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In 1972 when I first came to Dublin and studied Irish theatre, it was said that most Irish actors felt they did not have to train, that they were natural performers. There did exist training of a kind, but it was largely like the training one received from the majority of schools and personal teachers: voice training, how to walk, etc.

W.G. Fay and Frank Fay, two brothers who were professional actors at the turn of the twentieth century, were brought to the new theatre Yeats and Lady Gregory founded in order to direct the plays and to train the new company at the Abbey. Such acclaimed actors as the Allgood sisters, Sarah and Molly (Maire O'Neill), the Shields brothers, Arthur and William Joseph (Barry Fitzgerald), F.J. McCormick, and J.M. Kerrigan, all began in the plays of Synge and later with O'Casey. Sara Allgood played the Widow Quinn in the original *Playboy of the Western World* and later originated the role of Juno Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock*. Arthur Shields also played in the *Playboy*, as well as in *The Plough and the Stars*.

To see each of these actors on film is to be given a window on the early Irish theatre. While Sarah Allgood did recreate her performance in the Hitchcock film of *Juno* she does not come off as well as the legend suggests. It may be that she was unaccustomed to playing for the camera in the 1930s. By 1941 in John Ford's *How Green was My Valley*, as the family matriarch, Sarah Allgood gives an extraordinary performance, both grandly and intimately comical and profoundly moving. At the end of the film, when her husband dies, her performance registers as transcendent, it is one of the screen's great acting moments.

In 1947, Carol Reed directed W.G. Fay and F.J. McCormick, the originators of Synge and O'Casey's greatest characters (e.g., Christy

Mahon, Joxer Daly), in a scene in *Odd Man Out*, in which the first fifty years of Irish theatre history comes alive in an astonishing way. Watching this scene one sees the very best of early classical Irish acting (and an extra attraction is the presence in the film, though not in this scene, of the next generation's greatest actor, the young Cyril Cusack.) Shortly after this a new generation of Irish actors in the fifties, including Cusack, Siobhan McKenna, Richard Harris, Peter OToole, and Ray McAnally, also provided great performances on stage in films. So, the theatre community of Dublin wondered where did this need for the Stanislavski technique come from? Well, great acting has always come from an ability, whether accidental or intentional, to reveal raw emotional truth. But, less than great acting has always relied on the standards of the day of the teaching and training available.

In the early 1970s, when I was in Dublin, my teachers pointed out the lovable and highly popular Abbey Theatre stalwart, Harry Brogan, as an example of a style of acting that was as hammy as it was pleasurable and audiences warmly embraced his performances. But it was a style that fit the plays of Boucicault, as I saw in the 1972 Abbey production of *Arrah na Pogue*, but not the realism demanded by Anton Chekov or Eugene O'Neill.

To understand the importance and the achievements of Dublin's Focus Theatre, I want to explore two separate yet parallel strands of theatre history which came together in a disused garage at 6 Pembroke Place and to see how they played out and contributed to its founding and to its lasting impact in Dublin and beyond.

The System of Stanislavski

In 1963 Deirdre O'Connell founded the Stanislavski Studio, a school in which she could teach and promote the 'System' which was devised by Konstantin Stanislavski from the 1890s to the 1930s. She herself had been a student at the Actors Studio since 1958 and had studied with Lee Strasberg, a legendary teacher of Stanislavski's system which he termed 'the Method.' Over half a century as an actor, director, and acting teacher, Stanislavski devoted his career to assessing acting as a craft and to how it could be taught as such. And the key word here is c*raft*.

For much of theatre's history, actors were looked on as being possessed of magic, talent, even genius. Touched by the gods, actors would find something indefinable, something tinged with a deep sense of Truth in their performances. One could not train to be an actor. One was born an actor. One was born with Talent and the only training any actor needed was in projecting and modulating their voice and in their

movement. There were tricks of the trade to be learned: cheating out (playing so that one's face was turned out toward the audience even in dialogue with other actors on the stage); crying or laughing on cue; physical bits of business (called *lazzi* in the commedia dell'arte and *schtick* in the Yiddish theatre and in American vaudeville) with which to establish character; dancing and fencing. But acting could not be taught. You either were or were not an actor.

Perhaps no anecdote better puts this case forward than this apocryphal story from the life of Laurence Olivier, once regarded by critics and audiences from the 1940s-1970s as the greatest Englishspeaking actor in the world. In the 1960s he performed the role of Othello at the National Theatre, utilizing every part of his legendary technical storehouse with which to present the Moor. One night, after a stunning performance, a close friend went backstage to see Olivier. He found the star trashing his dressing room, throwing chairs and screaming in a rage. Attempting to calm down the actor, his friend said, 'Larry, what's wrong! What's come over you? Don't you know that tonight you gave maybe the greatest performance of your career?' Shaking and in tears, Olivier replied, 'I know. And I don't know how I did it!'

Great acting, even good acting, was controlled by an actor's sense of inspiration in the moment. To be divinely touched. So many actors over centuries trusted this axiom, one which made every actor's performance erratic, at least those to whom doing their best work at every performance was their goal. This was what propelled Stanislavski to undertake a study of acting, to treat it as a craft that can be taught, and that can be repeated night after night. Which is not to deny the importance of inspiration, which does occur – but as a craft the actor is freed from relying on it solely.

Stanislavski broke down the 'rules' and founded a system with which to bring each actor to emotional life in performance; to present the actor with a program of analysis of the role and to work on making each actor find and recall an inner truth for their character that can be repeatedly represented. In such areas as Given Circumstances, Sense Memory (or Affective Memory), Through-line (or Spine), Super-Objectives, Magic 'If', and Circle of Attention, the actor can break down the role into these various components and bring a sense of truthful behaviour to the performance. This is what Deirdre O'Connell was taught and what she was convinced that the Dublin theatre needed. Indeed, the task was daunting. Everywhere she turned she was told that the Irish were naturally talented and required no training. The level of

acting at the Abbey, at the Gate, and at the Gaiety was fine, except that audiences were getting tired of the 'star' turns their favourite actors would take, earning applause on their entrances: all vocalizing and no inner life.

And yet, acting, great acting, even merely good acting, needs emotional truth, at least by common western standards. Stanislavski defined acting as 'living truthfully in imaginary circumstances' and since the early Greeks such 'truth-telling' has been a part of great acting, no matter the style of playing, the genre of the writing, or the physical and cultural requirements of the role. The Greek actor Polus, cast as Elektra, made his entrance (all the roles in ancient Greece were played by men) carrying the urn of his father, Agamemnon. Elektra's first speech was an emotional speech necessitating all of the actor's resources. As it happened, Polus' oldest son had died recently, so the actor entered carrying the ashes of his son, connecting fully, truthfully with the emotions of Elektra, not representing her sorrow but 'filling the stage with genuine grief.'[52] Stanislavski would have approved and even cheered. Some things cannot be adequately faked.

Stanislavski did not develop his ideas in a vacuum. After he and Nemirovich-Danchenko had opened the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), they sought out Anton Chekhov, whose second full-length play *The Seagull* had been a disastrous failure in its premier production. Chekhov's plays were something new to the theatre. Less plot-oriented, more character studies, they demanded genuine human behaviour to drive the plays instead of the melodramatic actions of much of the nineteenth-century theatre. Cathartic moments, if and when found, turned on the nuance of speech and of body language. It was about the play's subtext, what remained hidden under the dialogue and in the silences. It was essential for each of his plays that they be performed without attention to the individual ego, that we the audience be immersed in an acting and design ensemble where the world of the play would wash over us with our own recognition. This had been growing in the western theatre since the middle of the century, slowly at first, with actors like Mikhail Shchepkin, Russia's greatest actor, showing the way. The reputation of MAT grew, along with that of its principal director, Stanislavski. After the Bolshevik Revolution, several of its primary actors, including Michael Chekhov, Maria Ouspenskaya, Richard Boleslawski and others settled in Western Europe and later in

[52] *Actors on Acting*, ed. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (Crown Publishers, New York, 1970), pp. 14-15.

the U.S., bringing the acting techniques developed by Stanislavski with them.

By the nineteen-twenties certain American actors and directors began to study the System, including Harold Clurman, and Stella Adler (who stepped aside from the students and went to Stanislavski himself). By 1930 they had formed their own theatre company, The Group Theatre, based on the principals of the System and its ensemble playing. Ten years later the Group disbanded and after the Second World War some of its directors and actors re-grouped and started the Actors Studio in New York City in 1947. By the early nineteen-fifties Lee Strasberg had become the leading acting teacher of the Stanislavski system, now called the Method. Actors of the calibre of Marilyn Monroe, Geraldine Page, James Dean, Paul Newman, Al Pacino, Ellen Burstyn, Karl Malden, Eli Wallach, and Ben Gazzara studied these techniques (while others such as Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift studied with Stella Adler and received their Stanislavski training

elsewhere). In 1958 eighteen year old Deirdre O'Connell auditioned for the Studio and was accepted in its program where she trained and eventually co-taught for the next five years.

At this same time a struggle broke out in America over whose training was closest to what the master, Stanislavski, wanted. It was argued that early Stanislavski encouraged actors to go so far into themselves that they lost sight of the fact of performance, whereas later Stanislavski was felt by some as more encouraging actors to invent, create emotional circumstances and bring it out in performance, to work from physical activity first and find the emotional truth from it rather than from starting with emotional truth. A classic example offered is the question: when walking in a forest and one comes upon a tiger, does one become frightened, then scream and then run? Or does one run first and become afraid on the running, when the physical activity may only increase the emotional and adrenal response of abject terror? Strasberg was accused of concentrating solely on Stanislavski's early writings which Stanislavski himself acknowledged later as unsatisfactory. Sanford Meisner, another Group Theatre alumnus, broke with Strasberg and offered training based on the later psychophysical theories of Stanislavski, while Stella Adler affirmed that only she had actually spoken with Stanislavski and she knew his intentions best. O'Connell herself actually broke with the cult of Strasberg by the time she left New York for Ireland in 1963, concentrating more on the full range of Stanislavski's writings.

Because the technique was suited so well to film acting, where projecting character only looked fake, while the camera picked up on the greatest of subtle nuances, the Stanislavski System thrived as film and television became the main forms of dramatic entertainment and small theatres, such as the Focus Theatre, were obviously eminently better situated for this kind of 'realistic' acting.

This was western theatre's second revolution, occurring almost simultaneously with its first revolution to the extent that the two appeared to be such mirror images as to be confused as the same.

The Rise of Realism and the Free Theatre Movement

The first revolution had occurred a generation earlier. The rise of realism throughout the nineteenth century changed the way plays were being written, acted and designed, and even brought in the 'new' art form of the director. This coincided with a growing dissatisfaction on the parts of some practitioners and audiences with the commercial theatre's dominance through melodrama and various spectacles and with local censorship laws. 1887 was the year of the great schism, when the Free Theatre (*Theatre Libre*) Movement began in Paris and spread throughout Europe and North America during the next forty years.

The rise in realism paralleled a rise in technology that made the real world available to masses of people for first time (telephones brought real people, through their voices, to great distances; photography and the phonograph brought their bodies and places of habitation, and again, their voices and sounds through vast distances, even resulting in the invention of a new form of theatre, the travelogue. All of this coincided with a rise in cultural disruption. Immigration from the rural to the urban and from the colonized countries to the colonizers filled cities with teeming masses of humanity. With it came enormous squalor, disease and poverty, along with demands for government intervention on behalf of the sick, the disabled, the unemployed, the underemployed and the underpaid, as well as the enslaved. Prostitution, robbery and assault, and drug and alcohol dependency,

along with spousal and child abuse soared in numbers. Liberation movements – for women, for slaves, for the colonized, for workers – popped up from country to country.

Theatre does not lead. It follows. Theatre, however, can be a means of drawing attention to problems. Emile Zola, following the lead taken by Balzac earlier in the century, argued that theatre can be a means of presenting a social ill and examining it as a pathologist would a disease. Auguste Comte presented a philosophy called Positivism which stated

that everything in the universe is knowable, and that the duty of science and art was to bring this knowledge to bear on solving these social problems. Fine sentiments, but theatre had become a significant commercial enterprise by the nineteenth century. Theatres grew in size, in audience attendance, and the subject matter for plays was kept strictly at the superficial level. Melodramas were the most popular theatre form at this time (to be replaced in the twentieth century with musicals), and audiences packed these theatres, e.g., the Boulevard theatres in Paris, the West End in London, Broadway in New York.

An amateur French actor, André Antoine, read the essays of Zola and heard about the plays of Ibsen, banned in most cities for obscenity (particularly *Ghosts*). Antoine was a visionary who realized that by staying small (under a hundred seats), he could have a theatre which was not dependent on huge revenues where new writers could experiment in theme and form. In 1887 he opened the *Theatre Libre* (free theatre) in Paris to a subscription audience (no tickets were sold and no advertising in the press kept the censors from wielding their power). He produced plays by Zola, Ibsen, and Strindberg. He was the first to produce evenings of one-act plays (called fifteen-minute plays, or *quart d'heures*) independently from full-length plays. He directed his actors to ignore the fourth wall (he wouldn't even tell his actors where the audience would be sitting until the dress rehearsal). He forced his actors to drop the declamatory style of acting and to concentrate on nuanced behaviour. He dressed his sets with all the details necessary to create a real world on the stage. Word of mouth made his theatre a sensation. The Free Theatre Movement had begun.

Two years later, in 1889, Otto Brahm opened his free theatre (*Freie Bühne*) in Berlin with Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Strindberg and Wedekind and Schnitzler were produced there also. Two years after that, J.T. Grein opened his free theatre in London, the Independent Theatre Society, in 1891, also with Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and he produced the first play by George Bernard Shaw, *Widowers Houses*. Within a decade this theatre became the Royal Court Theatre. Other theatres opened in its wake, sometimes following Antoine's lead, sometimes taking only a few of his ideas, the Moscow Art Theatre and the Abbey Theatre among them. A tour by the Abbey Players to the United States in 1911 inspired an American version of the free theatre movement, called the Little Theatre Movement, beginning the following year with the Toy Theatre in Boston and the Chicago Little Theatre (both in 1912) with the Neighbourhood Playhouse and the Washington Square Players in New York in 1915 (which subsequently evolved in 1919 into the Theatre Guild), and the

Provincetown Playhouse in 1916 (which produced the first plays of Eugene O'Neill, himself influenced by the Abbey's plays, especially those of J.M. Synge). Within another two years there were more than fifty such theatres in the United States.

Other changes occurred in the American theatre at this time. In 1903 George Pierce Baker began teaching playwriting at Radcliffe College

and later enlarged it at Harvard University, titled English 47, which included a workshop (Workshop 47) to produce the plays. Among his students were Eugene O'Neill, Sidney Howard, and Edward Sheldon. In 1925 Baker resigned from Harvard and became the head of Yale University's first Department of Drama. In 1915 Robert Edmond Jones veered away from the familiar realistic set designs of the time when he created an 'expressionistic' set for a production of Anatole France's *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* which historians credit as inaugurating the New Stagecraft Movement.

Since this time, there have been other small theatre movements dedicated to new plays, to promoting new artistic and social and political ideas in America, and to creating a new aesthetic which included other styles beyond realism, among them the Lafayette Players in Harlem (1915-32), the Civic Repertory Theatre (1926-33), the Group Theatre (1931-41), and the extraordinary Federal Theatre Project (1935-39) initiated by Hallie Flanagan to provide work for unemployed theatre artists and to bring their eclectic art to all Americans during the Depression.

It was from this tradition, especially from that of the Group Theatre, that New York-born Deirdre O'Connell came. A visionary like Antoine, she understood the need to keep her theatre free from the commercial pressures that afflicted the main stages of Ireland, including the Abbey, the Gate, and the Gaiety. Dublin had its small independent theatres, most notably the Pike in the 1950s which premiered the work of Brendan Behan and gave Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* its Irish premiere. Through the Stanislavski Studio, Deirdre O'Connell began a programme of training in 1963 that produced first-rate actors like Tom Hickey, Tim McDonnell, Sabina Coyne, Ena May, Gabriel Byrne, and Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy (also a first-rate director), augmented by strong ensemble casts in classics by Ibsen (Focus's production of *A Doll's House* was a phenomenal success, running for five months to great acclaim), Strindberg, Chekhov, Lorca, and Turgenev as well as contemporary works by Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Doris Lessing, and Tennessee Williams.

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In a recent email my collaborator Brian McAvera noted that Deirdre O'Connell

> cleared away (or cleansed) Irish acting of its nineteenth century melodramatic roots to give naturalistic acting room to breathe; and then Joe [Devlin] came along and introduced nonnaturalistic work, broadening the baseline.

This is true. But the Focus continues to assert itself with its Stanislavski training simply because Stanislavski's training is not limited to the realistic/naturalistic theatre. Stanislavski provided the actor working in any kind of style, from realism to Brechtian epic to Japanese Noh or even the Indian kathakali, with a means of enriching the performance through intentions, or inner actions and of breaking down the script/story by analyzing the circumstances of the moment and articulating that moment through the study of the character/performer's intentions,[53] regardless of the style. And the results of this training? The Focus Theatre, seating only 67, yet continually crammed to the rafters (if it were large enough to have rafters) in production after production, beset with financial woes due largely to the theatre's limited number of seats, has nevertheless continued to remain true to its founder's vision since her death in 2001 and, under her successor Joe Devlin, it continues to do so now on the eve of its fiftieth anniversary, even in new and temporary quarters.

This is the lineage behind the founding and working of the Focus Theatre and provides us with a sense of a great tradition from one visionary to another, all the way to Deirdre O'Connell and the present day on the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Stanislavski Studio in Dublin.

[53] Bill Bruehl's *The Technique of Inner Actions: The Soul of a Performer's Work*, Heinemann, 1996, offers many excellent examples, especially his work with a Bharatanatyam dancer trained in traditional Indian norms, 10-13