trying to be the best actor on the stage, he loses track of his purpose for being up there in the first place.

Nerves are a natural physiological response to perceived stress. We all get nervous. So how do we harness our nerves onstage? It's simple: we take *action*. We focus on our purpose in the scene and take action to achieve it. Stanislavsky called our purpose the character's goal or objective.

Objective: What the character is trying to achieve, the character’s goal or purpose.

Here’s the irony: In order to play a character convincingly, an actor has to care more about achieving the character’s goals than he does about impressing the audience with his talent. In other words, an actor must be committed to something more meaningful than protecting his own ego. On stage or off, *our character is defined by our actions*.

Action: the greatest acting teachers in history have always focused on action. Sanford Meisner (1987), who taught Robert DeNiro, Alec Baldwin, Robert Duvall, and Tina Fey said when “[you] are working to achieve a task, you’re not focused on yourself,” instead, “you’re attached to something outside yourself.” (Meisner, p. 24). The great Uta Hagen (1973), who also taught DeNiro (along with Whoopi Goldberg, Mathew Broderick, and Jason Robards), said “The sum total of your actions (what you do from moment to moment) reveals your character” (Hagen, p. 185).

The same can be said of leaders. A leader’s goals and the way she goes about achieving them, can tell you everything about her character. A good leader is dedicated to something more important than her own ego; good leaders always keep the objective in mind.

In his Ted Talk entitled “The Walk from No to Yes,” William Ury (2010), one of America’s top conflict mediators, tells about the time he brokered a tough negotiation between Russia and Chechnya. The talks got off to a rocky start when the vice president of Chechnya insulted the United States in front of all the other negotiators. At first, Ury said he wanted to defend the United States, but then he remembered his objective. He hadn’t come there to defend the United States, but rather to facilitate a peace agreement. So, he took a deep breath and thanked the vice president for his candor. Then, Ury gently reminded the group that the reason they had come together was to stop the war in Chechnya. Because Ury remembered his purpose, negotiations got back on track and they accomplished their objective.¹

Good leaders and good actors know the power of a clear purpose. Leaders keep the objective in mind in order to know what action to take. But how do they determine that objective in the first place? They examine motives - their own and others. They engage in self-reflection. They gather the facts. Good leaders know: if you want to determine a strong purpose, if you want to make sure you’re fighting for what you really need, you have to know the context.

Lesson Two: The Power of Context

Context is everything in the theatre. When I start work on a play, the first thing I do is sit down and read the script again and again. I research the history and events around when and why the play was written. I do this so I can understand the play’s

¹ I learned about Ury’s Ted Talk from Melanie Martin Long’s (2015) video: Mastering Stage Presence: How to Present to Any Audience, Lecture 10: Playing Status Relationships.

context. In the theatre, we call context the Given Circumstances.

Given Circumstances—All the relevant facts that influence a character’s behavior (Barton, 1993, p. 115).

Knowing the given circumstances means you’ve gathered all the facts. And those facts, that *context*, can make all the difference in how an actor chooses to play the scene. To illustrate, my fellow acting teacher, Allan Edwards, conducts a simple acting exercise. He asks his students to say the Pledge of Allegiance twice: the first time they recite the pledge just as themselves sitting in his acting class. The second time, however, the students are asked to imagine they are refugees from a land of oppression, immigrants who have worked many years to become naturalized citizens. With this new set of circumstances, the students speak the Pledge of Allegiance for the very first time as American citizens.

As you can imagine, the additional circumstances make a big difference in the way the actors speak. The first time through the pledge, the students seem slightly embarrassed and a little bit awkward. That’s because they haven’t been given a clear purpose. But the second time through the students seem reverent and committed, sometimes even emotional. It’s very dramatic, and very interesting to watch.

Like good actors, good leaders must understand the power of context. Effective leaders make it a point to learn the relevant facts before deciding what action to take. Currently, the world is experiencing a critical time of change characterized by increased divisiveness on the global, national, and local levels. With the proliferation of electronic media sources, sources with varying levels of credibility and little accountability, gathering the facts has never been more difficult. Unfounded personal accusations, assumptions, and “fake news” obscure our ability to understand context.

An extreme example of misunderstanding context happened in December 2016. Edgar Maddison Welch burst into a Washington, D.C., pizza joint armed with a semi-automatic rifle. Welch was convinced children had been imprisoned in the restaurant’s basement as part of a child sex ring run by Hilary Clinton (Haag & Salam, 2017). When no children were found, Welch surrendered to police revealing he had been spurred on by radio host Alex Jones, who also runs the website *InfoWars.com*. Apparently, Jones, a conspiracy theorist, had publicized the false “pizzagate” allegations and encouraged his audience to investigate for themselves (Killelea, 2017).

Voltaire once said, “Anyone who has the power to make you believe absurdities has the power to make you commit injustices.” It has never been more important for leaders to get the facts straight, and to communicate those facts *accurately*. Knowing the facts means knowing the *truth*. Good actors are in touch with the reality they inhabit and react truthfully to it, even if that reality is a fictitious one.

“You may play well or you may play badly; the important thing is that you should play truly.” (Stanislavsky, 1964, p. 14)

If a leader wants to determine the best course of action, she needs to get all the facts on the table.

What's the best way to understand context in this age of questionable information? You study the issue from every trusted angle, you consult the people who will be affected by your decision, and you consider *every* credible opinion on the matter. That means you have to listen.

Lesson Three: The Power Listening

Along with understanding the given circumstances, the larger context, it's important to understand personal context as well. After I've studied the play to learn all the given circumstances, after I've examined the script to determine all my objectives, it's time to start working with the other actors. The most important thing you can do at this point is to listen ... *really* listen. If you do, you'll discover some important things about the play that never would have occurred to you on your own.

Actors *have* to listen to stay on track. If they don't, they forget the next line or even which scene comes next. (I can tell you from personal experience how terrifying it is to forget your lines!) When an actor is truly listening, she is spontaneous, unpredictable, authentic, and interesting! But when an actor *isn't* listening, her performance is stale, mechanical, and lifeless; she has all the dramatic appeal of a cinder block. But what *makes* us listen? We listen because we need to find out more information. We listen so we can decide what to do next.

We all *want* to be good listeners, but what does that really mean? Real listening is an active process, not a passive one. It means living in the "here and now." Listening means being open to the influence of the other person. Listening means taking the time to hear the *whole* thought rather than waiting impatiently until it's your turn to speak or present your agenda—that's the mark of the self-centered actor. The best acting is *reactive*. The best actors respond to the reactions of their partner. In other words: the best actors listen!

Of course, effective listening is a quality of good leadership too. That's one of the best ways to gather the given circumstances, the relevant facts. But even the most credible sources of information are subject to bias. For that reason, good leaders must consider more than one point of view. Sometimes the most valuable information comes from the least expected source or is discovered in the least expected ways.

A few years ago, while serving as Interim Director of our School of Art and Design, the elevator broke down. Far from being an uncommon occurrence, this had been happening every two or three weeks for quite some time. This was an enormous problem because, on a few occasions, injured or disabled students or faculty had to be *carried* up or down the stairs to get to their next class.

The problem persisted, and every time the elevator stopped working our administrative assistant would kindly call the maintenance department who eventually sent over the repairman. This happened over and over again, but nothing seemed to permanently solve the problem.

One day, out of desperation, I asked the assistant to tell me when the elevator technician arrived. When I introduced myself as the School Director, his defenses shot up. It was clear that the poor fellow was used to being badgered and complained

at whenever he showed up to fix a campus elevator. It was clear that there was a history here. In the theatre, we call this history the character's "backstory."

Backstory: a character's offstage history that explains her/his behavior in the scene.

Sensing there was a backstory, I quickly reassured him that I only wanted more information. Once he knew I was willing to listen, he was happy to show me around and teach me about the problem.

By the end of our conversation we discovered something: all that was needed to fix the elevator was a simple maintenance check each month, which he kindly agreed to do. Do you know what? There hasn't been a problem with the elevator since!

Good leaders understand the power of listening. Good leaders know that everyone has a backstory. They try to understand the *whole person* and not just the surface issues. No matter how difficult or defensive a person may seem, it is important to remember that everyone is the hero of his own story.

But in order to understand personal context, you have to do more than hear the words someone is speaking, you have to *empathize*, you have to imagine what the other person is *feeling*. Sometimes the actor knows more than the character she is playing. Sometimes the actor may not even approve of his character's behavior. But in order to play the scene *truthfully*, Stanislavsky insisted that his actors avoid *judging* a character and choose to *empathize* with him instead. In essence, the actor has to listen deeply to the character. To accomplish this, Stanislavsky used a simple trick he called the "magic if."

Magic If: When the actor simply asks himself: "What would I do, if I were actually in the situation that the character is in?" (Stanislavsky, 1964, p. 46).

While they may not know the term "magic if," good leaders use it all the time. They listen so well they can imagine what it is like to be in the other person's shoes. Whether on the local, national, or international level, good leaders make it their business to study every side of an issue and learn how it impacts different constituents. Empathic listening is an important step in building the kinds of positive relationships that foster collaboration.

Lesson Four: The Power of Collaboration

Theatre is a collaborative art form; the director, writer, actors, designers, and technicians all work together to create a unified production. Every moment on stage is a collaboration between actors who, according to Stanislavsky, must respond authentically and spontaneously to one another. In fact, every performance is a collaboration between the actors and the audience (Stanislavsky, 1964, pp. 178, 180, 193, 294-295). Theatre simply can't exist in a vacuum. But ... collaboration isn't always easy. Sometimes it is a tug-of-war, a battle over supreme authorship. No one understood this better than Stanislavsky, who constantly shifted roles from producer, to director, to designer, to actor, to teacher. Yet, Stanislavsky also knew that collaboration can magnify our creative efforts in astonishing ways.

The challenges of producing a play based on historical events illustrate how theatrical collaboration goes beyond the stage. Examining the past can be a difficult and painful process, but it is an essential one, especially when it unearths local history that many would like to forget or ignore. One particular production, *Parade*, conjured two of our most destructive, local demons: antisemitism and racism. Yet, despite the volatile subject matter, divergent communities came together to examine the past, understand the present, and envision a better future.

On the night of April 26, 1913, 13-year-old Mary Phagan was found dead in the basement of the National Pencil Company in Atlanta, Georgia. After a highly publicized trial Leo Frank, the factory's Jewish manager, was convicted of murder on sketchy evidence. After studying the case carefully, Governor John Slaton commuted Frank's sentence. But on August 17, 1915, a group of men abducted Frank from his prison cell and lynched him from an oak tree on the outskirts of Marietta, just a few miles from our campus. This true story inspired the Tony Award-winning musical, *Parade*.

As a resident of the town where Frank was lynched, I had been interested in the musical for a long time. I became even more interested when I realized two things: first, the musical had never been performed in Marietta. Secondly, 2015 was to be the centennial of Leo Frank's death. I began to see *Parade* as an opportunity to explore local history and perhaps generate some healing discussions in the process. But I knew what an ambitious project it was, and that our theatre department couldn't do it alone, so I began looking for partners.

It didn't take long to find others interested in exploring the Frank case. The resulting Seeking Justice Initiative, of which *Parade* became a part, was much more exciting than anything I could have conceived on my own. Our impressive list of partners included: The Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History, The Bremen Jewish Heritage Museum, The Museum of History and Holocaust Education, our own College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Temple, Atlanta, Leo Frank's home congregation. Through this experience, I learned that collaboration can prove powerful for several important reasons.

The first and most obvious reason is that sharing resources means you can do more with less. In the current economic climate, topflight organizations are eager to forge partnerships with like-minded collaborators. *Parade* benefitted enormously in this way. For example, one of our partners, the Bremen Museum, provided high-resolution slides of obscure historical images at no cost. These became an essential production element.

The second reason collaboration can be powerful is that it helps make the case for additional resources. Our university, like many other institutions, likes to fund projects that include more than one group. In this way funders get more bang for their buck. The fact that we were collaborating with several units on and off campus helped me convince our president to contribute an additional \$5,000 to the project. As a result, we were able to have a marketing budget, hire sound support for our Temple performance, and fund a campus residency for Pulitzer Prize, Tony and Academy Award-winning playwright Alfred Uhry (*Parade*, *Driving Miss Daisy*).

Thirdly, collaboration opened our work to a much wider audience. Because each of our partners has a separate patron base, we were able to reach more people. In fact, our Marietta performance was completely sold out, far exceeding our box office projections. Because of our increased exposure, Playwright Alfred Uhry and I were invited to interview on Georgia Public Radio. *Broadwayworld.com* published a feature article on *Parade* and we even got a good mention in the international magazine *The Economist*.

The final reason partnerships are so powerful is that they increase impact. Reaching a wider audience certainly meant increased visibility for our College of the Arts. Furthermore, audience members who had attended the previous Seeking Justice events were primed to experience our work in a much more meaningful way. Most importantly, however, the *student* experience was enriched. As a part of the Seeking Justice initiative, our students were active participants as performers and technicians. They and other students attended panel discussions by experts, and were given a curator-led, private tour of the Southern Museum's Leo Frank exhibit.

Parade became powerful experience for many reasons, but most of all because collaboration helped us connect with our community in new ways. This leads me to my fifth, and final lesson.

The Power of Community

On June 22, 1897, Russian theatre critic and playwright Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko asked Konstantin Stanislavsky to meet him at a restaurant in Moscow, where they talked, uninterrupted for 18 hours. Both men were deeply concerned about the lack of discipline in the Russian theatre. That night, the two formed a partnership to create one of the world's greatest theatre companies, the MAT. Early on, company members lived communally at an estate in Pushkino, where they alternated between rehearsals and housekeeping duties (Gordon, 1994, p. 18). Living together so closely meant there were few distractions from the work. It also contributed to the collaborative spirit of the ensemble. Stanislavsky's goal was to create a true ensemble of players with no stars (Benedetti, 2000, p. 24). His goal was to create a community.

What is a community? Is it the town we live in? Is it our neighborhood? People often refer to the academic community, the online community or the arts community. For me, community is something that binds us together.

In 2011, I directed a play called *Splittin' the Raft*, an adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn* as told by Frederick Douglass. A generous grant from the National Endowment for the Arts made it possible to tour seven North Georgia communities, ranging from inner-city schools to rural mountain towns. The struggles we faced and the conversations we encountered prove the lasting and devastating legacy of American slavery.

Ours was the first production of *Splittin' the Raft* to be staged in the Deep South. Months of struggling to arrange tour dates taught me why. Some communities and schools were reluctant to host our production fearing the same kind of backlash Twain's novel has provoked since its publication (Long, p.136).

Still, this highly entertaining production allowed people to open up and approach difficult issues with a spirit of mutual respect. One student responded: “This production is a call to action.” In an interview with the *Douglas County Sentinel*, Laura Lieberman of the Douglasville Cultural Arts Council, stated: “The message of *Splittin’ the Raft* and the outstanding quality of this production are too important and relevant for our community to miss” (2011). Despite early resistance, *Splittin’ the Raft* prompted productive, community-building dialogue about race, gender, and economic equity wherever we went.

On November 11, we loaded up the truck and drove over miles of winding mountain roads to our final tour stop at the Sautee Nacoochee Cultural Center in White County, Georgia. As more than one White County resident put it, “the name of our county speaks for itself.” Today, much of the area is still owned by the descendants of the slave-owning Williams family. Only a few miles down the road from the center stands Bean Creek, a community largely still inhabited by descendants of the Williams family slaves. One Bean Creek resident told me, “There’s a long and painful history of discrimination, some of which is relatively recent” (Long, H., 2015, p. 146).

At certain time, the theatre filled quickly. There was a wide cross-section of locals in attendance (both white and black, rich and poor, from Sautee Nacoochee and Bean Creek). Kathy Blandin, the center’s director, was pleased to see some of the “old families” in attendance, along with several people from the Bean Creek community, some who hadn’t set foot in the building for several years because of recurring racial tensions.

The performance that night was among our most powerful. After the applause died down only a few people left the room. The audience *needed* to talk. The post-show discussion was particularly passionate. People who wouldn’t typically find themselves in the same *room* with one another were having a serious discussion about race and class in their community.

At one point, however, a local white woman became agitated. She couldn’t understand why we were going on and on about *slavery*, something that had happened so long ago. Strangely, she kept using the phrase “Am I living with Santa Claus or” For example: “*Am I living with Santa Claus* or hasn’t that all been dealt with? *Am I living with Santa Claus* or are *those people* just avoiding responsibility? *Am I living with Santa Claus* or are they simply trying to live off my taxes rather than pay their *own way*?”

The air went out of the room. Everyone was stunned into silence. I was embarrassed for the woman and for all of us. Most of all, I was ashamed to face the Bean Creek folks who had reached out in good faith. How could someone hear so many stories of discrimination *from her own neighbors* and still miss the point? Then, something changed: Sabrina Dorsey from Bean Creek smiled at the woman. With humor and with gentleness, she raised her head and said, “Ma’am, with all due respect *you’re living with Santa Claus!*” (Long, H., 2015, p. 146).

The room erupted with good-natured laughter and suddenly the woman began to relax and really *listen*. I’m not suggesting “Mrs. Santa Claus” underwent a full conversion that night, but there had been a clear turning point. By the end of the

conversation she understood something about the experience of her black neighbors that she hadn't considered before. For me, that understanding is "community."²

In order to build community, we have to let our true and imperfect selves come out into the open. We have to acknowledge what we *really* think and feel. We have to be open to opinions different from our own. We have to be relaxed enough and *trust* enough to let down our defenses. Only then can we risk being influenced by one another.

What does it take to build community? It takes respect. It takes trust. It takes commitment. It takes the courage to react with *honesty*. Interestingly, that's a lot like what Stanislavsky told his actors. You see, you build community in the theatre the same way you build it in life. Good actors and good leaders build community.

The Year of Russia

In May 2017, I had the opportunity to visit Russia for the first time with a faculty delegation from our university. This extraordinary trip was the culmination of our "Year of Russia" celebration which included weekly lectures, concerts, films, food, and panel discussions focused on various aspects of Russian culture, history, and foreign policy. These events were eerily relevant because they coincided with the 2016 presidential campaign and the early months of the troubled Trump administration. By the time we left for Moscow, many Americans were convinced Russia had meddled in the presidential election, but to what degree? I was eager to hear the Russian point of view. Despite my fascination with all of this, however, my primary preoccupation was, of course, Stanislavsky. After all, this was my pilgrimage to actor Mecca!

Russian culture is rich and beautiful. We strolled the streets of stately St. Petersburg and stood slack-jawed in astonishment at the masterworks housed in the Hermitage. I toured Anton Chekhov's estate, and, of course attended an outstanding production at the MAT! I was impressed by the pulsing vitality of modern Moscow with its sparkling skyline of glass superstructures. Whatever my personal feelings about Vladimir Putin, I understood his popularity; for many, Putin has restored Russian national pride and a general feeling of hope for the future.

We visited several universities where we attended lectures and panels on Russian foreign policy, domestic policy, and economic strategy. We toured the Kremlin, the American Embassy, and Russia Today, one of two top government-run news agencies. Everywhere we went, we were welcomed graciously and respectfully. Through all of this, Stanislavsky sat perched on my shoulder.

I was struck by how much we have in common with the Russian people, and by a few fundamental differences in the way we perceive the role of our nations in the world. Perhaps American playwright Lee Blessing explains it best in his cold war drama, *A Walk in the Woods*, about a series of fictitious conversations between

² This story was first recounted in my article Theatre across Communities: A Tale of Two Slave Cabins in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 146-147.

Soviet and American negotiators in Geneva between 1984 and 1985. In 2013, I directed a production of the play at Atlanta's Serenbe Playhouse, a professional theatre company. To put this in historical context, the play ends a few months before Gorbachev courageously announced a unilateral moratorium on intermediate-range nuclear missiles, and proposed a freeze on *all* nuclear weapons testing (Tsygankov, 2016, p. xiv).

A Walk in the Woods

BOTVINNIK: ... Americans and Russians are just the same. But their history is different. What is history? History is geography over time. The geography of America is oceans—therefore no nearby enemies. The geography of Russia is the opposite: flat, broad plains—open invitations to anyone who wants to attack. Mongols, French, Germans, Poles, Turks, Swedes, anyone So, what is the history of America? Conquest without competition. What is the history of Russia? Conquest *because* of competition. How best to be America? Make individual freedom your god. This allows you to attack on many fronts—all along your borders, in fact—and maintain the illusion that you are not attacking at all. You don't even have to call your wars, wars. You call them "settling the west." ... How best to be Russia then? Fight collectively. *Know* that you are trying to crush those around you. Make control your god, and channel the many wills of the people into one will Americans, who never had to confront themselves as conquerors, are still under the delusion that they are idealists. And Russians, who did have to confront themselves, are under the equally powerful delusion that they are realists. I'm speaking now of those in power. Common Americans and common Russians share a much simpler delusion: that they are peace-loving people. (Blessing, 1988, pp. 26-27)

A Walk in the Woods seems more resonant than ever, partly because we know what the characters do not: that the Berlin Wall would crumble, that the end of communism would give way to unforeseen freedoms - of markets, of technology, of information. On June 19, 2013, a few days before the opening night of our production, President Obama publicly stated that the dissolution of the Soviet Union had brought "a sense that the great challenges have somehow passed." In order to "move beyond Cold War nuclear postures" Obama called for reducing the number of deployed U.S. strategic nuclear warheads by one-third if the Russian government agreed to a similar cut. In Moscow, however, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin quickly responded, saying, "How can we take seriously this idea about cuts in strategic nuclear potential while the United States is developing its capabilities to intercept Russia's nuclear potential?"

Sadly, four years later, it is clear that President Obama was incorrect. In fact, the divide between our countries, it seems, is widening by the day. Despite our respective progress in the realm of individual freedoms, issues of poverty,

ecological devastation, and a possible nuclear disaster continue to threaten global stability. Homegrown terrorists and sophisticated cyber-warriors undermine democracy across the globe. In short, world peace seems just as tenuous now as it was then, if not more.

Recently, the U.S. Congress passed sweeping economic sanctions, which prompted a game of one-upmanship as both countries downsized each other's diplomatic corps (Gordon & Schmidt, 2017). While sanctions can be an important foreign policy tool, I wonder how much these are motivated, not by their potential effectiveness, but by the need of national leaders to appear powerful to their own people - to at least *appear* as if they are taking action? Wouldn't we accomplish more if our leaders began engaging more rather than less? After all, we are dealing with *people* here, people similar to ourselves. This is community at its broadest, most global level.

In his book titled *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, distinguished professor of international relations, Andrei Tsygankov, explains the complex framework of forces that influence Russia's fluctuating foreign policies in the post-Soviet era. Tsygankov concludes his text by advising Russia and the West to remain engaged and resist the tendency toward isolationism. Rather, they should:

... double their efforts to explain their international policies as consistent with their vision of the global world. ... Isolationism cannot be practical in a world that has grown increasingly global in terms of both new opportunities and new threats. ... staying engaged is not just an option, but a foreign policy imperative." (Tsygankov, 2016, pp. 269-271)

Make no mistake, I find much of Russian foreign and domestic policy objectionable. Admittedly, it is as hard for me to set aside my judgments as it is for anyone. Still, like Tsygankov, I am just as skeptical that stifling communication, rather than promoting it, will have the desired effect. Our leaders must not lose track of their purpose. Our leaders must remember we can't move forward without *listening* to each other in empathy and respect.

As members of the world-wide community, there are many circumstances that provide the context for continued collaboration. Russia and the West are unified by our common global responsibilities, economic opportunities, the need for natural resources, and our shared efforts to counter terrorism. While I only spent two weeks in Russia, my experiences there have convinced me we share many common values.

How can we achieve lasting progress without trust, without the ability to look across the negotiating table and recognize ourselves in one another? How can we break through the gridlocks, both at home and abroad, brought on by our individual and collective need for power and security? With increased globalization, our futures are linked together more now than they have ever been. For that reason, there are no lasting unilateral solutions. Whether on the global, national, or local level, our leaders will do well to remember what Stanislavsky taught:

- the wisdom to choose a purpose greater than our own egos;
- the diligence to gather and *accurately represent* the facts in their full and complete context;
- the character to choose actions of integrity;
- the empathy to listen deeply and understand another's point of view;
- the understanding that, by working together, we can become greater than we are on our own; and
- the courage to reveal our *true* selves and to risk being influenced by one another.

Imagination refers to the actor's ability to accept new situations of life and believe in them. (Adler, 1988, p. 20)

At the center of Stanislavsky's System is perhaps the greatest lesson of all: the power of imagination. Imagination is important because it allows each of us, as leaders, to see beyond our current limitations and to visualize what we are capable of becoming. As Albert Einstein observed, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand." The opportunity to study Russia and engage with Russian students and scholars has inspired me to better understand today's shared global context as an interdependent community in need of greater collaboration. Imagine that!

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