

THE ACTING METHODOLOGY OF EARLE R. GISTER: AN  
EXAMINATION OF THE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to Earle R. Gister.

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by

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This dissertation examines the foundational principles of the acting methodology of Earle R. Gister, former master acting teacher of the Yale School of Drama. It defines and explains the principles of the methodology as it was presented to students at the Yale School of Drama from 1994 to 1996. It outlines and provides examples of ways the actor, director and educator may use the methodology in approaching roles, plays, and pedagogy. This dissertation examines all of Gister's basic principles and how they are applied, as well as the principles of his advanced approach to actor training that he called "Three Levels of Theatrical Reality."

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Chapter 1: Modern Acting Methods .....	1
Chapter 2: Character: Who am I? .....	49
Chapter 3: Place and Time: Where am I and When am I there?.....	68
Chapter 4: Objective: What do I want .....	99
Chapter 5: Action: How do I go about getting what I want .....	116
Chapter 6: Application of the Methodology .....	135
Chapter 7: Three Levels of Theatrical Reality .....	163
Critical Commentary.....	184
Appendix .....	191
Work Cited .....	195
Bibliography .....	199
Vita	

## CHAPTER 1

### MODERN ACTING METHODS

In 1992 at the University of Texas at Dallas, theatre critic and scholar Dr. Robert W. Corrigan was directing a production of his translation of Anton Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*. The student cast struggled to come to terms with acting Chekhov. The challenge of developing Chekhovian characters and playing his subtext exposed many weaknesses in both individual and collective approaches to performance. Sensing the dilemma, Corrigan, not an acting teacher himself, invited his former pupil from the 1950's at Carnegie-Mellon University, Mr. Earle R. Gister, then Assistant Dean and Master Acting Teacher of the Yale School of Drama, to do a workshop that introduced his method of acting. Gister coached members of *The Sea Gull* cast during a weekend workshop while introducing his acting methodology, which included a very specific set of principles that the actor should apply not just to Chekhov, but to all plays. Applying the knowledge gained from the workshop to the production of *The Sea Gull*, the actors gave a performance that was not only lyrical, but also had much greater resonance, clarity and meaning than before Gister's help.

In 1993 Gister returned to UTD and led another workshop this time dealing with August Strindberg. The methodology was the same, but he shifted emphasis from showing how to realize human elements in Chekhov's plays to spiritual and supernatural elements in Strindberg's plays. In 1994 Gister again returned to UTD and offered a more advanced and altogether unique approach to Samuel Beckett that built on his foundational approach to

Chekhov, Strindberg and other modern playwrights. The results of Gister's workshop on Beckett was even more powerful than the ones on Chekhov and Strindberg, as he introduced, taught, and demonstrated an entirely new and higher level of technique, quite different from anything any of us had ever seen before, demonstrating that indeed his methodology was applicable to more than naturalistic theatre!

When I graduated from UTD with my master's degree, I applied to the Yale School of Drama to fully immerse myself in Gister's work. I was granted a Special Research Fellowship in Acting. I moved to New Haven, CT and studied with Gister for one year, recording on audio cassette all of his classes and meeting with him daily in a mentor/apprentice relationship. I studied his methodology in order to write about and publish it, and use it in my work as actor, director, and now Linklater voice teacher and educator. After completing my work at Yale University, I returned to UTD as a Ph.D. student with the intention of writing my dissertation about Gister's methodology. Currently, I use Gister's methodology in training my Syracuse University BFA acting students in New York, where I am visiting Assistant Professor of Acting, Voice and Verse.

Gister's work has never formally been written about. He was very guarded about his methodology and to whom he taught it. His classes at the Yale School of Drama were exclusive, with a carefully controlled number of attendees. Students took Gister's classes in order to use the knowledge gained for their acting, directing and/or teaching, but aside from me, no one took the classes in order to write about his methodology.

On December 13, 2004 I flew to New York City and met with Gister at the Actor's Center, where he taught part-time after retiring from Yale University in 1998. I wished to discuss the writing project. On that day, Gister granted me full written permission to write

my dissertation about his acting methodology. Since then, I have interviewed Gister at his home in New Haven, CT, both about the historical evolution of his methodology and about his life. I have extensive notes and recordings of our interview depicting the evolution of his methodology.

### **Some Relevant Acting Theories**

Throughout this dissertation, the major principles of Gister's methodology will be examined as I experienced and understand them through the work. Frequently the examination will include comparing and contrasting the methodology with specific elements of other acting theories. In order to help recognize the importance of Gister's methodology and its contribution to the knowledge of acting theory it is useful to contextualize his work within some of the major acting theories and methodologies for points of reference. Gister's methodology, like many others, includes principles that can be linked to those used and developed by Stanislavski. Other principles and key ideas can be linked to teachers who were influenced by Stanislavski, such as Michael Chekhov. Finally there are principles of his methodology that Gister claims to have invented. What follows is a general review of those major influential figures with summaries of their contributions to acting theory in order to help prepare the reader for the chapters that follow. Generally, more information is provided about Stanislavski, because he created or borrowed many theories and influenced many teachers who were taught by him directly or studied his methods in some way.

### **Realistic and Brechtian Acting**

According to Richard Schechner in Performance Studies, there are many categories of performance. They range from what he calls "minimal acting," (such as some performance

art) to “total acting,” for which he gives examples of shamans and trances possessed (146).

In order to help delineate types of acting Schechner designates the following categories:

realistic, Brechtian, codified, trances, performing objects: masks and puppets (148).

Schechner suggests that at times actors or genres may use more than one of the above types of acting. Although the above categories are perhaps an oversimplification of performance approaches and styles, they delineate Gister’s overall approach.

Gister’s methodology concerns realistic acting which Schechner describes as: “Behavior on stage [which] is based on that in ordinary life.” He says, “This kind of acting was considered avant-garde when it was introduced in Europe in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Soon it became dominant.” In realistic acting, “the actor disappears into the role. Audiences experience the characters as real, living persons.” In order to help achieve realistic acting, techniques, theories and principles for training actors emerged. Schechner observes two aims for such training: “to help the actor find situations in her own life that are analogous (emotionally, if not actually) to what happened to the character” and “to be able to show those feelings in a sincere way to spectators” (149-151). Although realistic acting is the primary focus of Gister’s methodology there are also similarities to elements of Brechtian acting in his advanced training that he called “Three Levels of Theatrical Reality.” In Brechtian acting the actors maintain a distance between themselves and the role. In this way they can both perform a scene and make comments on what they are doing.

There may seem to be a contradiction in the two predominant styles that Gister used. However, as observed in his classroom teaching and workshops Gister’s work was dedicated to preparing the students for professional careers in the theatre, and part of that preparation

meant learning the ability to recognize the aesthetics of different types of dramatic literature. His methodology and advanced training are predicated on realistic acting because he saw it as the prevailing style in professional theatre. He therefore determined that it was important for the student of acting to be trained in principles that are akin to Stanislavski's System, which was concerned with realistic acting. But he also determined that it was important for the student to be trained in principles that are analogous to Brechtian acting, which includes the playing of stereotypes and direct address to audience. He believed that elements found in Brechtian acting share the prevailing style with realistic acting, though to a lesser degree. The advanced actor training that Gister taught prepared the actor for the challenges of acting in plays that are influenced by and utilize elements in Brecht's theories and plays. Thus, the student would be trained to recognize and embrace both styles of playwriting, and have the skills necessary to play roles from either category.

### **Constantine Stanislavski (1863-1938)**

Constantine Stanislavski was a Russian director, actor and teacher. Along with playwright and dramaturge Vladimir Nemirovitch-Danchenko he co-founded the Moscow Arts Theatre in 1898. Stanislavski investigated and developed theories of the art of acting that have had widespread influence on generations that followed him. He was concerned with investigating the nature of acting. He examined acting as a phenomenon, rather than assuming an understanding of what it is and determining the best ways in which to do it. In The End of Acting Richard Hornby draws a distinction between what Stanislavski did and what other theorists have done:

Stanislavski is one of the few writers in history to offer a comprehensive theory of acting. Most writers on the subject are concerned with what acting *should* or *should not* be; they describe their own personal approach or promote a particular acting style. [...] Stanislavski, however, is concerned with what acting is. His theories, rightly or wrongly, are supposed to accommodate all styles of acting, rather than just his own. [...] He is not calling for a new approach to acting, but instead attempts to codify what actors have always done and, by implication, always will do. Moreover, he does not debate his principles, but instead, like Darwin with his theory of evolution or Freud with his theory of the unconscious mind, just sets them forth and expands on them. (151)

Stanislavski formalized a system of acting that has undergone many changes and adaptations over the last hundred years. For many years he kept journals, sketches and plans for teaching through his observations and explorations using a wide range of theories and principles. His system of acting became accessible to other teachers, actors and directors at different points in its evolution through the publications of his books. Though it was formalized through his writings, he never intended his system to be a final treatise on acting. Sharon Marie Carnike notes that Stanislavski “never deemed his System or his books complete; they remain dynamic, experimental explorations of the unique communicative power of theatre” (16). His work continually evolved up until his death, as he discarded or retained approaches depending on their value in helping actors to produce effective stage acting. Those approaches he kept, he would either use unchanged or build into even better

theories. For example, his use of the *objective* was and is a powerful element in his system, so effective for the actor that it continues to serve the work of building character into the twenty-first century and is most often associated with his approach. However, he discarded affective memory, (although he continues to be associated with it), deciding that it distanced the actor from the imaginary circumstances of the play. In affective memory work the actor playing a given character would recall a private, actual event from the actor's own past in order to evoke an emotion that may or may not be consistent with the playwright's intention for that character. Discarding theories that he felt were ineffective and retaining and/or building on theories that he felt showed promise was a style of working that Stanislavski adopted in his endeavor to create better and more effective approaches to acting.

Like all principles that deal with the practical aspects of performance, Stanislavski's theories are hard to comprehend if studied in written form without some background of experience in performance. Ideally theories should be examined through an understanding of performance rather than examining them as a novice and then attempting to apply them to a role. This idea was echoed by Peter Brook in dialogue with this author on August 31, 2008. Brook stresses that theory should originate from the practical, everyday challenges of rehearsing and staging plays. He felt that it was limiting to use a theoretical approach to character analysis unless one considered what the approach might mean through the lens of one's performance background. However, although Brook suggested that Stanislavski's system may work best in the hands of an experienced performer, he also suggested that it can be very valuable in helping young and/or inexperienced performers gain confidence in their acting through the structure it provides.

In his essay “Exit Thirties, Enter Sixties” Richard Schechner examines changes to Stanislavski’s method over time. He explains that the Russian Revolution led to the immigration of many disciples of Stanislavski at the First Studio, such as Michael Chekhov and Richard Boleslavski. Hence, when new ideas from Stanislavski crossed the Atlantic Ocean they were “adapted into a framework already conditioned to the First Studio” (21). Lee Strasberg would later study with Boleslavski, which initiated him into the affective memory work. This early work that crossed the Atlantic Ocean with Stanislavski’s disciples helped shape the foundational pedagogy of the Group Theatre. Although Stanislavski’s ideas were constantly evolving, this early work remained a cornerstone to the training in the Group Theatre. The pedagogy in the Actor’s Studio from 1947 through the 1960’s was strongly informed by Stanislavski’s early work in that First Studio, and did not evolve with Stanislavski’s new ideas and techniques. Schechner continues:

Both his methods and his over-view of acting changed. He moved from a method based on an inner technique (affective memory and its derivatives) to one based on the ‘logic of physical action.’ This work is more mimetic and more closely allied to the mechanics of child play than the exercises of the First Studio. The argument persists whether Stanislavski merely modified and transcended his early work or whether he abandoned its theoretical basis altogether. (21)

There are extensive writings by and about Stanislavski that offer detailed explanations about his theories, which make them highly accessible though often misunderstood. This is so because Stanislavski never finalized his System. Hornby writes:

Stanislavski's ideas evolved over many decades. One of the problems in understanding his theories in this country arises from the fact that Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, who taught his system at the American Laboratory Theatre in the 1920's, were drawing on concepts that Stanislavski was already apparently moving away from. When he finally set down his system in the last years of his life, in the 1930's, it was notably different from what they taught, and even more different from what Lee Strasberg was to make of his teachings." (The End of Acting 152)

It is clear from his major work, Acting: The First Six Lessons, that Richard Boleslavsky focused on elements of Stanislavski's early approaches to actor training. The book contains the following subjects: Concentration, Memory of Emotion, Dramatic Action, Characterization, Observation, and Rhythm. These subjects are also covered in Stanislavski's first major work, An Actor Prepares. Although the book was published three years *after* Acting: The First Six Lessons, the ideas it contained that were germane to Boleslavsky and the many teachers in the United States he would have contact with were already becoming popular and being taught. However, Stanislavski wrote other books that stress aspects of physical characterization and action that were not explained or examined in An Actor Prepares. He also abandoned "memory of emotion" (affective memory) substituting the active use of the imagination for entering into the circumstances of the play.

The reader should consider that there are many elements to Stanislavski's System that, while not major principles, when practiced, contribute to the actor's craft. For example, a major concern for Stanislavski was that the actor should learn how to relax. He felt that

tension was an enemy to effective performance. An Actor Prepares, (perhaps his most famous although arguably not his best textbook on acting,) includes an entire chapter, Relaxation of Muscles, devoted to the subject. It is widely known in schools of acting that tension can rob the actor of fully committing to the needs of the character on stage. Tension can limit the actor's freedom of breath and body, which can have a detrimental effect on the actor's work and perhaps, over time, health. Often, issues of failing to remember lines, mechanical stage movement, and lack of full expression and emotional release can in some way be related to tension. Stanislavski, however, was not the only teacher to recognize tension as an enemy to the actor. Many theorists, such as Lee Strasberg, and schools of acting, voice and movement that followed Stanislavski devised and/or borrowed relaxation exercises from various sources to help rid the actor of undue tensions. For example, the voice training of Kristin Linklater starts with detailed exercises in physical awareness and relaxation in order to begin the process of freeing the actor from habitual patterns of holding, tension and tightness.

Another important principle which Stanislavski required the actor to understand was the "given circumstances" of the play as presented by the playwright. He wanted the actor to live and act believably within those imaginary circumstances. In "Stanislavski Triumphant" Theodore Hoffman points to the importance of the given circumstances versus the subconscious as a means toward the evocation of believable stage behavior. Hoffman contends that "there is no theory of the subconscious in Stanislavsky" but that in the Stanislavsky system motivations came from the character's surroundings, feelings and the desire that a certain result will occur (81).

The centrality of ‘given circumstances’ in Stanislavski’s System results from his essential difference to motivation, to ‘why’ people behave as they do. In his System behavior is invariably presented as teleological, a constant product of organic environment. There is no theory of the subconscious in Stanislavski. He uses the word literally, as below consciousness, and seems to assume that subconscious feelings are our common stock. Life is the consciousness of individuals provoked by the dynamics of environment, and any actor can grasp the individual, conscious feelings of a character simply by immersing himself in the character’s social texture and by then introjecting the character into the requisite circumstances. (81)

It can and has been argued that behavior is not necessarily a product of a particular social situation or circumstance. Rather, it can be seen as a product of one’s history, biology and/or early stages of childhood development. But as Hoffman points out, Stanislavski invented the “magic if” as a means toward utilizing the imagination as a catalyst for feeling. He said it was “designed to permit the actor to draw on himself without playing himself” (82). The “magic if” is a term for a way that the actor might perform believably within the imaginary world of the character. Stanislavski showed that by utilizing the magic if feelings would arise spontaneously and genuinely without the actor’s reliance on digging into the unconscious or remembering the past in order to unearth or recall emotions analogous to the character and given circumstances. Proper use of the magic if helps stimulate the actor’s imagination through the question What would I do *if* I was in this particular situation?

Theoretically, through vulnerability to the situation imagined, the actor's feeling can begin to emerge without the aid of affective memory.

A central idea for Stanislavski was character versus personality acting: [he] "valued character transformation highly, actually maintaining that all good acting was character acting" (Hornsby 153). As part of his trilogy of major works, Creating a Role and An Actor Prepares, his second volume, Building a Character, (though not as popular as An Actor Prepares, perhaps in part due to Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya), is devoted entirely to character acting. It was important to Stanislavski that the actor creates a believable character within the imaginary circumstances and situations of the play.

Another approach Stanislavski employed was the "objective," a term he and many others since have used for designating what a character wants in a given scene of a play. There are two aspects to the objective, the *superobjective* and the *objective*. While the objective concerns scenes within plays, the superobjective is the term for what a character wants from the beginning to the end of the play. Although the meanings of the two terms have remained unchanged as cornerstones to acting theories that followed Stanislavski, the terms themselves would sometimes change. For example, in On Directing Harold Clurman uses the term "spine" throughout the text to designate what Stanislavski called the superobjective. While other terms, such as "intention," or "desire" have been used in place of the objective, the meaning of one of Stanislavski's greatest contributions to acting theory has remained the same, although Gister would modify it. The objective, as well as certain other key principles in Stanislavski's system will be analyzed in subsequent chapters because they relate directly to Gister's methodology.

**Students of Stanislavski: Strasberg, Michael Chekhov, Meisner *et alia***

Stanislavski believed that it was important to record his work. In Twentieth Century Actor Training, it is noted that he began to keep detailed journals on performances, both those he gave and those he saw, starting in his early teens (16). However, there is a difference between acting and writing about acting. Aware of the difference, Stanislavski was concerned with how to convey his ideas through writing. In doing so he used the approach of imaginary teaching situations:

Stanislavsky chose to write his manuals as if they were ‘the System in a novel.’ He thus creates a fictional classroom to portray, rather than explain, the process of acting. He introduces characters who struggle to act well and their teacher who tries to help them. Stanislavsky puts his characters into changing contexts which continually challenge their ideas about what it means to act. In endless Socratic dialogue, they explore the mysteries of acting, they argue their various points of view, and they sometimes break through to clear understanding of their intractable art. (Twentieth Century Actor Training 16)

Stanislavski’s ideas became accessible to other teachers and theatre artists through his students and especially through translations of his writings, which helped make his work popular in other countries. As others learned his work, they would often stress certain ideas while ignoring or marginally incorporating others, making them the driving principles in their own pedagogies of actor training. For example, the work of Stanford Meisner was strongly communication-based and focused on impulse and connectivity. Lee Strasberg, who

never met Stanislavski, was obsessed with affective memory. Jerzy Grotowski was a proponent of the Method of Physical Actions, as were others, such as Sonia Moore. However, they differed in their uses of the approach. Moore sought to teach the Method of Physical Actions as Stanislavski originally conceived it, while Grotowski took the approach to a new level through a re-examination of impulse. (See for example, Moore's Training an Actor and Thomas Richard's chapter, "Grotowski Vs. Stanislavski" in At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions). While retaining Stanislavski's use of the *objective* and *superobjective*, Michael Chekhov rejected affective memory even before Stanislavski did. He would substitute use of the imagination for recollection as a means for the actor to enter into the emotional life of a character. Eugene Vakhtangov was an advocate of *psycho-physical action* directed toward the attainment of the *objective* and Paul Mann offered a unique definition of action.

Stanislavski promoted experimentation in his students' use of his principles. Hornby, in The End of Acting notes "Far from requiring them to follow his methods slavishly, he created studios for them, in which they were not only allowed artistic freedom, but encouraged to experiment with the latest theatrical styles" (194).

### **Eugene Vakhtangov (1883-1923)**

Vakhtangov was an avid student of Stanislavski, and is known for his theory of drama that he called "Fantastic Realism." This approach used exaggerated forms of movement in order to reveal meaning. However, Vakhtangov was also one of Stanislavski's major disciples and clearly understood his master's methodology. Lawrence Parke notes in Since

Stanislavski and Vakhtangov: The Method as a System for Today's Actor that Vakhtangov is “most often referred to as his real heir.” He continues “It was to Vakhtangov that Stanislavski and Michael Chekhov regularly turned for coaching on their own roles. Vakhtangov it was who, in those private coaching sessions, is said to have attempted to persuade Stanislavski to recognize the importance of establishing the *needs*, *stimuli* and *causes* behind physical actions in seeking the actions themselves” (3).

The translation and publication of notes from Vakhtangov's diary in Acting: A Handbook of the Stanislavski Method make accessible a very concise, invaluable explanation of several important distinctions for understanding two major elements of Stanislavski's system: the objective and action. In the diary, Vakhtangov clears up any misunderstandings regarding the role of the emotion and feelings in Stanislavski's work:

Critics of Stanislavski's doctrine often overlook the statement which takes first place in the system and methods of Stanislavski: that the actor should not be concerned about his feeling during a play, it will come of itself. [...] Don't try to experience, don't make feelings to order, forget about them altogether. In life our feelings come to us by themselves against our will. Our willing gives birth to action directed towards the gratification of desire. If we succeed in gratifying it, a positive feeling is born spontaneously. If an obstacle stands in the way of gratifying it, a negative feeling is born—“suffering. (117-118)

The arousal of emotion is essential for an actor playing a role. Stanislavski and his pupil Vakhtangov were concerned with the means whereby the emotion or feeling would

surface in the actor. Vakhtangov asserts that by putting the emphasis on action (rather than on the feeling itself) directed toward the accomplishment of a need or “objective” the feeling that the actor seeks to engender will begin to surface. For example, if an actor in a role determines that his character wants his wife to start treating him with more respect, the actor might choose to *reproach* or *criticize* her, and by so doing an emotion, such as anger or resentment, can begin to surface in him. Hence, by committing himself fully to the action, Vakhtangov asserts, feeling will begin to surface not only in the actor to whom the action is directed, (in the above example, the actor playing the wife), but also the actor playing the husband doing the action. Thus the actor’s burden of having to directly generate an emotion in himself that he interprets as being appropriate to the character he is playing in a given moment in a given play is lifted through action.

Scientific explanations for how actions can arouse feelings are examined in the literature on mirror-neurons. The New York Times article “Cells that Read Minds” by Sandra Blakeslee on January 10, 2006 explains the phenomenon:

The monkey brain contains a special class of cells, called mirror neurons, that fire when the animal sees or hears an action and when the animal carries out the same action on its own. [...] Humans, it turns out, have mirror neurons that are far smarter, more flexible and more highly evolved than any of those found in monkeys, a fact that scientists say reflects the evolution of humans' sophisticated social abilities. The human brain has multiple mirror neuron systems that specialize in carrying out and understanding not just the actions of others but their intentions, the social meaning of their behavior and their

emotions. ‘We are exquisitely social creatures,’ Dr. Giacomo Rizzolatti [a neuroscientist from the University of Parma] said. ‘Our survival depends on understanding the actions, intentions and emotions of others.’[...] ‘Mirror neurons allow us to grasp the minds of others not through conceptual reasoning but through direct simulation. By feeling, not by thinking.’

As most plays from most genres are dependent on action, Vakhtangov argued that Stanislavski’s theories “were not only adaptable to stylized acting, but essential to its effectiveness” (195). As Vakhtangov’s diary entries reveal important distinctions for understanding Stanislavski’s principles of objective and action, and objective and action are also cornerstones to Gister’s methodology, this dissertation will examine the entries in detail where appropriate.

### **Michael Chekhov (1891-1955)**

Like Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov was an early disciple of Stanislavski. At a time when early Stanislavskian principles included affective memory, Mel Gordon pointed out in the introduction to On the Technique of Acting that Michael Chekhov’s work bifurcated toward the use of the imagination:

More than anything else, Chekhov’s work became associated with the power of the imagination. Since theatre’s strength lies in its ability to communicate through sensory imagery rather than through literary ideas, Chekhov sought to uncover appropriate actor training devices that would heighten his students’ imaginative awareness. His improvisations, which constitute the bulk of his

early teachings, advanced the notion that scenic space could have a special, almost bewitching, aura filled with evanescent or intoxicating Atmospheres. Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov's Emotional Recall exercises were based on the actor's sensory memory of an *actual* event from his life. Chekhov schooled his students to find *fictional*, external stimuli from outside their personal experiences that could fire their emotions and imaginations. (xviii)

Michael Chekhov, nephew to the playwright Anton Chekhov, joined the Moscow Arts Theatre in 1912. He was taught the principles of Stanislavski's early period work. Although Chekhov would reject the affective memory approach, he would retain some of Stanislavski's other basic theories.

Chekhov developed the reputation of being a great actor from 1912-1918. However, he and Stanislavski had several disagreements during this time. Franc Chamberlain in "Michael Chekhov on the Technique of Acting" notes that at one point " Stanislavsky criticized Chekhov for having too much fun with [a] role, and on another occasion Stanislavsky held him up before the rest of the company as 'the ulcer of our theatre'"(80).

Chekhov's life took a downward turn in 1918. Drinking, depression, divorce and the death of his mother left Chekhov in a critical mental state. He turned to the work of Rudolf Steiner, which was growing popular among Russian artists. Steiner would have a profound impact on the troubled Chekhov. Chamberlain notes "He began an intense study of Steiner's teachings as a means of liberation from his self-indulgent and self-destructive tendencies.

Steiner's theories were to form the basis of Chekhov's personal belief and would have a significant impact on his theory of the actor" (81).

Of major importance in Chekhov's work was the emphasis on playing the character rather than oneself. He rejected Stanislavski's use of affective memory because he believed that it "binds the actor to the habits of the everyday self which was not the way to liberate the actor's creativity. [...] Chekhov argued that the emphasis should be on the character's feelings, not the actor's—not 'how would I feel?' but 'what does the character feel?'—and that this would enable the actor to transform into the character rather than reducing the character to the personality of the actor" (81). Consequently, this approach must by definition reject Stanislavski's "magic if" as a means toward accessing behavior "appropriate" to the given circumstances because it uses the pronoun "I" rather than "he" or "she" the character. Thus, the fundamental shift of putting the emphasis on the character rather than the self requires rigorous use of the actor's imagination, for it is only through the imagination that the actor might come to understand the character's behavior within the given circumstances.

Chekhov drew the following analogy for understanding the difference between his and Stanislavski's approach to character: "In a scene where a child is ill, the Stanislavskian actor will focus on the child and see 'only the things seen by the character residing within him'. The Chekhovian actor, on the other hand, will focus on the character and observe how the character responds to the child" (81). Thus, for Chekhov, seeing, hearing, speaking, moving, etc. *as the character does* rather than *as the actor does* is a crucial distinction in creating the role. In order to do so Chekhov advocated that "...the actor is to become an

active participant in the process of imagination rather than just a passive dreamer, to bring the world of the imagination onto the stage and give it life” (86). He also wanted the actor to have the ability “to let go of images, to allow them to sink into the subconscious, and to welcome the changes in them when they return transformed. By recognizing and accepting the independence of the world of the imagination, the actor begins to soften the boundaries of the everyday self and ‘confront the ‘Higher Ego’” (86).

Chekhov went on to develop exercises in concentration, imagination and “atmosphere” that helped the actor to develop sensitivities and skills to inner impulses and to overcome the body's resistance and negative habits to performance. For example, every location, event, season, relationship, etc. can have its own atmosphere, such as a cathedral will have a different atmosphere than a hospital. He also invented the Psychological Gesture or “PG,” a sort of shorthand for compressing the whole character into one main desire. It is considered one of his major contributions to acting theory. Defining the character's “main desire” is also one of the goals and principles of Stanislavski's System through the superobjective mentioned above. However, the difference between the two approaches lies in the means whereby the superobjective is achieved. Stanislavski asks that the actor articulate the superobjective in language, such as *I want to be King of England*. Chekhov's psychological gesture asks the actor to embody the superobjective through a gesture that would be the summation of that desire, thus connecting the superobjective to one's body. For example, growing pensive might be expressed through an expansive sigh while turning one's head to the left and looking downward. The PG, then, is a way of embodying the discoveries actors might make about the character through the active use of their imagination.

Chekhov did not reject all of Stanislavski's theories. Units, objectives and superobjectives are major elements that Chekhov learned from Stanislavski and made part of his own approach. It is also important to recognize that although Chekhov rejected affective memory, Stanislavski eventually saw its limitations as well. However, Lee Strasberg thought otherwise. His approach was grounded in the technique of affective memory as one of its driving principles.

### **Lee Strasberg (1901-1982)**

Lee Strasberg was an American actor, director and acting teacher. In 1931 he helped found the Group theatre along with Stella Adler and Harold Clurman. A teacher at the Actor's Studio from 1949 until he died in 1982, he created an approach to acting built around early Stanislavskian techniques, such as affective memory.

Strasberg's name has become synonymous with the "Method." Like other techniques and exercises examined in this chapter, Method exercises help sensitize the actor's body to respond to various stimuli, including the imagination. The Method requires the actor to experience the "reality" of the role as much as possible. For example, if the actor is playing a gravedigger then he should experience digging graves; if playing a nurse, tending to the sick, etc. David Krasner in "I Hate Strasberg" says "Strasberg explains the actor's task 'is to create that level of belief on the stage, so that the actor is capable of experiencing the imaginary events and objects of the play' spontaneously, inventively, and honestly. Using the notion of as if (If I am living through the character's circumstances, how would I behave?), the actor, Strasberg asserts, is able to express 'the full complement of those

automatic physiological responses which accompany a real experience” (Method Acting Reconsidered 5).

“As if” in the above is directly related to Stanislavski’s magic if. Schechner quotes Strasberg pointing out an important distinction between Stanislavski and Vakhtangov in explaining the magic if as it relates to character:

Stanislavski would say, “Now, if you were Lady Macbeth, how would you do this? How would you behave?” And in doing this, he often made the aesthetic mistake of taking the role down to the actor.[...] On the other hand, [...] Vakhtangov [...] says, ‘If you had to do such and such a thing [...], what would have to happen to you, what would motivate you to do that?’ In other words he places the aesthetic intention first and then uses the technique as a way of carrying out the aesthetic intention. When this is not done, often, even in Stanislavsky’s productions, the work makes the reality descend to the level of the actor, rather than helping the actor to ascend to the level of the character. You see, work on a part helps create the reality and so we must be careful to bring the actor to the reality of the play by motivating him to act as the character acts.” (Qtd. in Performance Studies 152)

It is easy to see the connection between Method approaches, such as relaxation, used by Strasberg and Stanislavski approaches in his early period. However, the Method would differ by degree depending on who was teaching it. Strasberg’s approach gives emphasis to the free will of the actor as Krasner points out:

Strasbergian free will is a performance of the self. The self is vulnerable, protean, and flexible in emotional content. Still, subject-actors are 'free' to interpret the role, a freedom that empowers them. They may conform to traditional views of the role or cut against the grain. Either way, Method actors must impose their 'stamp' on the role. Dustin Hoffman's 'tomato' will not sit; this is his interpretation, and he will not relent. His is an assertion of the will. (18)

Strasberg made use of two techniques in particular, sense memory and affective memory. In Sense memory the actor recalls sensations such as the smell of a rose, the taste of peanut butter, the sound of a sea gull's cry, the feeling of sand pouring from the hand, and so on. Recalling sensations can have a direct affect on the actor's imagination that can, in turn, stimulate thought and emotion. In affective memory an event or situation from the actor's past is recalled in as many detailed ways as possible. For example, the actor may recall the death of his best friend, remembering the date and time, where he was, and what he was doing. One point of the exercise is to evoke the emotion appropriate to the character in the given circumstances. But the main purpose of the exercise is to inspire the actor to behave in ways appropriate to the character.

Importantly, Strasberg's ideas are not solely a regurgitation of early Stanislavskian principles, but based on specific elements of Vakhtangov's work that differed from Stanislavski's. Krasner says:

Vakhtangov had argued that feelings of the actor ‘must not be ready-made beforehand somewhere on the shelf of his soul.’ Rather, ‘they must arise spontaneously on the stage, depending upon the situations in which the actor finds himself.’ This is what Vakhtangov called ‘agitation from the essence.’ Strasberg[...] developed [his] techniques in the way [he] found to *agitate*, or inspire, the actor. Vakhtangov departed from Stanislavski, believing that the actor’s justification, motivation, and inspiration are not necessarily related to the circumstances of the characters. Justification for Vakhtangov is the actor’s secret; he believed it has the power to lead the actor to a more convincing sense of reality than merely mining the character’s beliefs. In order to agitate from the essence, Vakhtangov says, ‘it is necessary to live your own temperament on the stage and not the supposed temperament of the character. (29)

The consequences of siding with Vakhtangov rather than Stanislavski in the above are huge. With Stanislavski, the actor’s source of inspiration is the script, which obliges the actor to mine the text through analyzing the given circumstances by using the imagination. With Vakhtangov, suddenly actors have “permission” to find sources other than the play for stimulation. The obvious place to look is within the actor him or herself. Thus, the actor becomes a source of his or her own inspiration, the body a resource of raw materials from which to draw out inflammatory memories that will enhance and enrich the actor’s performance. Although the actor himself can be a source of inspiration, Strasberg advocated that the actor should rise rather than lower himself to the level of the character. Strasberg’s

idea was echoed by Sir Peter Brook. In an interview that this author conducted with Brook on August 24, 2008 he insisted that the actor should see the character as someone greater rather than smaller than himself. He believed that reducing the character to a definable element, especially early on in the rehearsal process, would limit possibilities for playing the role. Brook encourages his actors to stay open and to explore the depths of a character by seeing characters, such as Hamlet, Cleopatra and Hedda Gabler as greater than the actor him or herself. Thus, the actor is challenged to investigate the character more and more throughout the rehearsal process, rather than to simply and at once and for all reduce the character to something small, understandable and fixed.

While Strasberg embraced affective memory, Sanford Meisner, like Michael Chekhov, would reject it. Like Michael Chekhov, Meisner embraced imagination (if only as a marginal practice within his overall approach) as the preferred means of accomplishing what affective memory was designed to do.

### **Sanford Meisner (1905-1997)**

Meisner's theory of acting was based on the notion that the actor's intuition is the primary source for creativity. In "Just be Yourself" Louise M. Stinespring says: "Meisner rejected cold rationalism and the notion that character is fixed into the fiction of the script narrative." She quotes Meisner as saying: "My approach is based on bringing the actor back to his emotional impulses and to acting that is firmly rooted in the instinctive. It is based on the fact that all good acting comes from the heart, as it were, and there's no mentality in it"

(101). Thus, the major focus of Meisner's approach to training actors was based on encouraging behavior that was instinctive. Stinespring continues:

For Meisner, 'impulse' is synonymous with 'instinct,' in fact, it is the manifestation of instinct, the visible product we see that results from instinct. Spontaneous instinct bubbles up and drives human behavior. Hence, the 'emotional impulse,' not "emotional memory," informs his technique. Meisner asks: How can we develop the impulse and instinct that lies dormant in the novice actor? He understands that emotions would emerge from activities and our reactions to others. His technique for teaching acting is to remove emotion, psychology, or "character" from training. Instead he stresses impulse that will surface from the interchange of differences found in others. The repetition exercise was borne from Meisner's desire for the communal in acting and his emphasis on the spontaneity of the formative moment. (101-102)

In Sanford Meisner on Acting, Meisner defined the basis of acting as "the reality of doing" (16). He developed practical ways of training such as the "Word Repetition Game" which required his students to listen to one another and trust their impulses. In the Word Repetition Game an actor will say a phrase to another actor, such as "your hair is brown" and the actor being spoken to will repeat the line "my hair is brown." These lines will be repeated many times. There are several purposes of the exercise. For example, the actors must reduce the tendency to overact by simply listening to and repeating the phrase without speaking in a contrived or rehearsed manner. Also, the actors must focus on sources outside

of themselves, in this example, the other actor repeating the phrase, so the tendency toward self-consciousness is diminished as the actors fully commit themselves to listening and responding, responding and listening. Further, this exercise is a way of understanding what Meisner's basic principle of the "reality of doing" means (24). He bases his classroom exercises, as well as his general approach to acting, on the rule that actors should only do something on stage when "something happens" that makes them do it. In this way, it is an actor's scene partner that causes an actor to do something. Thus, behavior is caused by sources outside of the actor as the character rather than self-generated, an axiom that Gister also used. For the actor, being vulnerable, and listening and reacting to one's partner are of paramount importance in Meisner's work.

Meisner differed from Strasberg in that he rejected affective memory as a means toward the arousal of emotion. "Meisner, unlike Strasberg, downplays emotional or psychological approaches, seeing them as the most delicate and dangerous elements in the actor's craft. 'Emotion, without which a performance can be effective but yet not affective, is a most elusive element. It works best when it is permitted to come into play spontaneously and has a perverse inclination to slither away when consciously wooed' (Method Acting Reconsidered 100). While Meisner did not agree with Strasberg's approach to generating an emotional state-of-being appropriate to the given circumstances of a character through remembering past events, he did acknowledge that preparation was sometimes necessary. For example, if an actor is playing the role of Nina in Act IV of *The Sea Gull* and must enter in a highly aroused emotional state, Meisner acknowledged that some kind of preparation must be done by the actor in order to arouse the emotions. However, unlike Strasberg who

would suggest a memory exercise, Meisner did not teach a specific technique for achieving the emotional state. He left the way in which the emotional state might be aroused entirely up to the actor. However, he strongly advocated use of the imagination, rather than recollection, as a general rule for evoking the appropriate emotional state-of-being.

### **Paul Mann (1915-1985)**

There are many names associated with the Group Theatre and twentieth-century acting approaches that are synonymous with Gister's methodology. One of the lesser known figures, Paul Mann, was one of Gister's teachers. He is included here because he greatly influenced Gister. There is not a lot of biographical documentation about Mann and his acting theories. What serves as information comes from an interview Richard Schechner conducted with him and several interviews this author conducted with Gister. Unfortunately, the interview with Schechner reveals limited aspects of Mann's approach to actor training. The interview this author conducted with Gister and particularly the classroom work taught by Gister explains and examines Mann's chief contribution in great detail. The chief contribution Mann made to Gister was his theory of action. As will be explained in Chapter 5 there are several definitions of action in acting theory. Mann's definition is unique among them. Unfortunately, there is no documentation that defines, explains and/or shows how it works. Mann taught Gister his definition and the explanation of how it works. Gister, in turn, taught his students what he learned from Mann. This dissertation will be the first documentation that defines, explains, and examines Mann's definition of action, and shows how Gister taught it to be applied.

### **Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)**

Brecht was different from the other theorists examined in this chapter in that he was also a playwright. Brecht draws a clear distinction between himself and Stanislavski: “Stanislavski when directing is first of all an actor. When I direct I am first of all a playwright” (qtd. in Twentieth Century Actor Training 105). The fact that Brecht was “first” a playwright did not mean that he was not concerned about acting. However, he wrote plays in order to bring about change, which informed his acting theory. In “Brecht and Actor Training” Peter Thompson says that “Brecht’s approach to acting cannot properly be divorced from his campaign to change the world” (98)

Schechner says “Brecht did not want the actor to disappear into the role. He wanted the actor to engage the role actively, to enter into a dialectal relationship with the role. Brecht called this ‘Verfremdunseffekt,’ a word difficult to translate, but roughly meaning ‘alienation’ or ‘estrangement’ effect. It is best to think of the V-effekt as a way to drive a wedge between the actor, the character, the staging (including blocking, design, music, and other production elements) so that each is able to bounce off of, and comment upon, the others” (152-153). Commonly referred to as the “alienation effect,” it required the application of specific technique for its manifestation:

For the A-effect’s application [...] the stage and auditorium must be purged of everything ‘magical’ and that no ‘hypnotic tensions’ should be set up. This ruled out any attempt to make the stage convey the flavour of a particular place (a room at evening, a road in the autumn), or to create atmosphere by

relaxing the tempo of the conversation. The audience was not ‘worked up’ by a display of temperament or ‘swept away’ by acting with tautened muscles; in short, no attempt was made to put a trance and give it the illusion of watching an ordinary or unrehearsed event. (Brecht on Theatre 136)

This approach differs from realistic acting and the efforts of Stanislavski to create stage truth through producing the illusion (mostly through the acting) that the events on stage are really happening. It also differs from Michael Chekhov, who taught the actor to evoke very specific atmospheres appropriate to the given circumstances. For example, Chekhov suggests that places, such as churches, have atmospheres, and that the actor can imagine such atmospheres and act within them, allowing them to affect behavior. Thus, in contrast to Brecht above, Chekhov advocated that the actor “convey the flavour of a particular place,” and to do so through the active use of the imagination.

John Willett points out that in order to understand Brechtian acting it is important to recognize that Brecht desired that the audience should “adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach” to observing a theatrical event (Brecht on Theatre 136). In order to generate this “attitude” Brecht made use of the alienation effect, which Willett explains as “a *means* by which an effect of estrangement could be got. [...] To show everything in a fresh and unfamiliar light, so that the spectator is brought to look critically even at what he has so far taken for granted” (qtd. in Performance Studies 179). Principles that influenced Brecht’s use of the alienation effect can be observed in his recollection of Chinese performers:

The Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall [...]. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place. [...] The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has the touch of the amazing. Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic. (Brecht on Theatre 91-92)

Like Stanislavski, Brecht kept extensive journals and notes about his theories that he developed, not in a vacuum, but through the challenges of staging plays where his ideas would often collide. Pete Thompson points out in "Brecht and Actor Training" that "Brecht was a compulsive articulator. Much of what he wrote and subsequently published was a response to immediate circumstances. Given his taste for contradiction and his advocacy for dialectics, we should not be surprised by evident inconsistencies. There is no static, once-and-for-all manifesto. The measure of Brecht's truth is efficacy: what may be thought or half-thought expressed through what is done" (102).

Brecht warns that to produce the kind of theatrical experience that would bring about a detached viewing required that "the audience's tendency to plunge into such illusions has to be checked by specific artistic means" (Brecht on Theatre 136). Brecht was well aware that realistic acting had become the dominant style. He therefore searched for new ways of producing theatre that could bring about the results he desired. As his work was devoted to

social change his acting theory was centered on ways that could make socio-political statements be heard and felt, but especially understood and retained by his audiences.

Brecht recognized the power of the theatre to bring about social and political change and the reorganization of values. However, he saw limitations in realistic acting because the audience might get so emotionally embroiled in the inherent conflicts of the play that it would miss or fail to fully grasp the important meanings expressed. His solution was through techniques that would intervene in the emotional flow that realistic acting hopes to maintain. Thus, his acting techniques differ from Stanislavski's not because he felt that they were superior to helping the actor to create realistic characters, but because he saw limitation to using realistic acting in bringing about socio-political change.

It is useful for the theatre practitioner to consider that for Stanislavski action should flow from the character, while for Brecht action should flow from the social circumstance. However, Brecht saw value in aspects of Stanislavski's work, particularly the Method of Physical Actions, as did many theorists and practitioners that were also moving beyond realistic approaches to production. Among them was Jerzy Grotowski.

### **Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999)**

Jerzy Grotowski was a Polish director who founded the Laboratory Theatre. In his theatre he examined the relationship between ritual and the inner life of the performer or "doer." In "Grotowski's Vision of the Actor" Lisa Wolford says "The actor as envisioned in Grotowski's theatre was a holy figure, a type of 'secular saint' whose extraordinary

discipline and ability allowed him or her to cast aside daily life masks in order to accomplish an act of self penetration and disarmament” (197).

Central to his approach to directing was the use of montage, an approach to visual art and theatre that was central to Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein’s work. Generally, a montage is a collection of many short and varied images and other art forms, which are then brought together in a film, play or other art work in a way that creates a new art work that is “bigger” than any of its creative pieces. By using elements from music, visual art, literature and other sources, Grotowski created montage performances throughout the 1960’s.

Like Stanislavski, Grotowski’s approach to performance underwent many changes over time, the only constant was his inquiry into the actor’s creative process. Lisa Wolford notes that “Grotowski voiced a desire to demystify the creative process, seeking to define a methodology of performance training that would free the actor to accomplish his or her work without obstruction and also without waiting for random inspiration” (“Grotowski’s Vision of the Actor” 196). Informing his approach to the actor’s craft was his style of approaching performance that focused on the connectivity of actor with spectator. Fueling this approach was his recognition that new media, such as film, were beginning to intrude in theatrical processes. His project was to emphasize what makes theatre unique among media, what he called in Towards a Poor Theatre “the closeness of the living organism” (qtd. in Twentieth Century Actor Training 196.)

Grotowski determined that the actor should be central to the theatrical event. He downplayed the use of elements such as scenery and costume. Rather, the actor would find

ways to transform elemental objects. For example, through the actor's imagination a ceiling would become a sky, a chair would become a throne, and a table would become an interrogation room. With the responsibility of the theatrical event resting primarily on the actor's shoulders, the need for actor training increased. Welford points out that "performers were expected to be capable of extraordinary acts beyond the reach of the spectator." She quotes Grotowski as saying "If [the actor's] body restricts itself to demonstrating what it is—something that an average person can do—then it is not an obedient instrument capable of performing a spiritual act" (196-197).

Grotowski's actor training focused primarily on exercises for the actor's body. However, he sanctioned exercises only as a means toward creativity and revelatory acting warning "against a tendency to believe that physical training techniques have value in themselves, noting that it is tempting for actors to use exercises as a type of 'absolution' for not giving themselves fully to the context of the role" (194). As Grotowski sought means for the actor to reveal himself through performance, he discouraged use of methods that only lead to stereotyped acting. Rather, he embraced those techniques and approaches that would serve to deepen the actor's experience and means toward the expression of the self, denying the notion that "a 'method' associated with his work could be said to exist" (195).

In Grotowski's theatre the actors did not approach characterization in the traditions of Stanislavski or Michael Chekhov, for example. Rather, they would approach exercises and rehearsals as a means toward structuring a "testimony that drew on the deepest and most secret experiences of their own lives, articulated in such a way that this act of revelation could serve as a provocation for the spectators" (197). But Grotowski deeply respected

Stanislavski's reverence for the actor's daily training and discipline. He advocated that his own actors partake in daily rituals of training. Importantly, both Stanislavski and Grotowski determined that such daily training in, for example, voice, speech, and movement should be general in that it would provide the actor with a firm foundation for performance. Such training was not seen by either Stanislavski or Grotowski as techniques that taught the actor how to perform. Rather, the training prepared the actor for the physical, vocal and mental demands of performance.

It is worthwhile comparing those training approaches that serve the actor to get in shape for performance just as the athlete gets in shape for the sporting event with other modes of training that, once or twice done, can help to create permanent and powerful changes in the actor, as rituals sometimes can. Unlike push-ups, which must be done consistently to develop and then maintain strength, there are other approaches, such as the Linklater vocal progression, that when fulfilled creates permanent and powerful change. In Linklater training this change is not because the actor has been given something that must be continually practiced in order to be maintained. The change is due to the actor's reconnection to impulses and the natural voice the actor had as a child, but that has been suppressed through social conditioning resulting in deep tensions and inhibitions. The Linklater approach is much more akin to Grotowski's approach in that it is more than simply a collection of exercises that, if done, will completely transform the actor. Wolford explains that "Grotowski described his methodology of training as a *via negativa*, a process of elimination. In contrast to training programs that aim to give the actor a set of skills, the

objective of Grotowski's methodology was to take away from the actor all that obstructed him or her in regard to movement, breathing, and, most importantly, human contact" (200).

Grotowski used exercises from a variety of sources in creating a training that helped define his work. He borrowed techniques and exercises from Meyerhold's biomechanics, Noh theatre, and Delsarte. He used practices in Hatha Yoga to create a set of exercises referred to as "corporals," which combined yoga postures, such as the shoulder stand, with gymnastics, such as the somersault, in order to help the actor create spinal flexibility. He was particularly drawn to Stanislavski's later work and arguably his greatest achievement, the Method of Physical Actions.

Thomas Richards' explains in his illuminating book, At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions that Grotowski drew a distinction between physical actions and activities. Drinking a cup of tea, cleaning a pipe, writing a letter and entering through a door are not physical actions unless they are connected to a need or objective. To enter through a door in order to surprise someone, for example, makes the activity a physical action. It is perhaps no surprise that Grotowski, who placed great emphasis on the actor's body, would adopt the Method of Physical Actions into his training approaches. (Gister, too, would draw a distinction between his principle of action and activities, as will be shown).

Wolford, who trained with Grotowski in California and observed his work at the Italian Workcenter states that the single most important principle she learned from him was "the indispensable necessity for the actor to live in relation to something or someone outside of self" (206). The idea of relating "to something or someone outside of self" was very

important to Gister, as well, because in large part the principle of action that he inherited from Paul Mann was dependent on sources outside of the actor for its proper execution.

### **Earle R. Gister (1934-)**

Earle R. Gister was born in Racine, WI on March 30, 1934. He was the assistant head of the department of drama at Carnegie-Mellon, 1962-64 and the head of the drama program, 1965-75. He was the director of the Leonard Davis Center for Performing Arts, 1975-80 and the assistant dean of the Yale School of Drama, 1980-1996. Gister was also the first chairman of the first panel of the National Endowment for the Arts. He has been involved with actor training since the early 1960's. "Playbill," 120:5, 2004 highlights some of Gister's contributions to theatre and theatre training: "Co-founder of the League of Professional Theatre Training Programs, advisor to the National Endowment for the Arts, and co-chair of the training panel of the Theatre Communications Group, Gister has played a significant role in nurturing and development of most of the major theatre training programs in the country." His methodology is comprised of major principles drawn from many sources through more than forty years of involvement in the theatre as actor, director and educator.

Gister's methodology includes some techniques that can be traced to elements of the Stanislavski system, such as the *superobjective* and the *objective*. Other techniques, such as a principle of action that improves upon psychologically and physically based traditional notions, come directly from Paul Mann. Still other aspects of Gister's methodology, such as imagination rather than affective memory, and image-based principles of physical

transformation (characterization) can be traced to Michel Chekhov. Gister's emphasis on personalization (without giving specific direction on how to personalize) closely resembles Meisner's work as detailed in his book Sanford Meisner on Acting, as well as in Larry Silverstein's book The Sanford Meisner Approach. Further, Gister, like Meisner, refused to explain and teach *how* to personalize, and yet both insisted that personalization be part of the actor's preparation in whatever means the actor found to employ it. Finally, his advanced approach to training will utilize direct-address, stereotypes and other ideas often associated with Brecht.

Through his classes at the Yale School of Drama Gister offered other unique and important ideas that can contribute greatly to the literature on acting theory. Not only has he adopted the best of some theories of acting while inventing others, but he has structured them all into a very clear, concise and effective methodology that can be recognized by his students as distinctly his own. Evidence of the effectiveness of Gister's methodology can be seen in the acting of some of his former pupils, now famous, such as those listed in "Playbill" at Gister's 2005 production of *The Sea Gull*: Jane Atkinson, Rene Auberjonois, Rene Augesen, Dylan Baker, Angela Bassett, Julie Boyd, Kate Burton, Patricia Clarkson, Ted Danson, Rick Dutton, Robert Foxworth, Malcolm Gets, Paul Giamatti, Jay Goede, Susan Knight, Sanaa Lathan, Judith Light, Frances McDormand, Chris Noth, Michael Potts, Laila Robbins, Reg Rogers, Liev Schreiber, Richard Schiff, Michele Shay, Steven Skybell, John

Turturro, Michael Tucker and Courtney Vance.<sup>1</sup> A complete list of Gister's former students at the Yale School of Drama from 1979 through 1996 is included as an appendix.

Although those trained by Gister understand and use his approach, written documentation of his work does not exist in any published form. This dissertation provides an accurate and detailed publication of Gister's methodology as this author observed, experienced and has come to understand it, so that actors, directors and teachers have access to his methodology for their work as artists and educators.

### **Overview of the Methodology**

This dissertation defines and explains each of the guiding principals that provide the structure for Gister's methodology, as they were taught by Gister at the Yale School of Drama, 1994-96 and through workshops led by Gister in 1992, 93 and 94 at the University of Texas at Dallas. It shows how these principles work individually and collectively. Gister was rigorous about teaching each and saw to it that the student applied them. Often he would ignore certain "mistakes" a student-actor would make in class, such as not listening to one's scene partner, because his purpose in a given exercise would be for the student to grasp a particular principle, such as playing *action*.

The methodology is complicated and detailed, as are the plays. In the early part of the first semester, Gister would often teach it as a series of steps that could be learned in sequence. For example, the map scene between Yelena and Astrov in *Uncle Vanya* was one of many, many scenes in which Gister helped the student approach the work in a simple way

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<sup>1</sup> Playbill 120:5 (2004)

initially in order to attain complexity later. It was observed in class that on the one hand it is clearly a scene of seduction; on the other hand it can be complicated and convoluted by Astrov's long monologue about the disappearance of trees and the natural environment as depicted in the maps he has painted.

Astrov's vocation is medicine, but his hobby is making maps that reveal his love of nature and his concern with damage that is being done to the environment through industrialization. In order to reach the depths of this scene in a believable and accurate way, Gister started by having the student playing Astrov choose and play simple, clear actions "on" the student playing Yelena, such as *to make her feel beautiful*. Once the student was capable of doing this he would then work with him in adding layers of secondary actions during the long monologue section of the scene; a monologue that could mistakenly be interpreted by a beginning student as simply *a character describing a map*. One action choice could be played on the map itself making the situation of the disappearance of trees pitiful, indirectly making Yelena feel sympathetic.

Gister emphasized in his first lecture that he did not have a specific lesson plan for class, but taught out of each scene that students worked on. He would use the problems and issues that occurred as opportunities for correcting faulty and bad acting habits through application of certain aspects of the methodology, thus providing great experiences for student learning (8 September 1995). As students became more familiar and competent with Gister's approach to acting, it became increasingly clear to them that if a scene was not working, inevitably one (or both students) was neglecting an aspect of the methodology.

It was observed in class that Gister would use times of student ineffectiveness (and there were countless) as jumping-off points for discussion. Gister selected his students in large part based on their openness to learn. None of the students had ever been exposed to his methodology before, and all had auditioned to get into the program. They were all more or less at the same level of knowledge. If one student was having difficulty grasping, for example, the distinction between self and character, this became a learning point for the whole class. Students were always absorbed in the unfolding of the methodology through the class-work and Gister's exacting style of teaching. He would often spend an hour or more on just several lines of text until a student applied the methodology fully and completely from moment to moment to Gister's satisfaction.

Gister's pointed out that his goal in the work was for all principles of the methodology to eventually be operating in the student's artistry to the point where they were expressed as an indissoluble whole in terms of audience perception; a whole conveyed through the student (become professional actor) playing a believable character in performance. And while Gister and those trained by him might distinguish certain aspects of the methodology "working" during a given performance, by and large the audience would not. The result would be a credible performance consistent with the production aesthetic.

### **Structure of the Program**

In the first year of the three year program Gister introduced and taught his acting methodology. The methodology rested on a foundation of principles that would be explained to the student in the first class. He would then coach those students for the entire year in applying the principles to scenes from plays from modern drama, such as Chekhov's *Ivanov*,

Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, and Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*. As Gister explained on the first day of class, while the methodology could be explained intellectually in a couple of hours, it would take months of work through rigorous application to scene study in order for the student to grasp the principles in a visceral, pragmatic and useful way, demonstrating competency in acting.

Structurally, the training program at the Yale School of Drama was comprised of three years of instruction and performance: Acting I, II and III. In brief, the student was required to take a progression of courses in acting, voice, speech, singing, dance and movement, as well as other disciplines, such as fencing and stage combat designed to prepare the student for a career in the theatre. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide detailed descriptions about the voice, singing, movement and performance components of the training.

As Gister was the head of the acting program, the non-acting courses he implemented were chosen in part because they supported the acting classes, specifically *his* approach to acting classes. For example, the approach to voice training was based on the work of Kristin Linklater, a master teacher of international renown and author of the books, Freeing The Natural Voice and Freeing Shakespeare's Voice. Gister saw connections between Linklater's voice training and his own work. The voice teacher was often observed attending Gister's acting classes, making notes that she would then refer to in voice sessions designed to integrate vocal training with the methodology. (At that time this author did not see the connections as vividly as now, but has since gone through the teacher-training program with Kristin Linklater and become designated as a Linklater voice teacher). In short, Linklater's approach helps the actor to release the self, in all its aspects, emotionally, physically,

intellectually, spiritually, etc. through the voice, rather than attempting, for example, to help an actor to sound “pretty.” This concept fits neatly with Gister’s, which advocates, among other things, actors (as characters) affecting one another through release of feelings and emotion. At times in this dissertation, references will be made to Linklater’s work in order to help elucidate certain aspects of the application of Gister’s methodology.

### **First Year**

In Acting I Gister would rigorously teach his methodology. He used scenes from published plays as the format for applying and understanding his methodology, rather than the improvised scenes which are often a part of beginner training in many schools. He required the student to choose scenes from three playwrights in particular: Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg. For Gister, many of the elements inherent in their writing provided enormous dramatic opportunities for demonstrating how the methodology can be applied and how effective it can be in addressing and overcoming challenges. Further, Gister felt that these playwrights were so influential that much of the dramatic literature the student would encounter during the course of his career would be influenced by them.

### **Second Year**

In the second year of the training program the student would work on Shakespeare. Gister did not teach Acting II. In an interview conducted with him in his office at the Yale School of Drama in fall, 1995 he said that he did not teach Shakespeare because heightened poetic language was difficult for him to work with. Gister’s larynx had been removed because of cancer, so he spoke by holding an electrolarynx (a mechanical larynx) to his throat. Importantly, he felt that it would have been better for the student to start with Shakespeare in the first year. Thus, a progression of training would follow an historic

sequence of dramatic literature, mirroring the modification process that acting theory has undergone in order to meet the demands of the ever-changing aesthetics of the writing. However, as he was unable to effectively teach heightened poetic dramatic language to his own standards of excellence due to his inability to adequately speak the language, the first year started with playwrights of the Modern Period followed by Shakespeare in the second year.

It should be noted that while Gister may have struggled teaching Shakespeare because of his surgery, once one's ear was tuned to his use of an electrolarynx his speech was clearly understandable. What would have been lost if Gister attempted to speak verse would be the sounds, rhythms, and flavoring of heightened speech. (The educator who plans on developing a curriculum using Gister's methodology should reflect on the importance of using poetic language in pedagogy. Gister recognized the significance of learning to act Shakespeare yet due to his speech disability he would not teach it. The educator might consider developing an acting class that deals with those very elements that Gister could not teach in heightened language. For it was out of respect for those elements that Gister would not teach them.) Gister clearly saw his limitations and therefore only taught modern and contemporary drama where it can be argued, (as Gister often did,) that the use of language, though important, is not as crucial for performance as elements such as character and subtext. It is worth knowing for pedagogical purposes that he could have designed the program for the first year student to start with Shakespeare. However, Gister thought it best that they learn his methodology directly from him in their first encounter with it and not through secondary sources. Thus, Gister sacrificed a better order of playwrights for a clearer and more direct understanding and application of his methodology. Although another faculty

member taught the second year, it was under close supervision of Gister, as his methodology is equally applicable to the classic as the modern period, and Gister wanted continuity in his approach from the beginning of the first year to the end of the third.

### **Third Year**

In the third year of the training Gister taught what he called “Three Levels of Theatrical Reality.” The work provided an extraordinarily demanding exercise for the student that dealt with the very essence of transformation from actor to character to stereotype. The plays used were from what Gister designated as the Contemporary Theatre. Students would select scenes from Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, David Mamet, Sam Shepard, Eric Overmeyer and Suzan-Lori Parks. (Gister said in an interview at his home on October 6, 2005 that he later added Eugene Ionesco to the mix of playwrights, although recorded transcripts of his third year classes at the Yale School of Drama from 1994-1996 reveal that he was opposed to using Ionesco’s plays, as he felt at that time that the stereotypes were not clearly delineated (2 September 1994). However, it might be useful for the educator to ruminate on the significance of Ionesco being added to the catalogue of contemporary playwrights so that the pedagogical significance of using his plays might be considered. For example, consider the challenges of playing any of the three stereotype characters: The Professor, the Pupil and the Maid in *The Lesson* or the Old Man and the Old Woman in *The Chairs*. After reading Chapter 7, Three Levels of Theatrical Reality the reader may come to understand why Gister reconsidered Ionesco and added his plays to his catalogue.

## The Questions

Gister's methodology begins with the actor and the play. In addition to a thorough analysis of the play through pragmatic concepts, such as delineating how a given character *functions* in order to realize the play's meaning, his work calls for a rigorous application of a series of questions designed to help the actor transform self into character and to provide a structure that helps the actor *as the character* take the journey from the beginning to the end of the play. The following questions illustrate the way in which Gister's methodology provides structure for the actor's inquiry into character. They are the exact questions that Gister used in his work:

- *Who am I?*
- *Where am I?*
- *When am I there?*
- *What do I want?*
- *How do I go about getting what I want?*
- *What do I do after I get or fail to get what I want?*

Each of the above questions was clearly defined by Gister, who spent months teaching the actor how to apply them. For example, the question *Who am I?* deals with the process of transformation from actor into character and has its own underlying principles and "laws" that support it, helping to guide the actor toward answering the question which leads to his transformation into the character. As will be shown, Gister required the actor to examine the question not just through widely known traditional approaches, such as defining the character's age, social standing and relationships, but also through analyzing the text to discover what the character likes and dislikes, loves and hates. However, Gister taught that

his approach to *Who am I?* is not limited to a psychologically based analysis of a character's passions, such as discerning what the character's likes and dislikes might imply. It is also based on status within the given social circumstances of the play, such as mistress of the house, Varya in *The Cherry Orchard*, whose status is informed by the immediate family and friends in and around the estate. The importance of status is not limited to modern plays, consider the youngest daughter, such as Cordelia in *King Lear*, whose character is informed by the Chain of Being through which the Elizabethans, and therefore Shakespeare, viewed their world.

Additionally, Gister offered an approach to training actors for contemporary writing that he called "Three Levels of Theatrical Reality." This work provided the basis for his third and final workshop at UTD in 1993 and was applied to a Beckett production with very positive results. "Three Levels of Theatrical Reality" was the foundation for the third-year graduate acting students at the Yale School of Drama. In an interview with this author at Gister's home on October 6, 2005 he explained that he invented Three Levels of Theatrical Reality over the course of a summer in order to help prepare the actor for the demands of contemporary writing and includes some of his richest ideas.

Gister revealed in that interview that a faculty member who had been teaching the third-year students resigned shortly before the start of school. Gister had to replace the teacher and invented "Three Levels of Theatrical Reality" out of his understanding of the actor's ever-changing needs to meet the demands of contemporary playwriting. This approach builds on his basic approach to acting and adds three components: the actor transforming into stereotype, the actor adopting the playwright's socio-political point of

view, and the actor moving among self (actor), character and stereotype during the course of a given scene.

It is important for the reader to recognize that Gister stressed that the methodology can be applied to plays from the Greek through the modern periods. For example, the application of the questions can help the actor to investigate, define and make choices on behalf of Elizabethan as well as Chekhovian characters, and Gister would often make reference and draw parallels and connections between the two in class.

What follows is an examination of the fundamental principles of the methodology, as this author observed and experienced Gister teach them. While some chapters deal specifically with one element, often other elements will be included, as it becomes difficult to separate them because of their interdependency. Gister saw all elements as necessary and therefore, although he might have worked with one specific principle over a class period, the principle itself was informed by addressing the other principles. For example, *actions* a student might choose on behalf of the character would be considered in light of who and where the character is. Inevitably, references will be made to the other principles within those chapters that generally focus on a specific principle. Included in this dissertation is Gister's application of his own methodology in teaching. Thus, it can serve the educator in developing a pedagogy that might be useful for a program that progresses from freshman through senior year in high school, a four-year undergraduate program and a first-through third-year MFA program.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**CHARACTER: *WHO AM I?***  
**FIRST-YEAR METHODS**

There are six major questions that Gister required the student to apply to the analysis of a role. All six questions help the actor to understand the play and transform into the character. As listed in the previous chapter, the six questions are:

- *Who am I?*
- *Where am I?*
- *When am I there?*
- *What do I want?*
- *How do I go about getting what I want?*
- *What do I do after I get or fail to get what I want?*

This chapter explains how Gister organized the first-year class, because the organization is directly related to learning how to apply the above questions in order to understand the methodology. It then goes on to introduce how the question *Who am I?* is directly applied to creating character, showing the main ideas that support that application. Other chapters will build upon the ideas presented in this chapter showing in detail how the process of exploring and applying the question *Who am I?* informs the process of exploring and applying the other questions and, importantly, the reverse. Further, the dissertation will expound on the question *Who am I?* when it directly relates to arriving at answers to the

other questions, as it so often does. Finally, the answers to the question *Who am I?* will expand to include two-dimensional characters (or stereotypes) in the final chapter.

It should be noted that the questions above were not always applied in the order they are listed, as answering some questions depends upon answering others. For example, the question *How do I go about getting what I want?* concerns Gister's unique definition of action, and is dependent on the answer to the question *What do I want?*, which concerns the *objective*, and, in turn, is dependent on the *superobjective*. While the questions above are listed in the "proper" order, there are cases where strict adherence to this order may be unnecessary or impractical. For example, in plays that are non-linear or where time is ambiguous, such as in *Waiting for Godot*, the answer to the question *When am I there?* is less meaningful than answers to the other questions. The specific times (if they can be found in the play) are arguably irrelevant to the characters.

In the very first class Gister laid the groundwork for how applying the questions would unfold. Structurally the class would involve the students working on two-character scenes, initially from the plays of Chekhov. Gister explained that Chekhov was an ideal playwright to begin with because of the challenges his plays provide for applying the methodology. He felt that Chekhov was a humanistic playwright; his characters had basic needs and aspirations that most people could identify with. For example, the desire for love and happiness, such as in the relationship between Lopahin and Varya in *The Cherry Orchard* are common themes in all of Chekhov's plays. Also the plays have many short and varied two-character scenes from which the students could choose, providing opportunities for exploring different types of characters and subjects. As the class spent a great deal of time using scenes from the plays of Chekhov, the examples will be drawn from those plays.

Once students began to grasp Chekhovian characters and effectively play the scenes they could advance to the plays of Henrik Ibsen, whose scenes were much longer and generally considered more difficult, with socio-political subject matter that informed the characters' points of view and attitudes. For example, Torvald has very specific attitudes about women that Nora would eventually rebel against in *A Doll House*. Finally, to complete the first year the students would select scenes from August Strindberg, whose plays included stereotypes and evil characters, such as the Mummy and the Old Man in *The Ghost Sonata*, as well as a distinct atmosphere. The term "atmosphere" was used in To the Actor by Michael Chekhov to indicate the "soul" of a play and can refer to a particular place, such as a graveyard; a time, such as midnight; and a season, such as fall (48). Gister suggested that some Strindberg two-character scenes could be staged as if there was a third presence in the room; a third character, even though there was not one, thus providing another dimension in which to exercise the methodology (27 September 1995). At the UTD workshop in 1993, Gister showed that scenes in *A Dream Play* could be staged as if the characters were actually trapped in another character's dream, sensing the dreamer's presence. Using the methodology to explore and stage such challenging scenes could help the students to learn it better through wider application.

Students spent many weeks working with Chekhov scenes before advancing to Ibsen, then Strindberg. Gister would continually remind them that the work was not about how to act these playwrights. Rather, the playwrights were chosen because they provided elements that were found in many plays of the modern period. Therefore, they would provide important challenges for teaching the methodology, demonstrating its effectiveness through exercising and learning the principles in order to prepare the student for a career in the

professional theatre. The final chapter of this dissertation, which explains and examines his advanced work, will of necessity deal with several other playwrights relevant to that particular approach.

Primarily, the point of the progression of work was to ensure that all the major principles were exercised, the questions applied over and over and choices made and acted to the point whereupon students would develop a visceral understanding of the methodology. Gister compared the actor-training he offered to athletic training (September, 1995). He believed that great athletes would train their bodies to the point that when they performed (played) they would know what to do without reflection. Gister saw a very strong connection between athletic training and his own work (as well as the work of voice and movement teachers) with actors. He prepared the students' bodies and minds for the demands of theatre. He trained them to apply the methodology consciously in rehearsal and encouraged them to allow the discoveries and choices they made to operate in performance without reflection, much like an athlete might prepare for a contest, and then play to the fullest ability without stopping to think.

### **Scenes with Monologues**

Gister chose scenes rather than monologues for the context of the work, because they exemplified the most common structure the actor would work in. While some schools of drama specifically require students to work on monologues as a component of an acting class, Gister did not. However, sometimes plays would contain monologues that would occur just prior to or after many of the two-character scenes that were used in class. At such times, the monologues would be included in the work. An example is Sonya's monologue just prior to Yelena's entrance in Act II of *Uncle Vanya*. When this happened Gister would

work in much the same way applying his methodology as he would during the two-character scene. However, he might go into much greater detailed work with images and other sources. In this way, students would learn very clear and specific skills and techniques for how to perform monologues. Such knowledge would be useful not only in the rehearsal and performance of a play, but in preparing for auditions that required monologues.

### **Transformation**

Initially, Gister asked that the students choose characters that were close to themselves in some ways. For example, the character of Treplev in *The Sea Gull* would be a good choice early on for a male student. The character was close in age to many of the male graduate students at the school. Treplev is also a struggling artist (playwright) who is passionate about his work, but equally passionate (to his peril) about his girlfriend and, arguably, his muse, Nina. Likewise, for female students, Nina would be a good choice early on. She is a young woman who wants to be a professional actor, perhaps more than anything else in life. Such choices on the part of the students would allow them to gradually begin to explore characters that they could directly relate to before approaching characters less like themselves in age, appearance and social standing. As time went on, Gister would ask the students to choose those characters less and less like themselves, such as Professor Arnold Rubek and his wife Maja in Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*, demanding greater degrees of transformation. By the third year, students would do advanced work with characters and stereotypes, explained and examined in the chapter Three Levels of Theatrical Reality. Unlike the other principles, creating character through addressing the question *Who am I?* will be a point of reference throughout the dissertation.

### ***Who am I?***

Gister required the students to begin the process of transformation through the question *Who am I?* This question directly refers to the identity of the character. While the actor might quickly discover, choose and define answers to all of the other questions in the methodology, Gister urged the actor to continue to apply the question *Who am I?* as an ongoing inquiry from the very first reading to the final performance of a given play. But the question *Who am I?* could have multiple answers, depending on the domain in which it is asked, for example, referring to nationality or religion. Exploring the question can help the actor to define certain aspects of the character in the very first read-through of the play: age, relationships with parents and siblings, status within a community or socio-political attitudes and views (especially with Ibsen's characters). However, other aspects, such as: shyness, sarcastic attitude, deep-seated anger, rhythm of walking, religious affiliation and spiritual awareness (especially with Strindberg's characters) may not be discovered until the actor is in rehearsal speaking the lines and moving through the blocking. Gister predicted that the actor would continue to make discoveries about the character, not just through reflective thinking off-stage, but in the actual work of rehearsal and performance (9 September 1995).

While the rehearsal process is a great opportunity for the actor to make important discoveries about the character, it should not end there. Often actors make interesting and important discoveries about the character they are playing in the performance run. Sometimes the fact that actors are being observed by an audience can shed light on aspects of characterization that were missed in rehearsal and early readings. For example, it often happens in live performance that at a certain moment an audience will respond to some event, action or expression of character in a way that was not anticipated in rehearsal. This

response will cause the actor to see that moment, and perhaps his entire character, in a new and meaningful way. This author's personal favorite example of this is when an audience laughs at a simple character trait that the actor didn't know he was exhibiting or incident that he never thought funny in readings and rehearsals; thus giving the moment new meaning. The pitfall to such an experience is that on the next evening's performance the actor might deliberately overact that particular moment anticipating that the audience will respond, only to notice that it does not.

### **Character Acting Versus Personality Acting**

For Gister's methodology, the question *Who am I?* should not be confused with a search for one's true identity, self-analysis, or soul-searching, although during the three-year training period the students would make personal discoveries about themselves. Applying the question launches an investigation into the character in the play as someone distinct from the actor. For Gister, it was the playing of character not the displaying of personal identity that was one of the most important virtues in the craft of acting.

An essential distinction in understanding Gister's approach to character is that he taught character acting not personality acting. Generally, personality acting refers to an actor making a given role more about himself than the character as written. For example, an actor playing the character Uncle Vanya in the play of the same name may determine that he should not aggressively pursue the character Yelena (with whom he is in love) because it makes him (the actor) look desperate, and thus, bad. In this case the actor has made the role about himself and is concerned that he might look bad on stage. However, this choice flies in the face of the play as written because it is in keeping with Vanya's character that he would pursue Yelena, and to do so in a desperate way is appropriate to his character and the given

circumstances. In fact, he steals Astrov's morphine in Act III in order to commit suicide in large part out of desperation, because Yelena has rejected him. The actor, refusing to be seen as desperate, has failed to distinguish himself from the role if it is because he thinks the audience will identify him (the actor) with desperation and he does not wish to be associated with it. However, it might be worth considering why Gister was so adamantly opposed to personality acting when the first playwright he chose offers characters that many people can identify with in some way. Gister's insistence on character acting and criticism of personality acting is not unique. In The End of Acting, Richard Hornby notes that Stanislavski strongly believed in character acting while denouncing personality acting:

Stanislavski maintained that all good acting was character acting. Although the Actors Studio made Stanislavski their idol, when they promulgated the myth of "playing yourself," with real, personal emotion they were actually going against one of his basic principles.[...] Based on his own experiences, and his loathing of the star system, which exploited actors' personal attributes, Stanislavski repeatedly condemned personality acting in his writings. (85)

Gister asserted that in large part stage fright had to do with an actor making the role about himself rather than the character. Said another way, the actor is simply being "himself" rather than playing the character. In being himself in front of an audience, self-consciousness can emerge, and along with it anxiety and tension, which can distract the actor from playing the role. Sir John Gielgud relates his accomplishment as an actor to the importance of discovering the character:

Of course, all acting should be character acting, but in those days I did not realize this....My own personality kept interfering, and I began to consider

how I was looking, whether my walk was bad, how I was standing; my attention was continually distracted and I could not keep inside the character I was trying to represent. In Trofimov [in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, with the Russian director Theodore Komisarjevsky] for the first time I looked in the glass and thought, "I know how this man would speak and move and behave," and to my great surprise I found that I was able to keep that picture in my mind throughout the action, without my imagination deserting me for a moment, and to lose myself completely as my appearance and the circumstances of the play seemed to demand. (qtd. in Hornby 86)

Early on in the first year of training Gister was fond of reminding students that a play is not about them personally as individuals nor is it about their specific lives and circumstances, to which he would humorously add that it would be embarrassing if it were. He would stress that he did not care about the actor's personal life as far as the craft of acting was concerned. This meant that, while he did care about the well-being of the student, he was not interested in the student's "real personality" in performance. This did not mean, however, that plays do not seek to show circumstances that people can identify with and therefore gain new insight into their own lives. For Gister, though, everything that the actor does should be in service of the play, and therefore dictated by the needs of his character. Hence, all of the major questions in Gister's methodology relate to character-acting and serving the needs of the play as it is written.

## The Playwright

It was not just Gister who held the playwright and the play with reverence. This author attended the Design for Directors class at the Yale School of Drama taught by the internationally known designer and teacher, Ming Cho Lee. In class Lee made it clear that his work was in service of the play and that the school had a long tradition of playwriting and honoring the playwright's work (September, 1995).

While it is crucial that the actor distinguish himself from the character and makes choices relevant to the character, the events and the given circumstances, this does not mean that the actor should not draw reasonable conclusions about the character where there is ambiguity. For example, an actor playing the role of Natasha in *The Three Sisters* would do well to note that at no time in the play is any reference made to her having a family or friends. This fact is an anomaly in the play because the play itself is in large part about family. Consider the three sisters, their brother Andre, their home, servants, friends and the continual reference to their deceased parents. The very first line of the play refers to the father who died. It is crucial for the actor playing Natasha to recognize that Chekhov never mentions *her* familial relations while references to family regarding the other characters abound. Recognizing the fact that there is no mention of a family for Natasha, the actor might conclude that it is because she has no family. Further, the lack of a family is what drives her to acquire one. This sets up the entire plot of the play as she slowly takes over the entire house, dispossessing the sisters of their friends and home. Interestingly, it is she who is in the house at the end while the sisters are outside; their destinies uncertain. For Natasha, the play ends with her possessing a home, two children, a husband, and, perhaps, a lover in Protopopov. The actor playing Natasha can use the fact that Chekhov does not mention her

family to make a strong character choice in determining that she does not have one and, therefore, should get one. This choice directly addresses the question *Who am I?* and generates the impetus for all that follows.

### **The Imagination**

Another essential idea for Gister was that the actor address the question *Who am I?* through an active use of the imagination. He was very keen on the imagination as the most important tool that the actor possesses for entering into the circumstances of the play and life of the character. He urged the student to spend at least ten minutes per day doing imagination exercises, stating that the imagination was a muscle like any other, and it needed to be exercised in order to be developed (8 September 1995). He offered suggestions for doing the exercises, but did not require that they be done in any specific way. For example, the student could imagine himself at the beach lying on a blanket. The warmth of the sand can be felt through the blanket. The sun is shining on the face and a gentle warm breeze caressing the skin can be felt. The salt water in the air can be tasted and smelled. Seagulls can be heard along with the crashing of waves against a jetty somewhere to the student's right, and so on. This should not be confused with sense-memory work, where an incident from an actor's life is recalled in as many ways and details as possible. The point of sense memory is to recollect an experience, such as the loss of one's father, because the feelings engendered in the experience are similar to the feelings the character is experiencing, though the circumstances may be quite different.

Gister's imagination work was not unlike a runner doing sprints or a pianist playing scales. The exercise was prescribed because it helped strengthen the instrument with which the actor would do most of his preparation time and time again in creating a character and

entering into their imaginary life. For example, in Act III of *Uncle Vanya*, consider Sonya's monologue and all that it refers to and implies:

And he really said nothing! His heart and soul are still hidden from me, and yet for some reason I'm strangely happy. Why? (Laughing with pleasure). I told him that he was noble and beautiful and that his voice was tender. Was that wrong? I can still feel his voice throbbing in the air as it caresses me. (Wringing her hands). Oh, how awful it is that I am not beautiful. I know it, I know. Last Sunday, as people were coming out of the church, I heard them talking about me, and one woman said: "She is so good and generous, what a pity she is not beautiful." Not beautiful... (198)

For the actor playing Sonya, use of the imagination is very important in performing the monologue. In a September 1995 class, Gister worked with a student on this monologue. The monologue is spoken after Astrov, with whom Sonya is in love, leaves the room. Gister would start by asking the actor to create sources for the scene. Sources for the scene would include an image of Astrov, the sound of his voice, the place where he sat, an image of Sonya, perhaps in a mirror, images of the women commenting about her and so on.

### **Sources**

Another essential idea for Gister was the term source and what it meant. Its meaning is tied to characters, ideas and things that are referred to by another character. For example, a source can be a reference made in a monologue to someone with whom a character is in love. Gister would require the actor to not just say the words, for example "I told him that he was noble and beautiful and that his voice was tender." He would ask the actor to create an image of the character to whom she was referring and see and hear him while she said the words.

He was very practical in suggesting that the image be imagined in physical space, somewhere specific on the stage, rather than inside the actor's brain, so that it might be clearer to the audience. He suggested that the actor pick an image that would actually affect her. For example, Sonya is attracted to and in love with Astrov. In this case Gister would suggest that the actor pick an image that would affect her in a way appropriate to how Sonya is affected by Astrov. He also suggested that the actor change the images in some way after a week of working with them. He said that the same images would become stale and lose efficacy unless they were somehow modified.

In much the same way that Michael Chekhov speaks of atmosphere, Astrov's presence is still felt in the room for Sonya; it is as if his aura hangs in the air. While the room itself has not changed in terms of the furniture and props, Astrov's absence changes the overall feel of the room for Sonya. By providing a catalogue of sources that the actor as Sonya could refer to and use, such as an image of Astrov, their presence is made real for the audience through the actor playing Sonya directly referring to them. However, Gister wanted the actor playing Sonya to really see, feel, and hear these sources and not pretend to. Gister might start by having the student see the chair that Astrov sat in. He would have her cross over and touch the chair and see an image of Astrov sitting in the chair. He would require the actor to see the image as clearly and exactly as possible. He would have her make specific choices regarding the questions *What do I want?* and *How do I go about getting what I want?* as the choices should relate directly to the first question, *Who am I?*

It should be noted that the preceding instructions for picking the image of the character of Astrov should be limited to scene work in class when no specific actor has been cast as Astrov. For example, the above monologue might be included as the beginning of the

scene between Yelena and Sonya. In this case, there is no one playing Astrov because it is just a scene-exercise in class between two students playing Yelena and Sonya. Therefore, the student playing Sonya can use any image for Astrov that works. If an actor has actually been cast in the role of Sonya she should then use an image of the face of the actor cast as Astrov as an image when he is not actually present in the scene. Gister cautioned actors against using an image of someone other than the actor who is cast in the role opposite them for scenes that made references to that character, but for which he was not present. For example, if the actress playing Sonya in an actual play used a different image for the character playing Astrov than the one of the actor who was cast in the role, Gister felt that this could distance her from the actor playing Astrov in the scene. Such distancing can, among other things, have a detrimental effect on her level of vulnerability to the other actor. It can also be detrimental to the play because it is very clear that Sonya is deeply in love with Astrov throughout the entire play, although he is not in love with her. It is appropriate and necessary that Sonya appear vulnerable to Astrov. Her vulnerability is what sets up the confrontation between her and Yelena in Act II and it is a source of tension between Yelena and Sonya's love of Astrov. Hence, this provides an example of how answering the question *Who am I?* can help to answer the question *What do I want?* A very good answer to the question *What do I want?* for Sonya would be *to get Astrov to sweep me off my feet*. This clearly relates to who she is in terms of what she is passionate about. Although he never does sweep her off of her feet and the actor who reads the play knows this information, the character Sonya does not. It should be noted that the final outcome of a play should not necessarily dictate an answer to the question *What do I want?* because often characters do not get what they want.

Often it happens that an actor will be cast in a role where the character's attraction is not felt by the other actor. Perhaps in *Uncle Vanya* the actor playing Yelena, will not find the actor playing Astrov attractive at all. Gister's advice was for the actor in this situation was to try to find *something* attractive about the actor. He felt that if the actor playing Yelena used an image of another man as a substitute in order to experience the level of attraction she knows to be appropriate for her character, it would distance her from direct communication with the other actor. He therefore discouraged any forms of substitutions, as well as sense and affective memory (that Stanislavski used and then abandoned, but Strasburg used and then embraced.) Conversely, an actor cast in the role of Irina in *The Three Sisters* is supposed to find the character Tusenbach, who is in love with her, unattractive—even ugly. It is quite possible that the actor playing Irina might find the actor playing Tusenbach attractive. In this case, Gister's advice is the opposite of the one given for the actor playing Yelena: find *something* unattractive.

There are many times when a character refers to things, rather than other characters. Often these things have not been included in the set design and, therefore, must be imagined. The lake that several characters refer to in Act I of *The Sea Gull* is a good example, as are the birch trees that Tusenbach refers to in Act IV of *The Three Sisters*. The moon in *Romeo and Juliet* is important enough to almost be considered a third character in the famous balcony scene. Gister insisted that the student have very clear and specific images for those things that the character refers to in the play. He submitted that if the actor truly saw the images in his or her imagination, the audience would begin to imagine them as well, thereby deepening the experience of the moment in the play.

There are perhaps more theories about character than any other subject in acting theory. After all, characters are what plays are about. There are lengthy instructions on using image-based methods of transformation, such as found in the work of Michael Chekhov, and there are short rules of thumb for playing character, which can be drawn from nearly any acting text. For example, it is common in acting classes to instruct an actor to visit a museum and look at paintings from the period in which he is playing a character, find a portrait that is a reasonable representation of the character he is playing, and begin to “embody” the image in the portrait. Other ways of working with image-based approaches include using stereotypes of all kinds. For example, using an image of a romantic lover, such as Charles Boyer, could be a source for the actor transforming into character. It is also common to caution the actor with the rule that he should never negatively judge his character. Gister asserted that if actor judges their characters in a negative way, it could distance them from emotionally identifying with the role. Another rule of thumb for Gister was that he would correct the student in playing a specific character if the student spoke of the character in terms of “he” or “she.” He wanted the student to say “I” while still maintaining the distinction between actor and character.

### **The Play**

Gister wanted the actor to begin the work of transformation into character first by carefully reading and re-reading the play. He wanted the student to understand the play, including all of its characters, before analyzing the character to be played. By understanding the play the student could better address the question *Who am I?* For example, if a student was playing the character Irina in *The Three Sisters*, Gister wanted the actor to be very specific about her age and her relationships to the other characters in the play. Her specific

age is occasionally mentioned, but the play takes place over a three-and-a-half-year period. Therefore, her age changes, though there is no reliable reference to her age in every scene in which she appears. It must be deduced or estimated through investigating the given circumstances and relationships with her family. Gister said that when considering her relationships it was very important for her to define what her siblings Masha, Olga, and Andre mean to her. Gister would advocate asking, for example, *What is my relationship with Olga and how is that different from my relationships with Masha and Andre?* Determining these relationships would affect the way in which the actor playing Irina would behave in scenes with them. For example, their parents are dead and Olga is the oldest sister and Andre is the only brother. Through a careful analysis the actor playing Irina may discern that she is the youngest sibling and that Olga is a surrogate mother for her and Andre the surrogate father, replacing the parents who died. Irina does turn to Olga when she is upset, for example in Act III when she realizes that she may never go to Moscow nor meet the man of her dreams. It is Olga who convinces her to marry Tusenbach. The actor playing Irina could choose to treat Olga as a parental figure, making Olga feel like a mother rather than a sister.

For the actor playing Irina, the use of her imagination is of great importance in visualizing who the man of her dreams is. Gister would say that the more specifically she can create this “fantasy man” and all that life with him would entail, the more she will have a source for her optimism in the first two acts and the breakdown she has in Act III when she realizes that her dream is just that: that she will never have what she has spent years hoping for. Importantly, the more handsome and attractive she can make this man, the better for her because she will have a strong reason to continue to reject Tusenbach, who is in love with and pursues her throughout the play. It is clear from the text that Tusenbach is unattractive.

Having an image of a handsome man that will sweep her off of her feet is an important source for the actor playing Irina. It is deeply connected to who she is. It is clear from the play that Irina is passionate about this “fantasy man” whom she will never meet.

### **Likes, Dislikes, Loves and Hates**

In addition to defining the character’s relationships in a play, a very important idea that Gister taught for defining the character in addressing the question *Who am I?* is that the actor must identify what the play reveals the character to be passionate about. Gister would urge the actor to start this inquiry by defining the character’s likes, dislikes, loves, and hates. He felt that defining the character in these terms would go a long way toward helping the actor to make choices in terms of other elements of the methodology, such as in defining the objective. As the objective is defined in terms of what characters want, and what characters want is defined in terms of what they like or love, it follows that the two are strongly connected.

There are many examples in plays where it could be argued that characters have likes and dislikes and loves and hates. For example, it is Vanya’s love for Yelena and Yelena’s dislike of Vanya that drives much of the action in *Uncle Vanya*. Sometimes unrequited love is obvious in a play and other times it is not. However, it is crucial that the actor define the character in terms of love/hate, like/dislike as the definitions will affect the character and therefore the play in many ways. If the creation of a character is intimately connected with an analysis and definition of the likes and dislikes, loves and hates, and the likes and dislikes and loves and hates are intimately connected with the formulation of the objective, then the objective, logic would dictate, is intimately connected with the character. In applying the question *Who am I?* it is crucial that the actor examine and discover the likes, dislikes, loves,

and hates of the character as evidenced through the play in order to determine the needs and desires of the character. It is those needs and desires (and not others) that define the character. The more specific the needs, coupled with the commitment on the actor's (as the character) part to play actions toward fulfilling that needs, the more specific, refined and focused the performance. Through recognizing the character's likes and dislikes, loves and hates, and addressing the question *Who am I?*, the principles of the methodology work together in helping the actor playing the character to make these discoveries.

In conclusion, answers to the question *Who am I?* are intimately connected to the answers to the other questions, such as *What do I want?* Character is connected to the *superobjective*, the *superobjective to action* and how the action is played by the character. Character is revealed through action that would both disclose and attempt to accomplish that objective. However, before *superobjective*, *objective* and *action* are discussed in detail, there are two other questions that help comprise Gister's methodology. The questions concern defining the imaginary places and times in which plays occur.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**PLACE AND TIME: *WHERE AND WHEN AM I?***  
**FIRST-YEAR METHODS**

**Place: *Where am I?***

The question *Where am I?* refers to the imaginary places in which the events in a play occur. Although it refers to location, Gister emphasized that the question is crucial to understanding and playing character, because it begins the process of inquiry that leads to defining some of the “given circumstances” in a play. Once the students defined the places in which a given play occurred, Gister would ask them to define what those places meant to the character. He was not alone in asserting that location and its meaning can have a strong impact on how the actor as the character behaves. In Audition Michael Shurtleff makes place one of his “twelve guideposts” (114-117). Although Shurtleff’s theories generally involve the process of auditioning, they are equally applicable to rehearsal and performance once one is cast in a role. He suggested that not only is the place in which the scene or play occurs significant, but how the actor as the character feels about that place is essential: “Once you have chosen the place, once you see it clearly in physical terms, then you must look for how you feel about it. The feeling is most important. That is what will elevate your use of place into an emotional value” (114-115).

There were no designers nor were there sets in the classroom where Gister and the students worked. The room was basically a large empty space. Stacked to one side was

furniture constructed to stand up to years of classroom use. Basic chairs, benches, and tables were made of sturdy wood, but not designed to indicate any particular period, place, or social standing. Such bare furniture might only infrequently be appropriate set pieces in an actual production. Students would generally use this furniture to suggest a set. Thus, in most scenes students had to use their imaginations even more than if sets had been provided, which helped them to grow.

Like many playwrights, Chekhov defines the place in which a given scene or act occurs in all of his plays. More than Chekhov, playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill go into specific details, such as the color of a rug or the amount of light coming through a window. Frequently (sometimes due to budgetary constraints) designers ignore certain rich details and replace them with their own designs. Occasionally, as in *Waiting for Godot*, the set is depicted by the playwright as being very stark, with perhaps a lone tree on a small hill as the only set. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore the limitless possibilities for sets and designs indicated by the playwright and replicated or created by the designer, what is most important in defining location is in terms of what it means for the actor in fulfilling the demands of a role. Therefore, examples drawn from specific play-locations will be used to show how the meaning of such places is an important element in defining character and action.

Addressing the question *Where am I?* along with the question *When am I there?* is initially less complex than the other important questions in Gister's methodology. Often the playwright will explain the location in the stage directions. He may also directly or indirectly define and reveal details about the place through the dialogue, such as what a place means to a character. Although defining general locations can often be a simple task for actors,

defining details about the place and what they mean to the character can be challenging. Location can affect both who a character is and his behavior, so Gister insisted that the students be specific about the place and the character's relationship to that place. For example, while Varya is the adopted daughter of Lyubov, the owner of the cherry orchard in the eponymous play, she is also the mistress of the house, evidenced by her possession of the keys until she hurls them to the floor after the estate is sold at auction to Lopahin: "She threw these down because she wanted to show that she's not the mistress here anymore" (329). Her relationship to the house, although she is not the direct owner or a blood member of the family, is dictated by her status. Her way of moving through the house, her physical activities and even the way in which she interacts with servants should be informed by where she is and her relationship to that place.

Often in class the students might first answer the question *Where am I?* by referring to a general location, but Gister would insist that they be more specific, often responding to answers given by students with another question. He would continue to ask the students more specific and detailed questions, each one building on the other through the answers given in order to get the student to see the relevance of the answers to the development of character and choosing actions. Below is an example of how questions and answers with a student playing Nina in a scene from Act II of *The Sea Gull* can lead to useful conclusions and choices:

TEACHER. Where are you?

STUDENT. I'm in the woods.

TEACHER. Where in the woods?

STUDENT. I'm not sure.

TEACHER. What are you doing there?

STUDENT. I'm not sure.

TEACHER. Who are you meeting in the scene?

STUDENT. Treplev.

TEACHER. Who else?

STUDENT. After Treplev?

TEACHER. Yes.

STUDENT. Trigorin.

TEACHER. Yes. Why might you want to see Trigorin in the woods?

STUDENT. To talk with him?

TEACHER. Yes. Where is Trigorin?

STUDENT. Fishing.

TEACHER. Yes. Where?

STUDENT. At the lake.

TEACHER. Yes. Will he walk back to the estate soon?

STUDENT. Yes, when he is finished.

TEACHER. So, where are you?

STUDENT. I think I must be somewhere in the woods that he will walk through.

TEACHER. Yes. Imagine where that might be.

STUDENT. Probably a path.

TEACHER. That's reasonable. Where on the path?

STUDENT. A beautiful clearing along the path. So I must know that Trigorin goes down to the lake to fish?

TEACHER. Yes. What else?

STUDENT. I am hoping to meet him on his return?

TEACHER. Yes. What else?

STUDENT. When Treplev shows up it's a problem?

TEACHER. Yes. Why?

STUDENT. Because I am falling out of love with him and in love with Trigorin?

TEACHER. Yes. Now why is this place important?

STUDENT. Because I can be alone with Trigorin in a beautiful setting?

TEACHER. Yes. If only-

STUDENT. If only I can get rid of Treplev when he shows up with the dead seagull?

TEACHER. Yes, so what is the scene with Treplev about?

STUDENT. Making him go away so that I can be alone with Trigorin in this secluded spot?

TEACHER. Great choice.

The actor playing Nina might also consider in a practical way where the imaginary lake is in relation to the place that she stands on stage. When Treplev appears, she might consider that at any moment Trigorin will be walking by on his way back to the estate from that lake. If the actor as Nina makes the choice that Nina is anticipating Trigorin passing by on way to the lake, she might also consider how that anticipation is expressed in the scene with Treplev.

The actor as Nina might occasionally look in the direction of the lake in anticipation of the arrival of Trigorin.

Gister's style of questioning led the student to understand the character and circumstances in illuminating ways and served as a model for the way in which they should do their own questioning. But this process of questioning was not unique to Gister. In Systems of Rehearsal Shomit Mitter offers some insight into the purpose of questioning as it relates to one of the ways in which Stanislavski worked: "Most people who have some experience of teaching would probably agree that students best understand the things they have previously had reason to question. A question sets up a framework of contextual interest to which the answer may be referred so that, through its discovered relationship with its relevance it is better retained in the memory" (11). Perhaps this has some relevance to understanding why Gister defined his overall approach in terms of a series of questions (rather than insights, rules or ideas) that should be applied by the actor in the analysis of a role.

Unlike Gister, Stanislavski did not articulate specific questions about the principles that defined his system. But like Gister, he often used a series of questions that might trigger answers that would help define the circumstances of a character. Mitter says: "One of Stanislavski's methods of provoking his actors into exploring in sufficient detail the 'other' world of the play involves setting them a series of questions about the characters which, when researched and answered, establish what he calls the 'given circumstances' of the drama" (11). Gister's use of the well-worn theatrical term "given circumstances" in reference to action on the stage was first used by Stanislavski as David Magarshack translates in

Stanislavski and the Art of the Stage:

The other element out of which stage action arises is “the given circumstances”. It supplies the fable or plot of the play, its facts, events, period, time, and place of action, the conditions of life, the actor’s and producer’s (director’s) interpretation of the play, their additions to it, the mise-en-scenes, the production, the scenery and costumes of the stage designer, the properties, the sound effects, and so on. It includes everything, in fact, the actor is asked to take into consideration in his work on the stage. (34)

For Gister the question *Where am I?* (along with *When am I there?*) relates directly to the given circumstances of a play. Stanislavski’s similarity to and possible influence on Gister, either directly or indirectly, can be shown in an example of his application of a series of questions in order to determine the given circumstances of a play in an actual rehearsal of Tolstoy’s Czar Fyodor that Stanislavski directed. In Stanislavski Directs, Nikolai M. Gorchakov recalls the initial meeting for the production where Stanislavski asked his actors to answer the following questions as “homework” for the following day’s rehearsal: “1. Who am I? How old am I? My profession? Members of my family? 2. Where do I live in Moscow? (You must be able to draw the plan of your apartment and the furniture in the rooms.) 3. How did I spend yesterday?” (23) The reader can see that some questions are echoed by Gister in the application of his own methodology. For the purpose of this chapter, it is important to recognize that the question “*Where do I live in Moscow?*” above resembles Gister’s question *Where am I?* (The reader might also note that the *first* question above is *Who am I?*)

Clearly Gister is not the only teacher to emphasize an investigation into the specificity of place as part of the process of acquiring an understanding of the given circumstances. In rehearsal for Katayev's *The Embezzlers*, Stanislavski proceeds with a line of questioning to an actor specifically in terms of place: "You are a cashier, aren't you? What do you have in your office? Money... Well, yes, money. But what else? Tell me in more detail. You say 'money'. Good, how much? What kind? How is it folded? Where is it kept? What kind of table do you have in your office? What kind of chair, how many electric lights?" (11) Mitter points out the purpose of such questioning: "The questions are designed to reveal to the actors their ignorance about a way of life so that the answers, when supplied, contain more than the sum of the information they carry" (11). Mitter's comment has the feel of the aphorism that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, which seemed to be an unexpressed sentiment in Gister's work with the students in class. He felt that the whole character would eventually emerge through the sum of answers to his central questions.

In examining the question *Where am I?* it is important to recognize that often a play can take place in a number of locations. For example, Act I of *The Sea Gull* takes place out of doors by a lake, while Act IV is in a drawing room. Both places can dictate the way in which the events occur, but can also strongly inform the kinds of choices that actors might make on behalf of the character. In Act I after the play within the play, daylight fades and darkness begins to fall. Asking themselves *Where am I?* the actors realize the characters need to retire indoors, and so they might begin slapping at mosquitoes, squinting in order to see (there were no electric lights at the time), fanning themselves and shifting their positions due to the discomfort of sitting on the ground or makeshift benches as they long to move indoors. On a more positive note, the lake and woods can amplify the romantic implications and

impulses in the scenes between couples Masha/Medvendenko and Nina/Treplev at the beginning of Act I. This mood can be maintained for those same couples in group scenes in the middle of Act I. For example, the character Medvendenko might focus on Masha (because he desires her) in a scene involving all of the characters on stage, despite the fact that in sections of dialogue he doesn't have any lines nor is there any reference made to him.

In contrast with Act I, Act IV is set in the drawing room on a cold, windy night several years later. Treplev and Nina have their final scene together while family and friends play cards in the room next to them. The wind howls outside and the mood is somber as Nina and Treplev confess secrets about the past few years. Their serious dialogue is juxtaposed with the loud but light banter of the card players heard and referred to but unseen next door.

The actors must define the imaginary places and what they mean so that they can make choices in order to try and fulfill the needs of their characters. In considering the scenes with couples Masha/Medvendenko and Nina/Treplev in Act I above, it can be observed that Masha and Medvendenko appear in the woods first. They move to where a stage has been set up by the lake. They have come to watch a play (within the play) put on by Nina and Treplev. Treplev has written the play and Nina is its only character. It is clear that Masha and Medvendenko have arrived early as the play has not yet begun and the place is devoid of other characters. Even a casual reading of the play reveals that Masha is very much in love with Treplev although he loves Nina. It is also very clear that Medvendenko loves Masha. The fact that they have arrived early and that Medvendenko is following Masha can lead to the conclusion that Masha arranged to arrive early. The actor playing Masha might recognize that she could potentially see Treplev alone if only she could get rid of

Medvendenko (much like Nina wanting to get rid of Treplev in the example of questions and answers above). It is logical for the actor playing Masha to decide that Masha would consider that Treplev might have arrived before everyone else in order to make sure that the stage (for the play within the play) is ready and, perhaps, to meet Nina, (whom he is in love with) for a rehearsal and, perchance, a kiss, as revealed in the stage directions later: “they kiss.” It is in this way of investigating character and circumstances that the question *Where am I?* has relevance. The setting of Act I above is very important because the implication is that one could be alone with someone whom they were in love with in a secluded, romantic, moonlit setting in nature with its sounds of crickets, the wind through the trees, the birds and the solitude.

The forest is often a place where romance occurs. Consider the plays of Shakespeare, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As you Like It*. In such plays the forest seems to have its own power, much like a church, a cemetery and a police station all have their own powers. Gister used Michael Chekhov's term “atmosphere” for describing the general impression of a given place. Michael Chekhov said “Atmospheres are limitless and to be found everywhere. Every landscape, every street, house, room; a library, hospital, a cathedral, a noisy restaurant, a museum; morning, noon, twilight, night; spring, summer, fall, winter—every phenomenon and event has its own particular atmospheres” (48). Defining and fully imagining these atmospheres can help the actor as character enter into the imaginary circumstances of a scene, evoking an attitude or emotion, such as impatience or fear, appropriate to the specific situation.

While the dialogue, set, costumes, sound and lighting can refer to and suggest such places above, it is the actors who must find ways to realize the atmosphere first by defining it

through imagination, then by recognizing its importance to the characters and finally by allowing it to inform their actions and the ways in which they fulfill them. In doing this the actor helps the audience to see, hear and experience a specific environment and its atmosphere, beyond the limitations of set, lights, sound and costume, through the audience's imagination as well. Gister said that if the actor saw, for example, cherry trees, though they were not included in the set design, the audience would see them too. It is in the imagination that the actor can begin to see what the character "sees." For example, Gister would want the student playing Varya to see the cherry trees in her imagination when she looked "off right" or wherever the director and/or designer indicated they might be, assuming no trees are actually used in the production. Taken further, the actor as Varya might personalize what the cherry trees meant to her, giving the moment of "seeing" them greater richness if the actor is sensitive and vulnerable to that meaning. For example, the actor might consider that the fate of the cherry orchard could mirror Varya's fate, as the house may be sold to pay the mortgage and, therefore, her home and status within it would change. The actor playing Varya might consider visualizing the cherry orchard without its trees, which have been cut down for land development. Such an image could generate a melancholy feeling in the actor as the character. Melancholy is certainly an appropriate feeling for Varya, particularly in Act III and IV. But feelings appropriate to the character and given circumstances, like melancholy, are not often simply generated out of saying the lines. The actor must find a way to make the places, things, people, and her desires meaningful so that she is vulnerable in dealing with them. Such meanings can be generated by finding ways to "personalize" them.

Arguably his most cherished play, Chekhov called *The Cherry Orchard* a “comedy.” However, Robert W. Corrigan explains that it can be challenging to understand why:

One of the reasons *The Cherry Orchard* is so difficult to interpret is that the line between the characters’ self-dramatization about suffering and actual pain is such a tenuous one. If we miss all the subtle clues Chekhov gives us to indicate that Madam Ranevsky does not really care about the orchard and is actually enjoying being at the center of a teapot drama, then it is impossible for us to think of it as the comedy (‘at times even a farce’) which Chekhov intended. (The Theatre in Search of a Fix 47-48)

In several classes and the Chekhov workshop at UTD Gister explained that although the owner of the estate, Lyubov (Madam Ranevsky), weeps frequently and appears torn between two forces, her attention is more on the man she loves back in Paris than saving the cherry orchard from going to auction. However, that does not mean that she does not have enormous sentiment for the people and place where she grew up.

The play begins with her return to the estate, having been away in Paris, France for five years. When she arrives she sees the nursery and expresses what that means to her: “The nursery, my dear, beautiful room!...I used to sleep here when I was little. (Cries). And here I am again, like a little child...” The nursery has tender memories for Lyubov. In order for the importance of the nursery to resonate and be experienced by both actor as character and audience Gister would suggest that the actor “personalize” the meaning of the location. “Personalization” was a term Gister used for what an actor should do in finding a way to make some place, thing or person important to the character in a very meaningful way. (5

Oct. 95). For example, Gister might suggest that the actor playing Lyubov do an imagination exercise as homework, sometime during the rehearsal process. In the exercise she may picture herself as a little child, asleep in the crib. She could picture the nursery furnishings and the feelings they evoke, even though the playwright might not have supplied the details. During the actual production, when she comes on-stage and says the lines, she could summon the images she created beforehand, as she looks down at the crib. The more detailed the image, the better for the actor as the character because it is in the details that a specific relationship with the images can be experienced. For example, during the homework phase, she might “see” the clothing she wore as the child, how she lay on her side with knees tucked up, a little rocking chair in the corner of the room with an old and faded child-drawing of a cherry tree tacked to the wall.

Personalization is not unique to Gister. One of the original members of the group theatre, Sanford Meisner, made use of personalization in his theories using the term preparation in much the same way that Gister uses personalization. In his popular text, Sanford Meisner on Acting Meisner defines preparation as it should be used in his approach:

Preparation is that device which permits you to start your scene or play in a condition of emotional aliveness. The purpose of preparation is so that you don't come in emotionally empty. I want to be very simple about this whole project. If you sign the contract in the Schubert offices for a wonderful part in a wonderful play, the obvious implication is that you are bursting with joy when you write your name on the document. Even if you live in Riverdale, forty-five minutes away by subway, the pleasure and pride that was instilled

in you in the Schubert office is still there in some form by the time you get home. (78)

It is important in understanding Gister's methodology that a clear distinction be made between preparation and affective memory. Both Gister and Meisner advocate use of the imagination, rather than affective memory that Stanislavski once used then discarded:

In the early days of the Stanislavski System, Mr. S. was looking for true behavior, and if what he wanted was great pleasure, he asks where you look for the reality of great pleasure. His answer was very simple: *you remember* a time when you were under the influence of great pleasure. That's called "emotion memory." I don't use it, and neither did he after thirty years of experimentation. The reason? If you are twenty and work in a delicatessen, the chances are very slim that you can remember that glorious night you had with Sophia Loren. (Meisner, 79)

Although Gister, like Meisner, advocated use of the imagination rather than the recollection of an emotional experience, Gister's reasoning differed from Meisner's. Meisner suggests in the above that the actor would not be capable of generating those experiences that might be consistent with the given circumstances through affective memory. Gister suggested that the actor could generate experiences through affective memory, but they would differ from the given circumstances. Gister believed that the gulf that affective memory would create between the actor and the given circumstances could distance the actor from the role. However, both Meisner and Gister wanted the student to enter into the given circumstances of the play to as great an extent as possible. Both strongly believed in the use of the imagination in order to do so. While their reasons differ for rejecting emotion

memory, their reasons for advocating use of the imagination are similar as indicated by Meisner:

What you're looking for is not necessarily confined to the reality of your life. It can be in your imagination. If you allow it freedom—with no inhibitions, no proprieties—to *imagine* what would happen between you and Sophia Loren, your imagination is, in all likelihood, deeper, and more persuasive than the real experience. (79)

Gister asserted that personalization is the proper way to generate a “state-of-being” appropriate to the character in the specific circumstances. In the example above from *The Cherry Orchard*, the actor playing Lyubov could prepare herself as part of her “homework,” (a term that both Gister and Meisner used) not only by imagining the nursery where the character spent time as a child, but what that nursery means to her. Gister would advocate that this be done in the imagination of the actor, but he would not specify *how* the actor should do this. It is conceivable that the actor might use some elements of affective memory in attempting to identify with the emotional circumstances, despite Gister’s cautioning against it. But use of the imagination is the key to understanding Gister’s approach to personalization and preparation.

It is important to note that while Gister wanted the actor to use personalization as a means to generate the appropriate state-of-being of the character he did not want the actor to try to “play” a state of being on stage. An example of playing a state-of-being would be if an actor decides that the character he is cast as is sad because he is in a strange city longing to return home. The actor may decide to try and show the audience what “longing” might look like by pretending to be sad. Attempting to play a state-of-being can lead the actor to

“indicating” an emotion, rather than allowing the emotion to exist. By indicating, the actor removes himself from the “reality” of the given circumstances because he attempts to point out to the audience what it is that he is feeling, rather than simply feeling it.

The state of being summoned by off-stage preparation in the wings just before entering for a scene is generally short-lived in that its purpose is to prepare the actor in an appropriate way for the first moments of a scene. But after those moments the actor should allow the circumstances as they unfold to be the source of the emotional life of the character. This requires the actor to be vulnerable to the other characters and events that occur from moment to moment. It is in this way that preparation is finite; that it only lasts for a short period of time, because the events of the play should continue to affect the actor as the character, not necessarily the off-stage preparation. If the events don’t affect the actor as the character, and the actor attempts to cling to the emotional state-of-being generated through the off-stage preparation, he will stop the flow of the play. Meisner, too, suggested that the off-stage preparation should be done only to help begin a scene: “preparation lasts only for the first moment of a scene, and then you never know what’s going to happen” (79).

It is the imagination of the actor, as well as the other theatre artists such as set and lighting designers, who help to create a sense of place. This can be done realistically, with actual furniture from a specific period, or suggestively with light that creates tree-shadows through gobos (devices that shape light patterns) and twilight. But it can also be done through the actors, as they use their imaginations to “see” and “hear” details of a specific environment. Through the actors and designers the audience can become captivated by the imaginary world of the play and begin to enter into the given circumstances through its own

imagination. Michael Chekhov suggests that it is in this way that a loop is created that connects actor with audience:

The actors who possess or who have newly acquired a love and understanding for atmosphere in a performance know only too well what a strong bond it creates between them and the spectator. Being enveloped by it too, the spectator himself begins to “act” along with the actors. A compelling performance arises out of a reciprocal action between the actor and the spectator. If the actors, director, author, set designer and, often, the musicians have truly created the atmosphere of performance, the spectator will not be able to remain aloof from it but will respond with inspiring waves of love and confidence. (48)

The reader may wonder if such potentially exhaustive work in applying questions such as *Where am I?* might ever reach a point whereby definitive answers were reached and the actor could get on with acting the role. The reader might further wonder if all of the answers could ever actually be found or that the methodology required such an enormous expenditure of energy that it might exhaust the actor and the role might never reach fruition. Given that the imagination plays a large part in answering the questions, and the imagination is generally thought limitless, it is reasonable to suppose that applying the methodology to a given role could be a process that went on forever.

But Gister was practical in his application of the questions. Although he felt that the question *Who am I?* should frame an ongoing inquiry and he wanted the actor to exercise great care in exploring and answering the other questions through disciplined analysis, he also recognized that actors in the professional theatre have a finite amount of time to invest in

a role. It is true that in most productions there is only a certain amount of time to analyze the play through the questions. Therefore, an actor might never fully define the question *Where am I?* when referring to, for example, his bedroom. However, Gister would expect the actor to define those particular sources in or near the room that directly affect the character and serve the needs of the play. For example, a room has importance if, say, the dialogue suggests that someone can be heard pacing there; someone to whom the character in another room owes a lot of money.

Further, Gister strongly encouraged his students to enjoy the work on a role in the manner that a child might in terms of a sense of play. He shared with the class his joy of make-believe in his childhood. He confessed that as a child (and still as an adult) he loved to play and could do so all day. He wanted the students to reconnect with the sense of play that likely they, too, had as children, but were leaving behind as adults. He asserted that sometimes adults forget or ignore the sense of play and fantasy, and the use of the imagination that they exercised as children. Gister recalled an example of his own use of make-believe as a child playing “cowboys and Indians.” He could easily imagine himself in the wild west (*Where am I?*) along with details of the place (such as a large rock) and what those details meant (a place to hide from the “bad guys”) (8 September 95). In using the methodology, Gister wanted the student to maintain a childlike attitude of play, encouraging the students to make the work on the role enjoyable and fun.

In “Exit Thirties, Enter Sixties” Richard Schechner suggests that pleasure is an element missing in contemporary acting when the actors use “affective memory” (which Gister did not teach) rather than the imagination in their work. He offers an example of why

children experience pleasure at play while those adult actors who use “affective memory” in their work do not:

When [...] two children play cowboys and Indians, one is shot and one dies, usually undergoing great agony. But this agony is pleasurable, both to the child and to whom-ever watches him. This is because the child is testing and toying with his emotional apparatus. In a sense he is doing the opposite of affective memory which is re-living; the child is pre-living, anticipating a set of emotions he may later, as an adult, find use for. The actor using affective memory is paying back old debts; the child is storing up resources. (19-20)

Thus, despite the potentially exhausting work of disciplining oneself in the analysis of the text and applying the questions, if a spirit of play is maintained and the imagination is in good shape through exercise, the work of fully addressing the question *Where am I?* can be pleasurable. Like *Where am I?* the question *When am I there?* directly relates to the given circumstances of the play. It, too, requires an active use of the imagination, as will be shown.

**Time: *When am I there?***

The question *When am I there?* refers to the imaginary times in which events in a play occur. Although it refers to time, Gister emphasized that the question is crucial to understanding and playing character in much the same way as the question *Where am I?*, because it too relates to the given circumstances of a play. Further, like the question *Where am I?*, a first reading of a play could yield quick answers to the question, while more detailed answers might require investigation. For example, a playwright might specifically designate in the stage direction that Act III takes place in “early morning.” However, he might not state nor even suggest how much time has taken place between Act II and III. This

imaginary time can be of enormous importance for the actor in his analysis. Major changes can happen for characters in between acts, as many of Chekhov's plays show. Once the student defined the specific times in a given play, Gister would ask the student to investigate the importance of what those times mean to the characters involved. Gister was not the only teacher to refer to time as a factor for the actor to consider in the analysis of a role. However, unlike other teachers, such as Michael Chekhov and Stanford Meisner, Gister made time one of the cornerstones of his methodology.

In Gister's methodology *character*, *objective* and *action* have specific definitions that in some way differentiate them from definitions of the same or similar terms in other methods and theories. Even the *objective* (that he borrowed from Stanislavski) was modified because he felt that it should be directly related to *something one character wants from another*, as will be shown. However, Gister did not define the meaning of time (and place) in any specific way. There were no philosophical discussions about time in class, workshops or interviews with Gister. It can be surmised that he assumed that everyone knew what "time" meant. Considering that none of the students ever asked for a definition of the meaning of time in philosophical terms, it is safe for the reader to assume that a common-sense understanding of time guided the application of the question *When am I there?* in daily class-work. Therefore, Gister's introduction of the question *When am I there?* did not begin with its definition but with a few examples of how the students should apply it (7 September 95). Gister would question a student doing a scene in ways that showed how time was often crucial to character choices. The significance of the question *When am I there?* can be demonstrated by providing some examples that show how it might be applied to playing character.

While this dissertation concerns actors, directors and educators, it should be noted in recognizing the significance of time (and obviously place) that it is also a central factor for designers, those working with lighting for example. Time can refer to a particular day, month, year, and century, and also a season, such as summer or winter, influencing choices for costume, set, light and sound, which, in turn, affects actor choices even if only in small ways. For example, if a play is set in 1943 the theatre artists must be concerned with World War II. There are many specific choices for costume and set for a play set on the Russian front in winter. Even if a play is set in an area that was relatively unaffected by the war, the date of 1943 is still significant; the location perhaps made distinct by the playwright because it was unaffected.

While some uses of time in plays may have associations with historic events that inform the choices that the theatre artists involved in productions might make, other references to times might be limited to the “world” of the play. The fact that “some estate” goes up for auction on August 22 is meaningless outside of the world depicted in *The Cherry Orchard*. But like a court summons, Lopahin’s warning: “the cherry orchard’s to be sold on the 22nd of August. Remember that!” (Corrigan 316) weighs heavily upon its characters. Should the estate get sold at auction (as it does) the characters would be strongly affected to some degree or other (as they are).

The principle of time is applied by the actor addressing the question *When am I there?* Like answers to the other questions that create the basis of Gister’s methodology, the actor should first find answers to the question of time in the text itself. Even in those plays where time is ill-defined, such as in *Waiting for Godot*, it is important to apply the principle, if only to recognize that such a basic element important to human beings, and therefore

characters, is absent. It is logical to assume that most audiences might wonder just how much time has passed since Gogo and Didi began waiting for Godot in attending a production of it. The implication is that we have all been waiting for God[ot] for a very long time. In most plays, as in life, time is meaningful. It is part of what has been called “the given circumstances.”

There are more reasons for time’s relevance to character and circumstances than its relation to real events found in history plays such as Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. For example, time can be an extremely important factor in staging a simple scene at a park bench. Consider a park bench on a bright summer day at noon and contrast it with that same bench at midnight. At noon, the character who is meeting a friend can simply sit and enjoy the sights of people with lunch, mothers with strollers, joggers, bicyclists, pigeons and squirrels. The same character at midnight might very well be on the lookout for sex muggers, thieves, rapists, gangs, and rats. For an actor playing a character that is supposed to be “normal,” insensitivity to the circumstantial potential dangers of hanging around a park bench at midnight might limit the richness of the dramatic experience for both character and audience.

Often in plays, months and years can pass between acts, such as between Act III and Act IV of *The Sea Gull* “there is an interval of two years” (Corrigan, 161). Even if Chekhov did not specify the amount of time that passes between the two acts, a careful reading of the play can lead the actor to postulate an approximate amount of time through a logical accounting of the events that happen between Acts III and IV. For example, Nina runs away to Moscow, has an affair with Trigorin, becomes a professional actor, has a baby, the baby dies and she continues to pursue a career as an actor. Although the audience never sees these events because they occur between acts, they are revealed by Nina to Treplev in Act IV. The

actor playing Nina must realize not only her chronological change in age, but the effects such experiences have had on who she is (or was.) Many changes hold true for Treplev as well. He followed her career without her knowing it. He had to deal with Nina rejecting him and her having an affair with his mother's boyfriend, Trigorin. He also had to deal with publishers rejecting his writing.

In examining Gister's methodology it is important to recognize that characters are not static, but change because of events and other characters that affect them throughout the time that passes in a play. Gister uses time as a context for understanding character and how that character changes. Changes can occur for a character in those imaginary times between acts. For example, after a character exits and spends a year in Moscow in between Acts I and II he may be less naïve and more committed to becoming a writer upon his return. But change can also occur between scenes. For example, a character can exit in Act III angry and determined to have it out with his mother-in-law only to enter later in the act having failed in his goal, perhaps because he backed down, revealed through his sense of shame, the dialogue, and other characters who ridicule him.

It is important to recognize that all changes take place, one way or another, in time. But ignoring the imaginary time that occurs within a play can also lead to ignoring the changes that a character might undergo through a play's progression from scene to scene and act to act, because often these changes are not pointed out in the stage directions. The actor can use time as a context for imagining what kind of changes might logically be happening given the progression of time and events in a play. In order to do so the actor must recognize that change is an important element to character. Michael Chekhov asserts that defining

changes that take place in a character is very important yet often overlooked by actors in their character analysis:

Thinking that a character always remains the same while meeting other characters in the play is a crucial mistake that even great and experienced actors often make. It is not true, either on stage or in everyday life. As you may have observed, only very stiff, inflexible or extremely conceited characters always remain “themselves” while meeting others. To perform stage characters in such a manner is monotonous, unreal and resembles a kind of puppetry. Observe yourself and you will see how differently you instinctively begin to speak, move, think and feel while meeting various people, even if the change others produce in you is only small or barely noticeable. It is always you *plus* somebody else. (137)

Throughout the first year of classes Gister wanted the actor to be particularly astute in observing that scenes begin one way and end in another way in time. It is important to understand the difference between the ways in which they begin versus the ways in which they end in order to determine what a given scene is about and how the character changes within it. For example, one of the last scenes in *The Cherry Orchard* takes place between Varya and Lopahin. During the entire time-period of the first three and much of the fourth acts of the play there are references to the observation that Varya and Lopahin are a perfect couple that should be married. These references and observations are made not only by other characters, but by Varya and Lopahin as well. In the final scene between Varya and Lopahin the cherry orchard has been sold. Lopahin himself purchased it as it was sold at auction to pay the mortgage. Despite all of the talk by other characters and even Varya and Lopahin

throughout the first three acts that they should be married, it is clear by late in Act IV that she is still waiting and hoping that Lopahin will propose to her. During the day that everyone is planning to vacate the house, Lopahin is “around” the estate. There is a brief time when Varya and Lopahin are alone on stage. It is obviously *the* time for Lopahin to propose, based on all that has been building between them throughout the previous acts. There is a long pause in their dialogue; a pause in which both characters are aware of the implications between them. Suddenly someone calls Lopahin from off stage. He runs off as Varya slowly sinks to her knees on the floor. The audience’s anticipation at the beginning of the scene that they will become engaged by the end of the scene is not realized. Initially Lopahin is alone waiting for Varya, so that he can propose to her. At the end Varya is alone on the floor crying. No proposal has been made. Thus, from the audience’s point of view the scene started with the prospect that finally the two characters would unite and ended with the realization that they never would. The characters, too, believed that they would be engaged by the end of the scene. But if so, what went wrong?

In examining the scene it is important to observe that it begins one way and ends another way. Discovering why it ends in the way that it does is crucial to understanding the characters. Careful analysis can reveal that despite the fact that Varya takes an active role as a servant in the house, she is the adopted daughter of Lyubov, the owner of the cherry orchard. Therefore, she is of higher status than Lopahin, who grew up as a peasant. Despite the fact that Lopahin has been smart in business and has made enough money to actually purchase the cherry orchard, he still thinks of himself as a peasant, as he explains to Dunyasha in Act I. To Lopahin, Varya is on a higher social level than he due to her

relationship with Lyubov. Thus, despite Varya's desire and willingness to marry Lopahin, her status becomes an unspoken obstacle to Lopahin's proposal to her.

Gister's premise that scenes begin one way and end another way creates a means of framing and focusing an analysis on what happens over time and why in order to reach meaningful conclusions. These conclusions can be the basis on which the actor makes interesting, vital and appropriate choices on behalf of the character. In the example of Varya and Lopahin it is also important to recognize that time has played a large part in the anticipation of the proposal. The idea of marriage in a near future time can be part of their characters' consciousness throughout the play. It can be expanded into *the* ruling circumstance between the two characters as time passes and intensifies the need to propose. This need can turn to an ongoing pressure. The mounting pressure can generate anxiety that can be compounded as it coincides with the dreaded loss of the cherry orchard. The loss quickly leads to the break up of the family and the servants and friends who are a part of it. The idea of marriage and the mounting pressure to fulfill the action of proposing can be very important elements in defining the ways in which the actors as those characters interact with each other and with those around them.

It was very important to Gister that the student be specific about what occurred in the time in which a given scene took place, but also important were the events and changes that a character undergoes due to those events in the time that preceded a scene. Preceding time was not limited to actual events in the play, but could include events that happened in between acts, that would later be referred to either directly or indirectly. For example, the student playing Vershinin should consider the amount of time that takes place between Act I and Act II of *The Three Sisters*. It is important because he has been having an affair with

Masha that started between acts: sometime after Act I ended and before Act II began. In Chekhov the Dramatist David Magarschack tells us “Act II begins about nine months after the end of Act I” (259). Whenever the affair began it happened after Act I because Act I takes place during the course of a single day and event, Irina’s birthday party. In that time Vershinin first appears and is introduced as the new battery commander. The relationship between Masha and Vershinin, which begins in Act I as mild flirtation, has turned into an affair by the next time they appear together on stage in Act II. Their affair affects the way in which they behave toward one another in the scene in Act II. Indications of some changes that have taken place in the time between Act I and Act II are suggested in the dialogue. Vershinin, who is first shown in Act I uttering long-winded speeches, suddenly no longer has a lot to say. He musters the appeal: “I’m thirsty—I’d like some tea” in between long speeches by Masha; speeches that indirectly accuse Vershinin of treating her with less respect than do other soldiers that she has had a history (time) of interactions with. She also reveals her “mistake” in marrying her husband, Kulygin, implying that she prefers another man, such as Vershinin, for a husband. The time in which the affair has been going on is important, because it is clear from the play that Masha wants Vershinin to leave his wife for her. She has already expressed a lack of love and desire for her own husband. The actor playing Masha might measure Masha’s degree of impatience with Vershinin in proportion to the amount of time she has been having this illicit affair.

In analyzing the characters Vershinin and Masha, as well as the others in the play in terms of *When am I there?*, the actor can see how crucial defining specific dates, time periods between acts, and events that are associated with time, such as the Mardi Gras in Act II, can be in terms of character. But Chekhov did not reveal time periods in the stage directions in

*The Three Sisters* as he does in some other plays. David Magarschack carefully analyzed the events in the play and dates associated with those events revealed in the dialogue in order to construct an accurate timeline. The times and logical inferences that can be drawn from them can be of great importance to the actor, because they inform choices that must be made in order to realize the meaning of the play. Magarschack offers the following observations and conclusions that help show why the question *When am I there?* is important for the actor to address.

The whole action lasts about three and a half years, for Chekhov gives us the most precise information about the beginning of the play. It opens on May 5<sup>th</sup>, Irina's twentieth birthday, and Act IV takes place in the autumn when Irina is in her twenty-fourth year. Between Act I and Act II Andrey and Natasha get married and have a child. Act II takes place in February—Shrovetide. (Irina, counting the months before their proposed moving to Moscow, starts with February.) Act III quite likely follows immediately after the end of the second act, that is to say, the fire in the town must have occurred only a few months after the end of the second act. That seems to agree with the small lapse of time that is implicit in the lighted candle symbol and Irina's expulsion from her room. But if that is so, then two and a half years must have passed between Act III and Act IV. (259-260)

It should be noted that the conclusions he draws are not easily made, but can be reached through a careful, logical analysis of facts that are given through the events and dialogue. If two-and-a-half years have passed in between Acts III and IV then Masha and Vershinin have been having an affair for a relatively long period of time. It is in time that their love can

deepen. As their love deepens the eventual break-up due to Vershinin's transfer is all the more painful. Chekhov does not tell the actor this information. It must be concluded through an analysis of the play. By asking the question *When am I there?* the actor playing Masha can assert that Masha has been in love with Vershinin for three-and-a-half years when he leaves her because of his transfer to Poland in Act IV. This fact can inform the way in which their final scene is played. It is clear in the text that Masha needs to be restrained when Vershinin says his final farewell to her.

In addressing the question of time it is important to consider how analysis might differ when approaching plays that are based on fictitious characters and events rather than plays that depict people and events drawn from history. In his short but illuminating text, Evoking (and Forgetting) Shakespeare, Peter Brook asserts that actors are often more effective when portraying characters and circumstances that are based on real people and events rather than imaginary characters and circumstances:

Today, actors on television and in films are often amazingly true-to-life when they play reconstructions of actual events. In the theatre, actors playing for instance the police interrogation of some victim of police brutality, using material drawn from authentic recordings and transcripts have no intellectual confusion. If the person they are trying to bring to life uses an unexpected word, a strange phrase, a striking metaphor or even a repellent image, the actor is not confused by asking what 'the author' meant, nor what the author's 'period' was dictating to him. (44)

Brook's point is that when an actor plays a character and circumstances based on real life the raw material from which the actor draws using Gister's methodology or any other is not

questioned. The actor commits himself fully to the situation because it is not open to a myriad of interpretations as a fictitious character and circumstances might be. Further, usually when an historic event is interesting enough to warrant a play or film being made about it, there are pictures, paintings, biographies, literature, and/or visual and auditory recordings of events for the actor to use in analysis. Such resources can be very useful in helping the actor to transform into character and to perform convincingly. However, regardless of the amount of material available, Gister's methodology can still be used. The information outside of the play itself can serve as a resource for the actor when applying the questions. For example, the question *Who am I?* starts with defining what the character is passionate about. Information from outside sources that corresponds with rather than contradicts the play can serve to help the actor further define the character. Information that adds details to the place depicted in the play can also serve the actor, and so forth.

It is worth considering whether Gister's methodology can be applied to "bad" or "flawed" plays or not. This author asserts that it can. While there may be issues of clarification in terms of the questions *Who am I?*, *Where am I?* and *When am I there?* with poorly written plays, answers to the questions *What do I want?* and *How do I go about getting what I want?* will always be clear once made and executed. Although the questions *What do I want?* and *How do I get what I want?* are addressed with the answers that were generated from applying the first three questions in mind, they are often answered with a degree of freedom of choice. That freedom can help the actor when dealing with a poorly constructed play to make interesting, vital choices and to take action that generates experiences in the realization of those choices, as will be shown in the next two chapters.

The questions *Who am I? Where am I?* and *When am I there?* help the actor to define the character and circumstances of the play. It is through doing that the discoveries made through examining the above questions might be revealed. The last two questions, *What do I want?* and *How do I go about getting what I want?* concern the expression of the discoveries made by defining and attempting to fulfill the character's needs and desires through action.

## CHAPTER 4

### OBJECTIVE: *WHAT DO I WANT?*

#### FIRST-YEAR METHODS

The application of Gister's fourth foundational principle begins with the actor addressing the question *What do I want?* There are two categories to this principle, and both have roots in Stanislavski's system, the *objective* and the *superobjective*. Some of the basic ways of applying them vary among approaches, but by and large the definitions are nearly the same, even though the terms used may differ. In Acting is Believing Charles McGaw recounts that "Stanislavski himself called it 'zadacha,' which translates as 'problem'" (40). The various terms include: commitment, goal, need, desire, dream, motivation and intention. Some theories even use action, blurring the distinction between what a character does and what he wants. In acting theory the term *objective* is used for defining what it is that a character wants. The term *unit* is a section of a play, its existence and duration made distinct from other parts of the play by the objective, which grants it a distinguishing feature. Thus, *units* and *objectives* might be thought of as two sides of the same coin. According to Michael Chekhov, *units* and *objectives* are considered two of Stanislavski's greatest creations: "Units and objectives are perhaps his most brilliant inventions, and when correctly used they can lead the actor immediately to the very core of the play and the part, revealing to him their construction and giving him a firm ground upon which to perform his character with confidence" (To the Actor 139).

In an interview in fall of 1995 at the Yale School of Drama, Gister declared that the greatest textbook on acting is Michael Chekhov's To the Actor. Perhaps that is why Gister admired the actor Anthony Hopkins, who was influenced by Chekhov's theories of acting. In class, Gister strongly advised his students to see Hopkins's performance in the film, The Remains of the Day. He said that the acting approach used by Hopkins in the movie was akin to his methodology. When asked about his approach to acting during an interview, Hopkins credited Michael Chekhov. ("Inside the Actor's Studio" Episode 4.7, 1998)

In To the Actor, Michael Chekhov, nephew to Anton Chekhov and one of Stanislavski's greatest students, offers a clear and concise description of units:

Stanislavski said [...] that in order to study the structure of the play and the part it is necessary to divide them into units (bits or sections). He advised starting with big units first, without going into their details, and to subdivide the larger units into medium-size and small ones only if they appear too general to you. (139)

Thus, with the play broken up into units, the actor can do an analysis in order to define objectives for playing them. Chekhov goes on to define what an objective is for Stanislavski: "Stanislavski further said that the objective is what the character (not the actor) wishes, wants, desires; it is its goal, aim. The objectives follow one another in succession (or they might overlap)" (139-140).

There are many examples in dramatic literature where it can be argued that characters want specific things. For example, it could be argued that Hamlet wants to restore order to Denmark, Desdemona wants Emilia to reassure her, Lopahin wants the cherry orchard, Nina wants to be a successful actress, Treplev wants Nina, Masha wants Treplev, and Medvedenko

wants Masha. Seldom does a playwright specifically tell the actor in a preface, footnote or stage direction what the objective is for the character that he is playing. But if the actor analyzes the text itself, patterns of behavior and language emerge revealing that the character does seem to want something specific throughout the entire play, as well as within acts and scenes.

While Stanislavski drew a distinction between *units* and *objectives*, Gister did not use the term *units* as a regular part of the vocabulary of his methodology, though he did work in very small scene-sections at a time. Gister's division of scenes was determined by action choices. A scene section for Gister would last as long as an actor as character held a single action, such as *to make his scene partner feel intimidated*. When the action changed, Gister would consider it the start of a new scene section. However, it is easy to recognize that he borrowed both the term *objective* and *superobjective* and the terms' basic meanings from Stanislavski. Objectives in and of themselves did for Gister what units did for Stanislavski: divided the play into sections. (Gister did use the term *beats* designating *when an action changes*. Beats occur within an objective). In many theories of acting the objective is an element of the overall approach. This is true for Gister, as well.

Theoretically an actor could formulate many objectives for a given role, but they should support an overall purpose. Stanislavski called this purpose the *superobjective*:

All the character's objectives merge into one over-all objective, forming a "logical and coherent stream." This main objective Stanislavski calls the *superobjective* of the character. That means that all smaller objectives, whatever their number, must serve one aim—to achieve the superobjective (the main desire) of the character. (To the Actor 140)

Gister also borrowed the term *superobjective* and its meaning from Stanislavski. He articulated it in terms of what a character wants from the beginning to the end of the play.

Gister said that the playwright does not specify the objectives and superobjective nor do characters necessarily articulate what they are, at least not as such. Superobjectives and objectives must be determined by the actor through an examination of the role, even if it is fairly obvious through an opening soliloquy or in other ways. He was adamant about the actor recognizing that characters don't make acting choices, actors do; that the character does not create or discover the objective, but the actor does on behalf of the character.

Generally, in the classical period (late 1800s) objectives are revealed in the language of the play itself (and thus discovered by the actor), which reflects the widely held notion among theatre artists that Shakespeare's characters say what they mean. For example, Richard III makes it very clear in his opening soliloquy that he wants to become the King of England. This does not mean that objectives are always revealed directly in the language. Consider the implications in the dialogue between Desdemona and Emilia in Act IV of *Othello*. In a month-long intensive professional actor training course in January 2008, Shakespeare&Co. founder Tina Packer called this "the most Chekhovian of all Shakespeare scenes" for its thick sub-textual layering. Conversely, it can be argued that Vershinin's long-winded speeches, such as the one about the ignorance of the masses in Act I of *The Three Sisters*, are camouflage for seducing Masha. But this does not mean that all modern characters reveal themselves sub-textually. Consider those modern characters that actually say what they mean constantly, such as Medvendenko in *The Sea Gull* and eventually, such as Nora, in Act IV of *A Doll House*. However, usually in the modern period the actor must analyze the play for meaning that is loosely referred to as subtext or beneath the lines and in

the classical period the actor must analyze the language itself in order to discover the objective within the lines.

Regardless of whether the action for accomplishing the objective is textual or sub-textual, Gister wanted the student to be particularly astute in observing that while the actor knows how the play ends the character does not. The actor must recognize that he should always act *as if* he doesn't know, for example, that he fails to get the woman, house in Moscow, cherry orchard, or dies of syphilis at the end of the play. Such knowledge beforehand, if included in the actor's immediate awareness during performance, could have a dampening effect on the actor's impetus toward achieving the character's objective. For example, the actor playing Masha must recognize that even though Treplev never falls in love with her, Masha does not know this. Such knowledge can diffuse Masha's or, rather, the actor playing Masha's passion, for achieving her goal (superobjective). Therefore, the actor must act *as if* she does not know that the superobjective is never achieved. Doing so successfully is often acknowledged by the oft-used expression *the ability to live believably within the imaginary circumstances of the play*, Gister's definition of talent.

Though not a major or even minor principle, as he seldom used it, Gister's use of the phrase *as if* comes from Stanislavski's system, as was mentioned in Chapter 1. Stanislavski coined the term "the magic if" ("if" being the operative word) to designate a principle that helps the actor to better understand the given circumstances of a play through his imagination. In Stanislavski and the Art of the Stage Magarshack translates from Stanislavski's writings:

[...] the only way in which an actor can give outer and inner expression to stage action is by asking himself, What would I do *if* certain circumstances

were true? Stanislavski usually describes this element as the *magic if*, for, as he points out, “it transfers the actor from the world of reality to a world in which alone his creative work can be done.” (33)

For example, an actor, knowing that he himself has never been rejected, asks himself what he would do “if” he were to be rejected both as a writer and a lover. In this example, “if” triggers the imagination as a means toward understanding, for example, Treplev’s reason for suicide in *The Sea Gull*.

Drawing yet another distinction, Stanislavski concluded that while there are as many superobjectives as there are characters in a given play, all of the characters’ superobjectives should serve the play’s overall meaning. He called this overall meaning the *superobjective of the entire play*. Michael Chekhov explains: “In a play the whole stream of individual, minor objectives (as well as the superobjectives of the character) should converge to carry out the *superobjective of the entire play*, which is the *leitmotif* of the author’s literary production, the leading thought which inspired his work” (140).

For Gister, like Stanislavski, the objectives and the superobjective are created out of an examination of the play. In class, Gister also stipulated that the choices made on behalf of the character should serve the play, rather than some private motive on the part of the actor. For example, if an actor were playing the role of Masha in *The Sea Gull*, she might choose to make her superobjective *to get Treplev to marry me*, as evidence in the text strongly supports this choice. The choice *to make Treplev leave me alone* would be inconsistent with the play, as all the evidence in the play suggests that Treplev already “can’t stand her,” as he tells Dorn at the end of Act I, and *is* leaving her alone. Yet some actors do make such choices at

the peril of the play. Sometimes such choices are made simply because, for example, they don't find the actor playing Treplev, whom they are supposed to be in love with, attractive.

Like viewing a tapestry, each of the character-superobjectives could be likened to threaded-patterns that contribute to the making of the whole. For example, in Act I of *The Three Sisters* it could be argued that Natasha's objective is to get Andre to propose to her. This objective serves her superobjective of wanting a house and a family. As Andre is the eldest sibling, he has control of the house and the deed is in his name. By becoming his wife, Natasha has a vehicle for immediately sharing ownership of the house with him, and inheriting it altogether should he die. This superobjective becomes the reason for Natasha's specific objective choices throughout the play. These objectives become stepping-stones that lead to the superobjective of taking possession of the house from the three sisters. As the play is in large part about dispossession, Natasha's superobjective strongly supports the overall meaning. The play starts with friends and family in the house celebrating with Natasha outside (but soon entering). The play ends with all of the sisters outside, dispossessed of the house and life as they knew it and Natasha inside, giving commands to servants and Andre alike. A metaphorical tapestry could be woven by all the actors' superobjectives, with Natasha's superobjective representing a key threaded pattern.

Gister made it very clear that circumstances did not always end favorably for characters. Therefore, the actor should not avoid creating a superobjective that would never be achieved, as it might be crucial for the play's overall meaning or superobjective. In the above, the example of a character-superobjective for Masha (*to get Treplev to marry me*) is an effective choice that serves the play, though she never achieves it. At the Chekhov workshop at UTD in 1992, Gister showed that *The Sea Gull*, in addition to being about artists

and art, is in large part about how people often love and pursue those who do not return their love, are not suitable mates, or are not right for them in other ways. It is also about how people fail to gravitate toward or even notice those who do love and are good for them. In other Chekhov plays, tragically, they sometimes discover that they love someone after it is too late. Consider Irina and Tusenbach in Act IV of *The Three Sisters*. After Irina spends the first three acts rejecting Tusenbach, by Act IV she begins to accept and actually get excited about a life with him. But she quickly learns that he has just been killed in a duel with Solyony, and in the moment of learning the news she realizes that she loves him. But it is too late. The point is that it should be irrelevant to the actor in a personal sense whether or not his character's superobjective is fulfilled. What should be most important is that the choice for the character-superobjective, regardless of its outcome, should be in service of the play-superobjective or overall meaning.

It should also be noted that one of the necessary elements for drama, conflict, is created when actors choose objectives and superobjectives that are at odds with one another. Conflict occurs when they begin to take action consistent with realizing those objectives and superobjectives. For example, in the beginning of Act IV of *The Sea Gull*, the actor playing Masha could articulate her objective as *to get Treplev to see me as attractive*. This objective is certainly supportive of her superobjective: *to get Treplev to fall in love with me*. This can be antithetical to Treplev's objective, which could arguably be *to get Masha to leave the room, so that I can write*, which serves his superobjective: *to get Nina to love me*. While the dialogue early in Act IV appears innocuous, as it does in much of Chekhov's writing, subtextually these objectives can operate through the actors' playing of actions in order to realize them, giving the scene potency, liveliness and particularly specific conflict.

One of the later scenes in *The Three Sisters* between Masha and the doctor, Chebutykin, from Corrigan's translations Six Plays of Chekhov provides an excellent example of the subtlety of Chekhov's writing, which can give the impression that the dialogue is meaningless or, at best, bland:

MASHA: You look comfortable.

CHEBUTYKIN: Well, why not? Anything happening?

MASHA: *sits down*. No, nothing. *A pause*. Tell me something. Were you in love with my mother?

CHEBUTYKIN: Yes, very much in love.

MASHA: Did she love you?

CHEBUTYKIN: *after a pause*. I can't remember anymore.

MASHA: Is my man here? Our cook Marfa always use to call her policeman "my man." Is he here?

CHEBUTYKIN: Not yet.

MASHA: When you have to take your happiness in bits and snatches, and then you lose it, as I have, you can't help but get hardened and bitter.

Masha's "man" is Vershinin, whom she has been having a long affair with. She is married to the schoolteacher, Kulygin. The doctor is not her father, yet she asks if he loved her mother, who has since died. There is evidence to suggest that he had had an affair with Masha's mother and that Irina, Masha younger sister, is his illegitimate daughter, whom he dotes on. It should be presumed that Chebutykin, along with nearly everyone else in the play including Masha's husband, is aware of her affair with Vershinin.

This author directed the play as part of a workshop to examine and teach Gister's methodology to a group of students at Tarrant County College Northeast Campus, in Bedford, TX in 2004. In directing the play the students examined the short scene, wondering why Masha asked Chebutykin about her mother. This is what was considered: An interesting answer is that she is aware that he had the affair with her mother. She is also conscious of the possibility that he might miss her since she died. His past situation is analogous to her present situation because Vershinin will be leaving her soon with his wife, children and the rest of the soldiers to move to Poland, which, in all likelihood, meant a permanent break-up. This break-up can be similar to her mother "leaving" Chebutykin by dying. It is quite possible that Chebutykin is aware that the way he answers Masha's questions might affect her attitude to losing Vershinin. He clearly says that he loved her mother, because he knows that Masha loves Vershinin. When she asks him if her mother loved him, he hesitates, as if considering. This author asserts, that he is not really wondering. He knows the answer, which is "yes." But if he tells Masha the truth she will believe that Vershinin loves her, although this author asserts that he does not; that he is a womanizer. However, the consequences of her believing that he loves her will be that she will not allow herself to let go of him emotionally. This will have a devastating affect on her relationship with her husband and her entire future. She will suffer as Chebutykin does. By lying, Chebutykin is protecting her as best he can, although she will still suffer greatly when Vershinin and his battery leave. What is important to realize is that Chekhov never overtly makes any of this interpreted meaning clear. It must be discovered through analyzing the text. It is in this way that Chekhov's plays can be more difficult to act and direct than, for example, Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare made it clear what was happening in his plays through the language,

while in Chekhov's plays the meaning is not always apparent through the dialogue alone. By interpreting the scene as shown above, the actor playing Chebutykin could choose, for example, to make his objective, *to free Masha from Vershinin*.

Stanislavski had a formula that helped the actor to define the construction of the objective: "In order to name the objective, to fix it in words, Stanislavski suggested the following formula: 'I want or I wish to *do* so and so...' and then follows the verb expressing the desire, the aim, the goal of the character" (qtd. in M. Chekhov 140). Gister, too, would ask the actor to phrase his objective in terms of what it is that he or she wants (on behalf of the character). However, Gister would make this definition even more specific through the addendum: what it is that a character wants *from another character*. Therefore, in class he would require the student to articulate the objective in terms of what he or she *as the character* wants from another character or characters in a scene. For example, in Act II of *The Sea Gull* in the scene between Treplev and Nina, the actor playing Treplev may choose to make the objective *to get Nina to start demonstrating her love for me*.

For Gister, the principle *something the character wants from another character*, should be applied to the objective, but not necessarily the superobjective. The superobjective might be defined in other ways. For example, the actor playing Lopahin in *The Cherry Orchard* may choose to make *obtaining legitimate ownership of the cherry orchard* his superobjective, which is in keeping with the play. Thus, his individual scenes could be defined through objectives articulated through Gister's definition above. He might try to get Lyubov *to acknowledge that he honestly tried to get her to pay the mortgage*. He then can say that he did not practice deceit when he finally does purchase the cherry orchard in Act III.

Unless there are enormous amounts of time to analyze a play for production, generally one must get on with the staging of it. The objective is a way of putting forth specific meaning that, without such specificity, might otherwise be subject to many interpretations, and possible confusion, both on the part of the actor and the audience. The actor must find a way to reveal specific meaning, even if that meaning is deliberately ambiguous. The use of the objective sets the actor free to play action toward the accomplishment of the objective. Action helps to reveal character by forwarding the events of the play, generating conflict with other characters whose objectives may be diametrically opposed to his or her own. Further, the objective helps the actor as the character to do something that is of obvious importance in performance: listen to the other characters.

Sometimes actors will be criticized in their work for not listening to their fellow actors in a given scene or play. Gister agreed with the criticism, but felt that it was not particularly helpful to tell an actor to simply listen more in general. He felt that the objective itself created a specific listening. By fully committing himself to the need of the character's objective while acting *as if* he does not know whether or not the objective is accomplished, the actor as character would listen very carefully, but in an interested or filtering manner, to the other actor(s) as character(s) in a given scene. Often the expression of the accomplishment (or failed accomplishment) of the objective, if articulated in Gister's terms, i.e., *what a character wants from another character*, is revealed through communication (the dialogue). For example, in Act IV of *The Sea Gull* it can be strongly argued that Treplev wishes Nina to re-establish the relationship that they had at the beginning of Act I. The relationship could conceivably be re-established through Nina declaring "I love you and wish to get back together as we were." This declaration can be what the actor playing Treplev can

be listening for. Though it never happens in the play, it is entirely in keeping with Treplev that he should be listening to what Nina says for any hope of their getting back together.

Chosen out of many possible interpretations of the text, the objectives and superobjective would help bring the actor to a single unifying purpose in the performance of the role. Without declaring an objective and taking action toward its fulfillment, the actor's performance becomes vague, and leaves the play's meaning open to a myriad of possible readings, many of which the playwright may never have intended. Frederick Turner argues just such a point in "Performed Being:"

What Stanislavski showed was that an actor must have a clear, single objective (even if it is a very profound one) in order to perform convincingly. Modern literary criticism, with its love of ambiguity, multiple meanings, dialectical hermeneutics, and deconstructive unraveling of contradictory significations, has provided every work of literature, *as a text*, with a divine plenum of viable interpretations. The text is an infinite and eternal set of possibilities. Like an electron before it is detected, which can only be described as a finite (if usually infinitesimal) likelihood of an electron-type event spread throughout the entire universe from its beginning to its end, with a strong peak of probability in a particular region, the text for a modern critic is essentially indeterminate, un-actualized, and perhaps un-actualizable.

But a reading—like a reading on an instrument designed to make an electron declare itself—if it is a true performance, must choose an objective and must sacrifice the divine indeterminacy and infinitude of possibility for the tragic and concrete finitude of actuality. (Natural Classicism 33-34)

Numerous approaches to acting theory throughout the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries derived from and influenced by Stanislavski's system make use of the objective as a cornerstone of their methods. In his widely-read and well-respected book Audition, Michael Shurtleff asks the actor to address the question *What are you fighting for?* By defining the objective in terms of something that one is actually *fighting* for, it is conceivable that the stakes become much higher. This is probably what Shurtleff had in mind. Some proponents of the Stanislavski system use the term "intention" as a substitute. But Gister drew a distinction between the term intention and objective (6 Oct. 1995). For example, Vanya steals a bottle of morphine from Astrov because he intends to commit suicide, but never does. It could be argued that Astrov and Sonya intervene and talk him out of it. But it could also be argued that he wants to be talked out of it. Gister's caution that a distinction between what a character intends to do and actually tries or does do should be noted. While there is importance in recognizing intention, Gister wanted the actor to see that the objective is different in that the character *always* takes action consistent with realizing it, whether or not it is realized. For example, while in law, premeditated murder deals with intention, which makes the consequences of the act of murdering someone more serious, for the actor, the objective such as, *to plan to take someone's life*, which might be viewed as "premeditated" is what is important. So, while the actor as the character might be seen by an observer as intending to commit murder, Gister wanted the actor to think in terms of what he wants on behalf of the character and to take action consistent with realizing what that want is. The term "intention" might be what an observer would determine an actor as the character is doing, and, further, it could be argued that it is the same meaning as the objective. However, Gister determined that someone could intend to do something and never do it. By specifying

the objective as something one actually takes action to do, Gister drew a distinction between the two terms. For Gister, it was very important that the actor make choices that could somehow be revealed through action. The difficulty with the term intention is that conceivably one could intend to do something without ever doing anything to realize it. Similar to velleity, which is merely the inclination to do something without commitment to actually taking action to do it, intention does not readily lend itself to action that would lead to its fulfillment. Thus, for Gister, objective is the appropriate term, because, whether or not realized, it always leads to action. While Gister's methodology admits intentionality as a possible element of character, he was more concerned with what actually can happen through action.

“Motivation” has also been used in the same way as the objective. However it is different from Gister's use of the term objective in that it implies a psychological justification for character objective, or *why* the character does what he does. In the End of Acting Richard Hornsby draws a clear distinction between the two:

It is important to distinguish objective from motive. *Motivation* is a word tossed about far too casually in the theatre. It differs crucially from objective in that it looks backward, not forward, and is likely to be hidden and psychological rather than conscious and clear. [In] plays written before the realistic era and in many modern antirealistic plays as well, it is quite possible for characters to have no motives at all in any deep sense, and modern actors are wrong when they try to invent some, like deciding that Iago is motivated by an unconscious homosexual passion for Othello. But whether characters

have motives or not, they always have conscious objectives if the play is any good at all. (166)

Gister's concern with analyzing a play from a psychological perspective was in terms of how the actor would reveal his findings. He felt that the actor needs to think about the character in terms of those objectives that would forward the events of the play. For example Hamlet is a prince, which had specific meaning to the Elizabethans. It is Hamlet's duty to bring order back to the world of the play, as that order has been disrupted by Claudius. Once it is certain to Hamlet that Claudius murdered his father, he sets out to avenge his death and, thus, restore order to Denmark. Having a clear and specific superobjective that serves the play and its meaning, such as *to restore order to Denmark*, was crucially important for Gister. Carefully chosen objectives would, in turn, help lead the actor as the character toward the accomplishment of the superobjective. Therefore, Gister's concern with analyzing a play from a psychological perspective always related to how to reveal the fruits of such analyses. He felt that analytical work would be useless if there was no way in which to make it a part of the character and to reveal it.

The objective sets up the context for the playing of actions. Regardless of the means whereby a character is analyzed and understood, the expression of character is dependent on the objective and actions that would fulfill it. The objective is what reveals psychological interpretations or even one's intuitive sense of character. Plays are not novels, and do not have many of the details of circumstance and character clearly defined in the narrative. With the exception of stage directions, which are often scanty, plays are comprised mainly of dialogue. The actor has to fill in details that the playwright may only suggest in or leave out

of that dialogue. Objectives fully committed to through actions help reveal even the deepest of psychological interpretations of situations and circumstances.

Although Gister refined and drew some new distinctions of meaning for the objective and superobjective, nonetheless the meanings are akin to those found in Stanislavski's system, as well as those of others theorists who have adopted them. However, Gister's use of the element known as action" differs from both Stanislavski action and others, as will be shown in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### ACTION: *HOW DO I GET WHAT I WANT?*

#### FIRST-YEAR METHODS

Although it has been clearly shown that Gister, like many other teachers, borrowed the principle of the *objective* from the Stanislavski System, his principle of *action* is unique among acting theories and its origin is uncertain. Gister defined action as *how an actor (as the character) wants to make another actor (as the character) feel*. He also applied this definition to images and objects, i.e., *how an actor (as the character) wants to make an image or thing feel*, as will be shown. In the first instance, an actor, as a character, plays an action on another actor, as a character, in order to make that character feel an emotion that can lead to accomplishing the objective. In more than one class, Gister demonstrated that if a person commits himself to an action “on” someone, whether in acting or in life, then the person’s own emotional life will “come right along with him” in the playing out of it (2 September 1994 and 7 September 1995). While it is obvious that objects such as chairs and photographs cannot feel anything, the act of attempting to make something feel an emotion by an actor triggers an emotion in the actor. Gister argued that if an actor fully committed to making a picture of a loved one feel wanted the actor would start to feel an emotion. He reasoned that this was so because the human body, which includes the emotions, does not know the difference between reality and fantasy. The literature on ‘mirror-neurons’ supports Gister’s claim, as will be shown.

While the arousal of feeling in the actor performing the action is important, it is not the main purpose for Gister's principle of action. The main purpose for action in Gister's terminology is in fulfillment of the *objective* of the character and that it arouse emotion in the receiver of the action. For example, in *The Cherry Orchard*, the actor playing the character Trofimov may choose to make the actor playing the character Lopahin feel stupid, because he wishes to be seen as superior by those around him. In this case the action: to make Lopahin feel stupid, serves the objective: to be seen as superior. In the case of an inanimate object in the same play, the actor playing the character of Gaev, afraid that his sister, Lyubov, will be returning to France can indirectly make her feel needed by playing the action: to make an old chest of drawers, in the family for generations, feel special while in her presence. This action serves the objective: *to get her to stay with me in Russia*, because he can indirectly evoke a feeling in her (in order to get her to stay) through the action "on" the chest of drawers.

In summarizing what has been shown in the previous chapter, it is important to remember that Gister insisted that the actor define the play in large part in terms of objectives leading to the fulfillment of the superobjective. He was very specific about his formulaic approach to the objective: 1) that it was always a choice an actor made on behalf of the character, 2) it was always defined as what the actor as the character wants from another actor as character and 3) the objective chosen must be in service of the needs of the character. For example, the actor playing Medvendenko may choose to get Masha to fall in love with him in the first scene in *The Sea Gull*. This clearly satisfies all three requirements above. Once the objective is defined the actor should then make *action* choices in order to accomplish it.

Gister was taught his specific definition of action and how to use it through his work with Paul Mann, who lived from 1913 to 1985. In an interview conducted by Richard Schechner with Mann for the Winter, 1964 issue of The Tulane Drama Review it was revealed that Mann, at that time Director of Training and a permanent member of the Repertory Theatre of the Lincoln Center, worked and studied with the Group Theatre. He was influenced by the Ouspenskaya-Boleslavski teachings, as well as by Michael Chekhov. He visited the Soviet Union (prior to 1964) to observe the work being done at the Moscow Arts Theatre and other Russian schools (84). His observations would further influence his work.

Although little documentation exists about Mann and his theories of acting and their influences, at a workshop at UTD in 1991 Gister acknowledged that Mann was the source for his knowledge of the principle of action. During interviews conducted at the Yale School of Drama in 1995 and later at his home in 2005, he confirmed Mann as that source while elaborating on his working relationship with him. In a taped interview on October 6, 2005 Gister expressed enormous gratitude for the knowledge he gained from their work together as it produced his understanding of the principle of action, which would greatly influence him and the evolutionary development of his own methodology.

The source of Mann's knowledge of the principle of action is a mystery. Gister did not reveal knowledge of that source. Conjecture on the part of this author leads to two likely possibilities: he learned the principle from his observations during the visit to Russia (The Soviet Union) sometime prior to 1964 or he invented (or discovered) it himself. Nonetheless, this mysterious principle and how it works is one of the most powerful ideas in Gister's

methodology. In interviews, Gister reported that Mann influenced him in other ways, but he only specified the principle of action as Mann's chief contribution to his methodology.

Gister gave support to the principle of action by comparing it favorably to the way in which people often accomplish results in life. He insisted that people influence one another more through emotional than intellectual means. During the introduction to his principle of action in class on September 7, 1995 he recalled protests about the Viet Nam War as examples of how strongly emotion can be a catalyst for human action. He suggested that the reason that there was such protestation at the time was because people *felt* that the war was wrong. No amount of intellectual reasoning, justifying and convincing could change their minds. He concluded that results must be produced through emotional interaction, because intellectual reasoning would fail, as it had on the protestors by those who tried to end the protests.

For Gister, in order to be effective, the actor, too, must play action that is emotionally rather than intellectually based. He often repeated in class that the actor should never play the action *to convince* anyone of anything (9 October 1995). As will be examined in the chapter "Application of the Methodology," Gister's principle of action is not necessarily dependent on the speaking of lines for its efficacy. An actor as a character can make another actor as a character *feel appreciated* simply by the playing of an action in silence. While action is not dependent on lines in order to affect someone, lines can also be used with action. A key distinction for using Gister's principle of action in the Modern/Contemporary theatre versus the Elizabethan/Classic theatre is that for the classical period his principle of action is often textual and for the modern period his principle of action is often sub-textual.

The use of Gister's principle of action does more than help the actor as character experience emotion and accomplish the objective. By making one's acting partner, for example, *feel pity*, that partner does not have to generate emotion himself. His work, in turn, is to make his partner feel, for example, *shame*. Thus, the burden of responsibility on the part of the actor having to experience what his character might be experiencing in a given moment is lifted, as one's own scene partner does the work of generating the emotional life. For Gister, the key to what the actor who is receiving the action must do is to remain vulnerable toward one's scene partner, so that one can fully experience the action from the other actor and thus, feel the emotion.

Gister's principle of action has even further consequences than those discussed above. He felt that plays were meant to be experiential, which is to say that audiences come to experience the theatrical event. Plays were not written simply to be read in one's home. The principle of action was very important to Gister because it actively generates experience. For him experience is in large part emotional and in essence what plays should be about and productions should strive to engender. The act of making someone or something feel on stage resonates in the emotional life of its audience who experience that interaction and, therefore, the play itself, on a moment-to-moment basis. For example, if one actor as a character attempts to make another actor as character *feel sad*, not only can the emotion surface in the actor, but the audience, too, assuming it is vulnerable to the event. This phenomenon is supported in the literature on mirror-neurons. A paper by Giacomo Rizzolatti and Layla Craighero who are pioneers in the theory of mirror-neurons, explains it thus: "Mirror neurons represent the neural basis of a mechanism that creates a direct link between the sender of a message and its receiver. Thanks to this mechanism, actions done by other

individuals become messages that are understood by an observer without any cognitive mediation.” As the audience begins to experience the emotional current of the play, its reaction can affect the actors. Thus, an emotional loop is generated that travels from actor to audience and back. Gister’s principle of action supports this performance dynamic because of its focus on actively triggering feelings through its use. Further, as actions should be played in order to fulfill the objective, which in turn should help the actor to achieve the superobjective, active pursuit of the superobjective via action should serve to enhance the audience’s understanding of the play’s overall meaning in a direct, moment-by-moment basis.

Gister’s principle of action has support in Stanislavski’s theories. In “Stanislavsky’s System” Sharon Marie Carnicke explains that Stanislavski thought that “successful acting places the creative act itself in the laps of the audience.” He continues:

By insisting on the immediacy of performance and the presence of the actor, Stanislavski argues against nineteenth-century traditions, which taught actors to represent characters from the stage through carefully crafted intonations and gestures. However well rehearsed, Stanislavskian actors remain essentially dynamic and improvisatory during performance. Stanislavsky calls such acting [...] ‘experiencing.’ He adopts this idiosyncratic term from the novelist Leo Tolstoy, who had argued that art communicates felt experience, not knowledge. (Twentieth Century Actor Training, 17)

While action is one of the most important principles in Gister’s methodology, it is also an important element in many theories of acting and human behavior, though definitions of it vary widely. It appears in the literature of communication, business, management,

personal relationships and psychology among others. It also appears in disparate fields as revealed in, for example, the scientific writings of Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela, detailing their work on the biological roots of human understanding and survival mechanisms:

Since all cognition brings forth a world, our starting point will necessarily be the operational effectiveness of living beings in their domain of existence. In other words, our starting point to get an explanation that can be scientifically validated is to characterize cognition as an effective action, an action that will enable a living being to continue its existence in a definite environment as it brings forth its world. Nothing more, nothing less. (The Tree of Knowledge 29-30)

In many theories of acting and human behavior the “meaning” of action is often ill-defined, vague, misleading, contradictory or simply assumed. After all, everyone knows what action is. Often in theatre, particularly in the professional work of rehearsal, directors and actors toss the word action around in interchangeable ways. For example, it is sometimes used to designate a physical movement, otherwise known as “blocking” (though Stanislavski designated this as “physical action” if it is in service of the objective). A director may say to an actor early on in rehearsal that his action is to enter, look around the room and then sit on the couch. Gister would designate this “action” as an “activity” drawing a very specific distinction between the two terms. He was not opposed to activity, but was simply rigorous in clarifying the difference between them in teaching his methodology. It is the presupposition of “knowing” what an action is that would initially be an obstacle for Gister to overcome in teaching first year students. Most students who entered

the program had learned conceptions of action through participation in high school drama, undergraduate training and/or professional work that they brought with them. Gister's initial task was to break the student's habit of using their own definitions of action that differed from his own. In order to help elucidate the effectiveness of Gister's principle of action, it is useful to look at a few of these other theories (that do offer definitions) in terms of how and why they operate, and what they achieve while pointing out how they differ and how they are similar to or in some ways support Gister's principle.

While some theories are closer than others to Gister's principle, this author has only found two references to action that are truly similar among the literature. Hardly a theory, it appears as a single sentence in the text, Notes on Directing by Frank Hauser and Russell Reich: "An excellent way of expressing an action [...] is to prompt the actor to focus on how he wants the *other* person to feel" (44). Their text is a collection of notes the authors accumulated over many years of directing in the theatre. There is no source given for the note on action. It also appears as examples of specific action choices in the analysis of a scene from *Uncle Vanya* in the book The Power of the Actor by Ivana Chubbuck. However, her examples do not constitute a specific theory of action akin to Gister's because she uses other examples of action choices that are not related to how the actor as character wants to make someone or some thing feel. For example, she uses an example such as the actor as character making another actor as character "believe" (rather than feel), which Gister would never use.

While the above examples are the nearest definitions to Gister's own this author has found, we begin our examination of other "similar" theories, appropriately, with those of Constantine Stanislavski. In Stanislavski on the Art of the Stage he tells us:

The best way an actor can evoke a feeling of truth and belief in what he is doing on the stage is to concentrate on the simplest physical actions. What matters are not the physical actions themselves, but the feeling of truth and belief they help the actor to evoke in himself. If an actor finds it difficult to grasp at once the large truth of some big action, he should divide it, like his part itself, into smaller pieces, and try to believe in the smallest of them.

Quite often by the realization of one little truth and one moment of belief in the genuineness of his action, an actor will gain an insight into the whole of his part and will be able to believe in the great truth of the play. (49)

Although there were many changes that Stanislavski made to his various theories of acting, *physical action* has long been regarded as one of his most important, influential and unchanging principles. Its application has been widespread, serving as the theoretical basis for the texts of many of his students and theatre artists, such as Training an Actor by Sonia Moore. Jerzy Grotowski took physical actions to a new level as revealed in At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions by Richard Thomas. For example, in the chapter “Grotowski Vs. Stanislavski: the Impulses” Richards shows how Stanislavski’s use of impulse relates to peripheral physical expression while Grotowski’s use of impulse relates to that which precedes and generates physical action. Physical Action was the subject of this author’s master’s thesis, Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Actions Applied to Moliere’s *The Imaginary Invalid*. The principle of physical action has informally contributed to theatre artists and educators in countless ways as evidenced in the work of such directors as Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski. But, while physical action has been used in numerous schools of acting, it was not considered *action* for Gister. He was rigorous about designating what

Stanislavski and others since have called “physical action” *as* “activities,” separating and distancing Stanislavski’s concept from his own. Activities in Gister’s terminology will be further defined and examined in Chapter 6.

Physical action can take many forms, such as removing one’s hat or entering through a living room door, but it can also have its basis in the psyche. One of Stanislavski’s prized pupils, Eugene Vakhtangov, elaborates on Stanislavski’s theory of action in his diary,

Preparing for the Role:

The actor must, therefore, come onto the stage not in order to feel or experience emotions, but in order to act. “Don’t wait for emotions—act immediately,” Stanislavski said. [...] Every action differs from feeling by the presence of the will element. To *persuade*, to *comfort*, to *reproach*, to *forgive*, to *wait*, to *chase away*—these are verbs expressing *will action*. These verbs denote the task which the actor places before himself when working upon a character, while the verbs to *become irritated*, to *pity*, to *weep*, to *laugh*, to *be impatient*, to *hate*, to *love*—express feeling and therefore cannot and must not figure as a task in the analysis of a role. Feelings denoted by these verbs must be born spontaneously and subconsciously as a result of the actions executed by the first series of verbs. (Acting: A Handbook of the Stanislavski Method 118)

Although Gister felt that the verb-choice approach to playing action was flawed, he did agree with the idea that feelings arise as a result of sincerely committing oneself to action. It is important to remember that Gister felt that actions created feelings in the doer because the human body does not know the difference between reality and fantasy, because

of the principle of mirror-neurons. Thus, the process of an actor as the character attempting to make someone or something feel an emotion in turn affects the actor on an emotional level as well. While the focus is different for the Stanislavski and Gister definitions of action, many of the ideas about action in Vakhtangov's diary are shared by Gister. For example, the idea that feeling is aroused through doing and that "[Stanislavski] teaches us to follow the road pointed out by nature itself" supports Gister's analogy to the way in which human beings seek to fulfill their needs through action (119).

While feeling can be the result of playing an action as defined by Stanislavski, Gister would argue that the playing of the action in the above scheme often fails in effectiveness because the actor's focus has a tendency to stay on himself in "doing" the action rather than who it is being done to. For example, Gister would point out that if one adopted the above approach and used a verb such as *to scold*, inevitably what begins to happen is that the actor acts like he is scolding. Thus, he imitates doing an action rather than actually doing it, as if miming what it looks like to scold someone. This distinction is crucial for understanding the difference between Vakhtangov/Stanislavski action and Gister/Mann action. It should not be confused with the Aristotelian concept of imitating an action, often wrongly defined as (rather than rightly associated with) the events that happen in a play. Francis Fergusson in his essay "*Macbeth* as the Imitation of an Action" states:

The word "action"—praxis—as Aristotle uses it in the *Poetics*, does not mean outward deeds or events, but something much more like "purpose" or "aim." Perhaps our word "motive" suggests more of its meaning [...].

Action is not outward deeds or events; but on the other hand, there can be no action without resulting deeds. We guess at a man's action by way of what he

does, his outward and visible deeds. We are aware that our own action, or motive, produces deeds of some sort as soon as it exists. (200-201)

By using the approach outlined by Vakhtangov, the action does not fully release onto the person (or thing) it is chosen to affect. Actors begin to imitate the verbs themselves, acting like they are comforting, forgiving, approaching and waiting. Gister would change these elements, *making the other character feel* comforted or forgiven. This change shifts the focus to affecting the other person, rather than acting as if or like one was affecting the other person. Put another way, the actor sets about attempting to directly trigger a feeling in the other actor or indirectly in the other actor through a thing.

As was shown in the last chapter, the objective can remain the same, and even words, such as “comfort” and “forgive” can remain the same. However, the focus shifts entirely. This concept of affecting the other character or thing is a point that cannot be overemphasized in Gister’s methodology. It is also an important reason that the Linklater approach to voice training was attractive to Gister, as it frees the actor as character to release energy onto other actors as characters and things around him in order to make them feel emotions. Often, beginning (and sometimes advanced) students of acting exhibit signs of vocal and physical inhibitions that block the playing of actions. Classes in Linklater voice and specially designed movement classes help free the student from vocal and physical inhibitions that would otherwise hinder full release of the kind of action that Gister taught. Linklater’s work is structured as a progression of exercises that the student performs over a lengthy period of time, usually about three years in an MFA acting program. The work includes: enhancing body and breath awareness, releasing of sound and vibrations, freeing the body from habitual patterns of tension that would block or limit the full release of the

voice, deepening and expanding the breath capacity and resonating chambers in the body and articulation work that develops sensitivities and skills for speaking a wide range of poetry and dramatic literature. Primarily, the point of the work is to “free one’s natural voice” rather than impose a way of speaking onto the student. With freedom that comes as a result of the training, the student’s ability to use the voice, breath and entire body to express the self is enhanced. This ability is very helpful in playing actions, because actions require the actor as character to affect sources such as other characters, things and images. Undue tension, lack of breath support, and limited speaking skills can dampen the release of action, thus limiting the affect the actor as character can produce on the receivers of the actions.

Although criticized by Gister, the definition of action cited in the Vakhtangov diary has had widespread influence. It can be found in many texts on acting. For example, Robert Benedetti’s classic, The Actor at Work, gives numerous examples of types of actions that an actor might play: “to be a success” “to convince” and “to trick” among many others (210). In 2004, Marina Caldarone and Maggie Lloyd-Williams published Actions: The Actors’ Thesaurus offering a lexicon of thousands of verbs like those above for the actor to draw from in the analysis of a role. The authors base their approach to action, which they call “actioning” on Stanislavski’s use of the term. Their rules for playing action, like Stanislavski’s, differ from Gister’s:

An action verb must always be a transitive verb. A transitive or active verb is a verb (‘a doing verb’) that you can actively do to someone else. It is always in the present tense and transitional, expressing an action that carries over from you (the subject) to the person you’re speaking to (the object). So, in the case of *charm*, *encourage* and *cherish*, ‘I *charm* you,’ ‘I *encourage* you,’ and

'I *cherish* you' all make sense and so those three verbs must be transitive.

(xvii-iii)

Gister would certainly agree with action as being something done by one person to another person. However, the verb method in the above, just as the verb method illustrated in Vakhtangov's diary, can be a pitfall for actors. The trap is that it can quickly lead an actor to imitate "charm," "encouraging behavior" and to pretend what "to cherish someone" might look like to an observer, rather than to "really make someone feel charmed, encouraged, cherished, etc.," as Gister would often say.

While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore the many domains outside of acting theory in which definitions of human action are important, one has been chosen to help further define Gister's own. In addition to the fact that it is not based on acting theory, it was chosen because, like Gister's principle of action, the theory is derived from observing human communication.

The example is drawn from the work of the philosopher J.L. Austin. Austin developed a philosophy for linguistic action made through his observations of everyday speech or "utterances." He called the utterances "performatives." These performatives do not necessarily reflect facts about the world, but are actions in that they allow the speaker to do things in and through the speaking of them. For example, to declare a couple man and wife is not a statement about the world, but an action that reorganizes the status of the couple in a legal and binding way. What is important is whether or not the person making the utterance has the authority (such as a Justice of the Peace) to make the declaration (perform the action).

Austin designates three acts that can be performed through speaking: *illocutionary*, *locutionary* and *prelocutionary*. The illocutionary act is the ‘performance of an act *in* saying something,’ the locutionary act is “the performance of an act *of* saying something” and the prelocutionary act produces “certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, actions of the audience, or of the speaker or of other persons” (How to Do Things with Words 99-101). The prelocutionary act is analogous to the kinds of actions that have been examined in this chapter in that it hopes to achieve a result indirectly, i.e., by doing something that would produce a result such as the objective examined in the previous chapter, not doing *as* but *for* the result. Thus, the prelocutionary act attempts to affect, for example, the “feelings” of the person, just as Gister’s action does, and thus achieves the desired result (the objective) *through*, versus the locutionary act *of* and the illocutionary act *in*, doing so.

Austin’s student, John Searle used the term “speech acts” to designate types of utterances that constitute “acts” that he categorized as:

“Uttering words [...] = *performing utterance acts*.”

“Referring and predicating = performing *propositional acts*.”

“Stating, questioning, commanding, promising, etc. = performing, *illocutionary acts*.”

(Speech Acts 24). Searle included *prelocutionary* acts with the above categories, adding to Austin’s definition with: “the consequences or *effects* such acts have on the action, thoughts, or beliefs, etc. of hearers. For example, by arguing I may *persuade* or *convince* someone, by warning him I may *scare* or *alarm* him, by making a request I may *get him to do something*, by informing him I may convince him (enlighten, edify, inspire him, get him to realize)” (25).

Understanding Computers and Cognition by Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores

shows how Searle classified the linguistic actions or “speech-acts” that Austin observed as:

**Assertives:** commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something’s being the case—to the truth of the expressed proposition.

**Directives:** attempt (in varying degrees) to get the hearer to do something.

These include both the questions (which can direct the hearer to make an assertive speech act in response) and commands (which attempt to get the hearer to carry out some linguistic or non-linguistic act).

**Commissives:** commit the speaker (again in varying degrees) to some future course of action.

**Expressives:** express a psychological state of affairs. This class includes acts such as apologizing and praising.

**Declarations:** bring about the correspondence between the propositional content of the speech act and reality, as illustrated by the example of pronouncing a couple married. Generally, the speech acts are viewed as universal: “Each culture or language may have its unique ways of expressing the different speech acts, but the space of possibilities is the universal basis of our existence in language.” (58-59)

Fernando Flores, a student of Searle’s, investigated speech-act theory in order to develop a theory of communication that would help people to become more effective and efficient in business. His theories offer interesting possibilities for developing an approach to acting. By interpreting the lines of a play through the distinctions developed by Austin, Searle and Flores, the actor can have a framework for analysis that can lead to:

- character development
- a set of powerful distinctions: *promises, requests, declarations* and *assertions* from which to interpret the utterances that the character makes in the dialogues
- distinctions about applying linguistic action to speech
- an understanding of communication that can serve in seeing the dialogue within a given scene in an entirely new light

For example, Treplev's first line in the scene between him and Nina in Act II of *The Sea Gull* is "Are you all alone?" Clearly, according to Austin, Searle and Flores this utterance is a request. A request is a call for action on the part of the receiver of the utterance, in this case, Nina. Nina responds with "Yes." According to Austin, Nina's response can be considered an assertion, i.e., a statement that can be proven. Treplev then lays a dead seagull at her feet. She responds, "What does this mean?" This is another utterance that is a request. The entire play can be analyzed in this way with all of the lines defined as one speech-act or another.

In "The Reality of Doing: Real Speech Acts in the Theatre" David Z. Saltz investigates what illocutionary acts might hold for Method acting theory. Although Method acting does attempt to create a certain reaction in an audience member (just as an illocutionary speech act attempts to create reaction in the receiver,) he points out some subtle ways in which certain speech act theory terms do not "map onto" those of Method acting: "...a Method actor might be attempted to equate Austin's notion of illocution with Stanislavski's notion of an objective, but these two concepts are not quite parallel. The illocution is itself an action. An objective is the point or goal of an action; in speech act terms, it is the speaker's desired perlocution. When I ask for salt, I am performing the act of

requesting (the illocution), but my objective is not to make a request, it is to get the salt (the desired perlocution). Saltz points out that illocutionary force of a message is not determined by the intent of the sender but by the way the receiver perceives the intent of the sender. “It is entirely possible,” Saltz says, “for me to intend, for example, to compliment you and to end up inadvertently insulting you” (65). Saltz suggests that speech actor theory has more in common with other acting theories, such as Sanford Meisner’s communication-based approach, than with Strasberg and other Method acting teachers who are more concerned with the inner-life of the actor as the character.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to further explore linguistic action as a possibility for the development of an acting theory. However, it is useful to point out that the definition of action in speech-act theory differs from Gister’s in means. Austin’s principle is predicated on the proper execution of specific types of utterances. Gister’s principle (action), not utterance, is the vehicle for producing change through the arousal of emotion. It should be noted that while action, (as Mann and Gister define it), can be released through utterances, it is not dependent on them for their proper execution. For example, an actor as the character can enter a room occupied by another actor as the character. The actor entering can have the objective *to make the actor as the character who occupies the room, leave the room*. Without uttering a sound, the entering actor as the character can successfully do this by making the other actor as the character feel so uncomfortable that he leaves.

But Austin, Searle and Flores’ theories may offer possibilities for acting theory, particularly in performing Shakespeare and other classical playwrights. Speech-act theory could prove very useful in drawing distinctions in heightened dramatic language where the richness of poetry often requires rigorous scrutiny for clear communication in performance.

It may be worth investigating an Elizabethan play as a series of “illocutionary points.” Could there be value in categorizing lines from *Hamlet* in terms of the five points? Certainly interpreting the line “To be or not to be” as a commissive or expressive can help define what it means and how it can be spoken. For example, what specifically is the expressive revealing about Hamlet’s state-of-being at this specific time in the play? Who is the expressive being made to? Perhaps it is for Claudius and Polonius’s benefit, who are secretly listening? If there is some basis for the assertion that all utterances can be categorized as illocutionary points, perhaps the approach of matching the utterance to the specific point or category within which it may fit can help an actor playing Hamlet to understand the language and the role in a specific and helpful way.

The purpose of this chapter has been to clearly define Gister’s principle of action. In order to do that, examples were drawn and it was compared and contrasted with other principles of action, showing important similarities and differences. However, as has been mentioned in Chapter 1, Gister was able to explain the principles of his methodology in a relatively short period of time. It took months of classroom work applying those principles in order to produce the kind of visceral understanding that Gister required of his students and that would serve them in their professional work in the theatre. The next chapter, *Application of the Methodology*, will begin to show how the principle of action (and the other principles) was and should be used in text analysis.

**CHAPTER 6**  
**APPLICATION OF THE METHODOLOGY**  
**FIRST-YEAR METHODS**

**Introduction**

The analysis that follows uses the Robert W. Corrigan translation of *The Sea Gull*. The scene analyzed is directly quoted from the Corrigan translation. Gister preferred, used and recommended the Corrigan translations of Chekhov's plays in all of his acting classes, directing projects at the Yale School of Drama and workshops on Chekhov, such as the one that he conducted at the University of Texas at Dallas in 1992. Unfortunately, the text Six Plays of Chekhov, which contains all of Corrigan's translations of Chekhov's plays, has been out of print for several years.

This chapter shows some examples of how the central questions and important ideas that support Gister's methodology might be applied to a scene. It will show the interdependency of the central questions through explaining and examining how answers to *Who am I?*, *Where am I?* and *When am I there?* can inform answers to *What do I want?* and *How do I go about getting what I want?* Additionally, it will explain and examine how to choose *objectives* that serve the *superobjectives*, how to choose *actions* to realize the *objectives*, and how *actions* are played. Finally, it will explain and examine the question *What do I do after I get or fail to get what I want?* and "the how of an action" that have yet to be discussed. Although the question *What do I do after I get or fail to get what I want?* is

important in Gister's methodology, in this dissertation it is not examined as a central question because it works as an extension of *What do I want?* Therefore, it is best understood through the analysis of an actual scene from a play in relation to the application of the *objective*.

In the following analysis some examples are given of how applying the central questions can lead to important answers for the actor. With those answers, choices can be made on behalf of the characters. While there are many possible answers for each question, this analysis shows how a few important answers can lead to meaningful choices, and how those choices are realized through action. The reader should keep in mind that applying the questions through an actual rehearsal and production process can yield many more answers than this analysis provides.

The scene chosen is between Nina and Treplev in Act II of *The Sea Gull*. While there is no quintessential scene that provides the perfect model for all scenes, this scene is an example of how the methodology might be applied to a particular scene from a particular play. It is hoped that by offering this analysis within the dissertation a blueprint is provided for the reader in applying the methodology to roles in other plays while bearing in mind that the aesthetics of the writing may differ considerably. Consider that applying the question *Where am I?* can and should lead to very different answers and choices for an actor playing Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* set indoors in Mississippi versus Jerry in the *The Zoo Story* set outside in Central Park versus Lvov in Chekhov's *Ivanov* set both indoors and outdoors in Central Russia.

### **Read the Play Thoroughly**

Gister advocates this first important step: that the actor should read the play thoroughly, many times if necessary, in order to understand what it is about. Understanding

the play in terms of its overall meaning (Stanislavski's "superobjective") can help the actor to make choices when applying the central questions examined throughout this dissertation.

Gister explained that *The Sea Gull* is about love, art and being an artist. It is also about how the elements of love and art sometimes get confused with one another by artists, how we sometimes love people who are not right for us and ignore or fail to notice those who are (November, 1992). Those ingredients, like dispossession and loss in *The Three Sisters* can help shape choices that the actors might make on behalf of the characters in analyzing *The Sea Gull*.

### **Synopsis of *The Sea Gull***

This synopsis by this author is similar to what an actor, following Gister's recommendation for a close reading, might conclude after reading the script. *The Sea Gull* focuses on the lives of four major and several minor characters. It is set on a beautiful estate very close to a lake. The major characters, Treplev, Nina, Irina and Trigorin are all artists. Irina, Treplev's mother, is a famous actor and her boyfriend, Trigorin, who is not related to Treplev, is a famous writer. Treplev is an aspiring writer and Nina, his girlfriend, is an aspiring actor who lives in the nearby estate across the lake. There are also minor characters, such as Masha, the daughter of Shamraev, the manager of the estate. She is in love with Treplev, although he does not return her love. There is also Medvendenko, a poor schoolteacher in love with Masha, although she does not return his love. Finally there is the area physician, Doctor Dorn; and Polina, Shamraev's wife, who is in love with Dorn, though he resists her.

**Act I**

In Act I Irina and Trigorin, who live and work in Moscow, are on vacation and have come to visit Treplev and her brother Sorin, who owns the estate where the play is set. All of the characters gather outside next to the lake in early evening where a makeshift stage has been built for a one-character play-within-a-play written by Treplev. The play, which is reminiscent of works by the “symbolists,” is an expression of Treplev’s project to invent new theatrical forms. During the performance, which amounts to an overly long monologue by Nina, Irina makes fun of Treplev’s writing, publicly humiliating him in front of everyone, including the famous writer, Trigorin, of whom Treplev is jealous. In a rage Treplev ends the performance prematurely and disappears into the woods surrounding the estate. Masha chases after him. The group gathers around Nina and praises her performance. After meeting Trigorin she leaves because her parents disapprove of the lifestyle of theatre artists, with whom they do not want her to associate. The group departs except for Doctor Dorn who praises the play in a short monologue. Masha returns unable to find Treplev. Arguably his illegitimate daughter, she confesses to Dorn her love of Treplev. Dorn can offer no consolation because he knows that Treplev loves Nina. She leaves and Treplev returns. Dorn, the only audience member who seemed to like the play, praises Treplev for his work. Treplev, appreciative, exits in tears looking for Nina.

**Act II**

Act II takes place several days later on and near the croquet lawn of the estate. There is a brief argument between Shamraev and Irina about travel arrangements to town for her and Trigorin’s return to Moscow. All exit except for Nina. The scene to be analyzed now

occurs: *Treplev appears with a dead seagull that he shot and offers it to Nina as a symbol of his own fate: he will shoot himself, too, because she has withdrawn her love. They quarrel.*

*Treplev exits as Trigorin enters.* Irina and Trigorin have a long scene in which he discusses his life as a writer and she declares that she would love to become a famous actor. The conversation is disrupted by Irina who says that the plans have changed and that she and Trigorin will be extending their stay at the estate.

### **Act III**

Act III is set in the dining room of Sorin's estate one week after the end of Act II. It is the day that Irina and Trigorin have planned their return trip to Moscow. Sometime after Act I, Treplev challenged Trigorin to a duel over Nina, but Trigorin refused. Treplev has a minor head wound from a failed suicide attempt, but Doctor Dorn, who has been summoned, is late. Treplev consequently has his head bandaged by Irina, who tries to get him to stop acting childishly, which ends in an argument. Nina meets with Trigorin and gives him a medallion with a note that suggests he read a line from one of his books. The line, "If you ever need my life, come and take it" leads Trigorin to ask Irina if they can stay on the estate for awhile longer. Irina, aware of Trigorin's growing attraction to Nina, refuses. They quarrel, make up, and leave for Moscow. As they are leaving the estate, Nina covertly informs Trigorin that she is running away from home in order to move to Moscow and become an actor. He gives her the name of his hotel in Moscow and they kiss.

## Act IV

Act IV takes place in Treplev's study at the estate in winter, over two years after Act III. Although Masha has married Medvendenko and they have a child, she still loves Treplev. Several characters discuss events that occurred over the time interval between Act III and Act IV. It is disclosed that an affair between Nina and Trigorin led to Nina having a child, but it died. Afterwards, Trigorin withdrew his love from her and returned to Irina. Nina became an actor, but with limited success. Treplev grew increasingly depressed over losing Nina, and her affair with Trigorin, but achieved moderate success as a writer of short stories. It is revealed that Nina is touring the provinces with a theatre company and may have been spotted by Medvendenko near the lake. Irina has been telegraphed to return to the estate because her brother's health is quickly failing. When Irina arrives she is accompanied by Trigorin. Treplev and Trigorin shake hands and "make up." All characters but Treplev retire to another room to play lotto (bingo). Treplev resumes writing a story he has been working on when Nina enters through the study door, unseen by all but Treplev. In a long monologue she talks about her life over the last two years: the pain of losing the child, the break-up with Trigorin and the difficulty of being a professional actor. She calls herself a "seagull," the name she signed in letters that she had sent to Treplev during her two-year absence. She asserts that she has had a renewal of confidence by returning to the lake and the estate, but must leave. Treplev begs her to stay. Overhearing Trigorin playing lotto in the "next room" she confesses to Treplev that she still loves Trigorin, says goodbye and leaves. Treplev tears up all of his manuscripts and burns them. He then exits and kills himself with a pistol. The shot disrupts the card game. Dorn exits and discovers the body, but tells everyone that the

noise was due to a bottle exploding in his medicine bag. He then pulls Trigorin aside, explains what has happened and asks him to take Irina away before she finds out about Treplev.

### Scene from Act II of *The Sea Gull*

TREPLEV. *Enters, carrying a gun and a dead sea gull.* Are you all alone?

NINA. Yes. *Treplev lays the sea gull at her feet.* What does this mean?

TREPLEV. I was rotten enough to kill this sea gull today. I lay it at your feet.

NINA. What's wrong with you? *Picks up the sea gull and looks at it.*

TREPLEV. *after a pause.* And soon I'm going to kill myself in the same way.

NINA. What *is* wrong with you? This isn't like you at all!

TREPLEV. That's true! I began to change when you did. You've changed towards me and you know it...You're cold to me, and my very presence bothers you.

NINA. You've been so irritable lately, and most of the time you talk in riddles and I don't understand a word you're saying. And I suppose now that this sea gull, here, is some kind of symbol too. Well, forgive me, I don't understand that either...*Putting the sea gull on the seat.* I'm too simple minded to understand you.

TREPLEV. It all began the night my play failed. Women never forgive failure.

Well, I burnt it! Every bit of it! Oh, if you only knew how unhappy I am! And the way you've rejected me, I can't understand it!...It's as if I woke up one morning and found the lake suddenly drying up. You said that you're too simple minded to understand me. Tell me, what's there to understand? Nobody liked my play, so now you despise my talent, and think I'm ordinary and insignificant, like all the rest of

them...*Stamping his foot.* Oh, how well I understand. How well! It's like a nail in my head...Oh, damn it...And my pride...sucking my life blood...like a snake...*Sees Trigorin, who enters reading.* But here comes the real genius, he walks like Hamlet himself, and with a book, too. *Mimics.* "Words, words, words."...The sun has hardly touched you and already you're smiling and your eyes are melting in its rays. I won't bother you any more...*Goes out quickly.*

**Character: *Who am I?***

The first question to be addressed in analyzing the role of Nina is *Who am I?* Gister's method anticipates that the student playing Nina would begin by determining what it is that Nina likes, dislikes, loves and hates. It is obvious from the play that Nina loves the theatre and the lifestyle that goes along with it. She loves being on the stage acting and longs for a career in the theatre. Importantly, she declares to Trigorin that she would love to be famous.

The actor playing Nina should consider whether or not she loves Treplev. Although it is not clear if she is *in love* with Treplev at the beginning of Act I, it is clear that at one time (before Act I) she was, but throughout the time-period of the play she is not. The choice that she was at one time in love with Treplev can be observed by the way in which he reacts to her when she withdraws herself from him. The actor playing Nina should make a distinction between loving and being in love with someone, because this distinction is crucially important in defining how she interacts with Treplev versus Trigorin. While she may not be in love with Treplev, there is strong evidence to suggest that she still loves him. For example, the fact that she returns after a two-year absence in order to see him at the very end of the play could lead to the meaningful conclusion that she wishes to make amends for

having left him. Gister himself suggested that she returns in order to give him back his inspiration for living and writing, which he lost when she left him (November, 1992).

When teaching, Gister constantly reminded the students that the actor always knows more than the character. While the actor playing Nina knows that Nina leaves Treplev and has an affair with Trigorin, the character does not know this until it happens. Therefore, in playing the role the actor might make the distinction that although Nina has begun to fall in love with Trigorin, she does not fully realize it. However, by falling in love with Trigorin, she is already on the path of withdrawing her romantic love from Treplev, but arguably still loves him as a friend. These distinctions can inform choices about the way in which the scene might unfold.

It is very clear from the play that Nina loves the theatre. She greatly admires both Irina, as a famous actor and Trigorin, as a famous writer. However, she does not like Treplev's writing, and he, it should be noted, is not famous. She does not understand his writing and this begins to translate into not understanding him. Her desire to become an actor is not just a fantasy. She runs away from home, leaving Treplev, family and friends in order to move to Moscow to become an actor.

Her age is not specifically given but she is defined as "a young girl, daughter-of-a-landowner." She has a father and a step-mother who keep a close watch over her. It is clear from the text that the play takes place in just over a two-year period. That she is capable of running away to Moscow, giving birth to a child and supporting herself as an actor does not pinpoint her age, but can help the actor to make a reasonable choice about how old she is appropriate to the play.

In examining Treplev's likes, dislikes, loves and hates it is important to recognize that his background is different from Nina's. As a child he was surrounded by friends and associates of his mother, Irina. Many of these people were presumably connected with the arts, particularly the theatre. Treplev must have been aware of his mother's status as a celebrity. Clearly in Act I he shows resentment toward his mother when he ends the performance of his play after his mother comments on it.

Treplev desires to write "new forms" of plays. He wishes to transform the theatre because to him it has grown stale. It could be argued that his desire to change the theatre is a way of rebelling against his mother. Regardless, it is clear that he is passionate about writing. However, he is also passionate about Nina. It is his love of Nina that compels him to express himself in destructive ways when she begins to reject him. The actor playing Treplev may consider that his love for her turns to hate.

The actor might also consider Treplev's relationship with his mother. While it is likely that he loves her, it is also likely that there are many things about her that he dislikes. For example, he calls her "stingy" when she refuses to help finance medical expenses for Sorin, her brother who is in failing health. The actor playing Treplev should also consider his relationship with Trigorin. There is much evidence in the play that Treplev is jealous of him, likely due in large part to his success as a writer. Also, he is his mother's boyfriend who has an affair with Nina. These circumstances must be considered in determining how much Treplev dislikes or possibly hates Trigorin. Certainly, the circumstances lead Treplev to challenge him to a duel, as well as attempt and then commit suicide. While there is evidence that Treplev truly loves his uncle, Sorin, the most significant answer to the question *Who am I?* deals with his relationship with Nina.

Unlike Nina, Treplev reveals that his own age in the first act is twenty-five years old. There is no reason given to suspect that he is not telling the truth, because he is speaking with Sorin, Irina's older brother, who likely would know when Treplev was born. Also unlike Nina, who knows who she is, who she would like to be and what she wants, Treplev questions his identity and purpose in life in a most revealing way. The actor playing Treplev might consider that Treplev is telling the truth in a scene early in Act I, because he is speaking to one of the characters that he loves very much, his Uncle Sorin:

Uncle, can you imagine anything more impossible, more hopeless, that to be alone---a nonentity---in a room full of celebrities, writers, and actors, and know that you were being tolerated only because you were her son? Who am I? What am I? I left the University at the end of my junior year due to "circumstances," as our editors put it, "over which we have no control." I haven't any talent, no money, and I'm described on my passport as a shopkeeper from Kiev.

In the monologue, the actor playing Treplev can begin to define the kind of relationship Treplev has with his mother. The actor might also begin to define why Treplev decides to become a writer. The text indicates that by Act IV he has attained some degree of success as a writer, despite the self-assessment that he has no talent. It is presumed that Treplev's father is dead. It is likely that Irina left young Treplev with Sorin when she toured. A strong bond could have developed between them, and there is much evidence in the text to support this conclusion. The actor as Treplev deciding that he loves Sorin very much creates a context for their long scene in Act I. The degree of intimacy, sincerity and self-revelation can be

predicated by the depth of that love. Conversely, the ambivalence in Treplev's feelings toward his mother can affect the way in which they interact. The two major scenes in which they interact both end in arguments with Treplev exiting.

**Place: *Where am I?***

The next question that Gister's methodology required the actor to ask is *Where am I?* In general, the place where Nina lives is important for a number of reasons. She cannot fulfill her dream to be a famous actor if she continues to stay with her parents on an estate far from Moscow. Where she lives is not where she needs to be in order to become an actor. But it is also important because she lives next to an estate that is visited by a famous professional actor and an equally famous writer. Nina has the opportunity to perform for them as an actor because Treplev has written a play (with her as its only character) and created a stage on the lake. Finally, she has the opportunity to get to know and perhaps learn from them. By Act II she has made the acquaintance of the famous writer Trigorin. She has also established herself as a talented, aspiring actor with all of the characters in the play, most especially for her, Trigorin.

It is indicated in the stage directions that Act II takes place on a lawn on Sorin's estate, from which the lake can be seen. Although the scene begins with a small group of characters, they exit except for Nina, who stays alone on stage speaking a short monologue before the scene begins. It is significant both that she has a view of the lake and that she does not leave when everyone else does.

The actor playing Nina might consider the choice that Nina is waiting for Trigorin to finish so that she might be alone with him. As it is very unlikely that a theatre would incorporate a "lake" into its set design, the actor playing Nina could use her imagination to

see an image of this lake, perhaps with Trigorin on shore fishing. If no indication has been made by the director as to where this imaginary lake might be, a good choice would be for the actor playing Nina to envision it in whatever direction Trigorin would later make his entrance, although, imaginatively, a path leading from the lake might not be a direct one to the estate. What is important is that the actor be specific and consistent in making choices about imaginary places. An inconsistency can occur if in one moment the actor as the character refers to the lake as somewhere just beyond down stage left and then she refers to it somewhere off-right. While consistency should be an obvious rule in acting it is sometimes not observed.

Treplev enters the scene when Nina is already present. Although they are in the same place, somewhere on the lawn on Sorin's estate within view of the lake, the place has different meanings for each character. It is clear from the text that Treplev is upset with Nina. He feels that she has changed toward him. It is also clear that he is jealous about Trigorin. It is quite probable that he has been spying on her. Trigorin loves to fish. It is possible to imagine that he routinely has been fishing at the lake throughout his short stay at the estate. It is also conceivable to imagine that Nina is aware of Trigorin's habits, and that Treplev is aware of Nina's habits of observing Trigorin's habits. These habits are directly related imaginatively to the places in which they occur.

The actor playing Treplev might consider where he is coming from when he enters with the dead seagull. Presumably he has not been walking around for days with the dead bird, but perhaps killed it sometime earlier. He may have considered shooting Trigorin, but killed the seagull instead. The text indicates in Act III that he had challenged Trigorin to a duel. No specific time is indicated as to when the challenge took place. Treplev shoots

himself sometime in or before Act III, though the wound is superficial. He kills himself at the end of the play. Questioning and defining where Treplev comes from is important as it can help the actor to imagine where his experience of jealousy and anger occurred that Treplev expresses in the scene. Recognizing his potential for violence can also help the process of personalization. For example, the fact that he shoots and kills a seagull, shoots and superficially wounds himself, and finally shoots and kills himself in the end should indicate to the actor that Treplev is deeply troubled. In recognizing that Treplev is deeply troubled, the actor can begin to imagine the circumstances that lead to the specific emotional states-of-being, such as intense jealousy and anger. Thus, he can prepare off-stage through using his imagination in the moments before entering the scene. The actor playing Treplev may strongly suspect that Nina is in this particular place in order to meet Trigorin. The actor could imagine, as Treplev would, the worst: that Nina has fallen in love with Trigorin, confirming his suspicions that she has changed.

**Time: *When am I there?***

It is very important for the actor playing Treplev to recognize that he and Nina have a “history” together, a time when “I was happy” that Treplev refers to in Act IV. When he accuses her of having changed, turning “cold” toward him, the implication is that there was a time when this was not the case. While Gister directly cautioned actors to never assume that what one character says about another character through dialogue is always true, with Treplev there is evidence to support the conclusion that Nina *has* changed toward him. The actor playing Treplev should consider just how long it has been since she has changed. For example, it is very likely that these “changes” that Treplev has been observing in Nina have not been going on for long, perhaps only since the arrival of Irina and, especially, Trigorin.

While Irina might very well prove a model for the kind of actor that Nina wants to be, Trigorin might prove more than just a model for a lover whom she wishes to have. Their arrival on the estate could have strong influences on Nina. Further, Treplev's "childish" behavior during the play-within-the-play in Act I could lead Nina to the conclusion that he is not someone she wishes to continue to have a romantic relationship with. During the time "in-between" Act I and Act II Treplev has witnessed Nina's withdrawal from him. If their relationship has changed, which is evident through the dialogue, presumably this imaginary period in-between acts furthered that change.

While it is important for the actor playing Treplev to address the question of time in terms of what the text reveals as having happened after the play-within-the-play, as well as what might be imagined as having happened, such as specific (though imaginary) indications that Nina has changed her behavior toward him, what also must be considered is the time in which the scene above takes place. While it is not clearly indicated when Trigorin goes fishing, it is clear that he loves to fish and that he has been fishing just prior to the scene. It is useful to ask the question *When am I there?* in considering Nina's location at the start of the scene. Why does she stand alone on the lawn with a clear view of the lake? A strong choice is that she wishes to see Trigorin. It is likely that Trigorin has established a habit of fishing every day. As Nina lives on the other side of the lake, she could very well observe Trigorin fishing at a particular time each day. She could also note when he returns to the estate for dinner. Choosing to observe Trigorin fishing in her imagination, though not actually in the play, can help the actor playing Nina to create the imaginary circumstances around their "coincidental meeting" in Act II. By knowing when he fishes and when he returns to the estate, Nina can "conveniently" position herself between the estate and the lake

in order to “accidentally run into him.” Importantly, the actor playing Treplev can imagine that this is what Nina is conspiring to do as well. Thus, he too shows up in the same location in order to somehow intervene by making a bold, symbolic and dangerous statement: “I will kill myself in the same way.”

A strong choice for Nina is to recognize that during the scene with Treplev, Trigorin might show up at any moment. If he should show up, she would lose her opportunity to be alone with him. This is crucially important because in a short time Trigorin and Irina will be leaving for Moscow and Nina may never have another opportunity to be alone with Trigorin. While the actor playing Nina knows that Treplev storms off, thus creating the opportunity for Nina to be alone with Trigorin, Nina does not know this information, nor does Nina know how the future as depicted in the play will unfold. This is an important distinction for the actor to make throughout the play and not just in individual scenes. Importantly, if Nina is aware that Trigorin could be “passing through” on his way to the estate from the lake at any moment, the actor as Treplev could make the same inference: that Treplev is aware of it too. It is a fact that he shows up to confront Nina just several moments before Trigorin walks by. Thus, time can create urgency on the part of both actors as the characters. But it is important to recognize that Chekhov mentions none of these choices. While the possibility of the actor playing Nina to decide that she is in this particular location at this particular time because she wishes to meet Trigorin privately is a strong choice that helps the actor to create strong circumstances, Chekhov does not indicate any of this in his writing. Through addressing the question, *When am I there?* and all that the answers might imply, the actors playing Nina and Treplev can make the kinds of choices that can help them to invest themselves

emotionally in the circumstances by imagining, realizing and defining what the specific circumstances are. Without such specificity, the acting can be vague and unclear.

**Superobjective and Objective: *What do I want?***

As was previously mentioned, the question *What do I want?* includes the superobjective and the objectives. The superobjective is the term for what a character wants from the very beginning to the very end of the play. The objectives lead toward the superobjective. The superobjective should not be chosen randomly but through an analysis of the role. Using answers to the first three questions can help to create the superobjective for Nina. For example, it is clear from the play that what seems to be most important to Nina has to do with being an actor. Nina loves the theatre, and wants to be and eventually becomes a professional actor. Therefore, becoming a professional actor could be part of her superobjective. But she does become a professional actor sometime before Act IV. Therefore, she would have succeeded in accomplishing her superobjective too early. A better choice would be to become a *successful* professional actor like Irina. She can make *to become a professional actor* an *objective*, which supports the *superobjective*, *to become a successful professional actor*.

Once the actor chooses a superobjective for Nina, such as *to become a successful professional actor*, she can then analyze those scenes that she appears in and create objectives that in some way relate to and help her to accomplish her superobjective. For example, in the scene that follows the one that this chapter analyzes, she has a long conversation with Trigorin. The actor playing Nina may choose to make that scene's objective *to get Trigorin to fall in love with me*. While the dialogue does not specifically indicate that that is what the scene is about, the events following it such as: their kiss, her

covert message to him, their secret meeting, their affair, and her pregnancy support the choice for that particular objective. More importantly, this objective could serve her superobjective (*to become a successful professional actor*) because Trigorin is a great writer who is from that “world” of which she longs to become a part. Presumably he has many connections in Moscow. Therefore, the above is a clear example of how the superobjective can be created from answers to the first three questions and the objective can be chosen from the superobjective.

Using the above as examples, the actor playing Nina in the scene between her and Treplev might consider that, if her superobjective is to become a successful professional actor, and Treplev’s writing is bad, she may start to withdraw from Treplev and turn toward Trigorin. If she makes the choice *to be waiting for Trigorin* when Treplev shows up she might consider that Treplev is an obstacle to being alone with Trigorin. She might consider the objective *to make Treplev go away* as a possible choice that serves her superobjective because she cannot very well get Trigorin to fall in love with her with Treplev “hanging around” with a dead seagull and a shotgun.

In formulating a superobjective for Treplev it is important to recognize that he wants to become a successful writer, much as Nina wants to become a successful actor. By the play’s end he has attained some level of success, arguably much more than Nina has. But when Nina leaves at the end of Act IV, she is returning to her theatre company to continue her pursuit of becoming a successful professional actor. Treplev burns his manuscripts and kills himself. How might the choice for a superobjective for Treplev differ from that of Nina? As it appears that his suicide is directly related to Nina’s rejection of him, rather than publishers rejecting his writing or some other reason, a strong choice for his superobjective

would be to relate it to Nina in some way. This directly corresponds with determining the character's likes, dislikes, loves and hates through the question *Who am I?* The superobjective, *to get Nina to fall back in love with me* would be a good choice for the actor playing Treplev. This provides a context for creating an objective for the Nina/Treplev scene in Act II, such as *to get Nina to declare her love for me* or *to get Nina to behave toward me as she used to* which serves the superobjective above. By shocking her with the dead seagull the actor as Treplev can attempt to get her to start paying attention to him rather than Trigorin.

Gister said he wanted the actor to phrase the superobjective and objectives in positive and direct terms (7 September 1995). For example, in the scene between Nina and Treplev, the actor playing Treplev could choose as his objective *to get Nina to dislike Trigorin*. However, Gister's statements while teaching indicate that he felt that this kind of choice is not as effective as a direct, positive one such as *to get Nina to demonstrate her love for me*. Also, while the superobjective might relate to attaining status, acquiring worldly goods, personal growth, or many other things the objective is always related to something one character wants from another. Therefore, it should be articulated in those terms by actors when making choices on behalf of their characters.

It should also be remembered that superobjectives and objectives are choices that the actor makes on behalf of the character that he is playing. Characters don't choose objectives and playwrights don't tell actors what they are or should be. Superobjectives and objectives are created by the actor through analyzing the play. They are based on the premise that characters in plays want things in much the same way that people want things in their everyday lives. By committing himself to an objective on behalf of the character, the actor

can attempt to fulfill the character's needs, generate conflict and serve the overall meaning of the play. Commitment on behalf of the character in Gister's terms is revealed through action, which he defined in classes as how an actor as the character attempts to make another actor as character, or image or thing feel.

**Action: *How do I go about getting what I want?***

Action is always related to fulfilling the objective, which is related to fulfilling the superobjective, which comes from an analysis of the questions *Who am I?*, *Where am I?* and *When am I there?* Gister constantly reminded the students that they should act actions, not objectives, places, times, etc. What he meant is that although the choice of an action should be to fulfill the needs of the character and the needs should be determined through an analysis of the central questions, what an actor should actually do on stage is to engage in action on a moment- to-moment basis. Thus, months of rehearsal and analysis using the methodology by an actor playing Treplev would culminate in the actor playing action choices, such as *to make Nina feel wrong, loved, needed, cruel, special and hated* throughout the entire time he is on stage in the scene between them in Act II. Gister did not want the actor to be thinking about *Who am I? Where am I? When am I there?* or *What do I want?* while acting, just as a wide receiver in football should not be thinking about how he formulated the particular pattern he is running while going out for a pass (8 September 1995). Gister would say that the thinking work should already have been done prior to the performance. What the actor must do in performance after the initial work of answering these questions is both simple and potentially very difficult: to fully commit himself to action. Obviously, in order to commit to action, choices have had to have been made.

Using the objective as a guide, the actor playing Nina may consider that when Treplev enters in the scene, she does not expect him. Obviously this is a strong choice because it can create drama through the shock of being confronted by (arguably) her *ex*-boyfriend (depending on the actor playing Nina's decision about the status of their relationship at this particular time) with a dead seagull and a shotgun. The way in which Gister might suggest that this moment unfold is by having the actor as Nina use her imagination in order to "see" the lake. He might suggest that she see Trigorin fishing. He might also suggest that she find something particularly attractive about Trigorin. Following this he would ask the actor how she wants to make Trigorin feel. The actor might choose "special." Although, the actor playing Nina may not imagine that Trigorin sees *her*, as he might be busy fishing, and therefore would not feel any action that the actor as Nina might be playing on him, the actor as Nina would begin to connect to an image, such as the actor playing Trigorin, that is directly related to an objective, such as *to get Trigorin to fall in love with me*, which, in turn is directly related to her superobjective (*to become a successful actress*) which is directly related to the *Who am I?*, *Where am I?* and *When am I there?* questions. Thus, through action, she brings forth an entire character and an imaginary world with a situation specific to it. Because the human body does not recognize the difference between real and fantasy, by fully committing herself to making the image of Trigorin feel special she is engaging in what Gister advocated: "believable acting." This engagement can arouse feelings in her body. Importantly, as the actor as Nina is attempting to make Trigorin feel special, she can be shocked by Treplev's entrance, much as if the scene had been a real-life event where one person is caught observing another, perhaps revealing her attraction to that other, by a jealous lover.

The scene can begin with Nina alone on stage making Trigorin feel special, all in her imagination and all without lines. It should be noted that according to Gister an actor does not need lines in order to play action. An example of this is when a mother makes her child feel guilty for knocking cans off of a shelf in a grocery store by the way in which she silently looks at him in front of the store clerk as he replaces the cans. Thus, with the actor playing Nina engaged in the action of making Trigorin feel special, the actor playing Treplev can enter. As a way of preparing himself for the scene off stage the actor playing Treplev might imagine the actor playing Nina and the actor playing Trigorin flirting with one another. As has been mentioned, this differs from affective memory preparation. If the actor playing Treplev were to use affective memory in order to arouse an emotion that he felt was appropriate to Treplev's state-of-being, he might recall a time when he was jealous from his own life history. Gister said that doing this would distance the actor as Treplev from the given circumstances of the play, while using the imagination would bring the actor closer to it. Gister wanted the actor playing Treplev to find something particularly attractive about the actor playing Nina. Conversely, at this particular time in the play, it would be useful for the actor playing Nina to find something particularly unattractive about Treplev, such as his "childishness."

The actor playing Treplev should pick an action to play on Nina that would help him to accomplish his objective. Gister constantly reminded students that they could make many possible action choices work in a given scene. For example, the action *to make Nina feel wrong* could be an effective choice, yet *to make her feel loved* could also work as long as it was done in order to accomplish Treplev's objective *to get Nina to demonstrate her love for me*. Assuming that the actor playing Treplev decided that the first action choice *to make her*

*feel loved* was what he would use, the actor would enter the scene with the dead seagull and cross over to Nina. While doing so, his focus would be on *making Nina feel loved*, while she, for example, is focused on the image of Trigorin fishing, *making him feel special*. At a certain point she becomes aware of Treplev, which breaks her focus on the image of Trigorin. At the point when her attention is broken she would change both her focus and her action. An example of a change would be to shift from *making Trigorin feel special* to *making Treplev feel dangerous*. Gister would say that a “source” for *making Treplev feel dangerous* could be the dead seagull that Treplev holds in his hand. This means that the actor playing Nina would see the dead bird, or another source, such as the gun, and then see Treplev and she would immediately play the action *to make him feel dangerous*.

Gister wanted actors to affect one another. He wanted an actor to constantly place his focus on something other than himself; always on “sources” outside of himself, such as for Nina, the *image* of Trigorin, the *dead bird*, *Treplev*, the *gun*, the imaginary *path* that Trigorin might walk to get to the estate, even Treplev’s *childishness*, which is not an actual fact that one can observe, so much as an “invention.” For example, the actor playing Nina might “see” the *childishness* in the way in which the actor playing Treplev *moves his lips*. Thus, on behalf of the character she “imbues” the *childishness* in Treplev, which provides a source of her growing displeasure with him, helping the actor as Nina to create imaginary circumstances consistent with the world of the play.

In continuing the analysis of the scene, assuming the two actors as the characters are playing the following: Nina, *to make Treplev feel dangerous* and Treplev, *to make Nina feel loved*, Gister would say that the action should not change unless something happens to make it change. One of the key reasons that Gister would want an action to change would be if the

action used was not accomplishing the objective for the character. For example, Nina might *make Treplev feel dangerous* in order to fulfill the objective *to make him go away*. While he does, in fact, go away, it is not until several lines and his short monologue later that he exits. Crucially important, while the actor playing Nina knows this information the character does not. Therefore, the actor may choose to shift actions at some point during the scene. For example, she might choose *to make Treplev feel strange, weird* or simply *unwanted* using the fact that he lays the dead bird at her feet as a source for the action change. The most important reason Gister advocated that an actor change an action is because the one that they are using on behalf of the character is not working. However, it is important to recognize that what determines whether or not an *objective* is being or has been fulfilled is normally the play itself. For example, if Nina's objective is *to get Treplev to go away*, his final line "I won't bother you any more!" followed by his exit clearly reveals that she has accomplished her objective. However, characters do not always get what they want. In the above scene, Treplev's objective (*to get Nina to declare her love for me*) is not accomplished, as the text indicates.

It is important for the actor playing Treplev to make a distinction between playing an action and the physical business of laying the seagull at Nina's feet. Gister wanted the actor to think of stage business such as drinking a cup of tea, filing papers or other physical business indicated by the playwright as *activities*. He wanted the actor to be very specific in distinguishing *activities* from *actions*. For example, although the actor playing Treplev must lay the seagull at Nina's feet as part of the requirement of the scene as indicated in the stage directions, Gister did not want the actor to stop playing the *action*, in this case *to make Nina feel loved*, because of that *activity*. He wanted the actor to continue to play actions while

simultaneously conducting any activities that the script required. This is as true for a sword fight as it is for using a handkerchief to cover a sneeze. It is crucial in understanding Gister's methodology that the actor does not take some sort of "break" in between actions, but is constantly engaged in them while on the stage, regardless of whether there is an activity he must perform or an event that occurs while he is on stage, such as the entrance of several other characters who are drunk, dancing and singing.

In the scene above the actor playing Treplev may continue to make Nina feel loved although Nina may have changed from making him feel dangerous to making him feel strange. At some point, the actor playing Treplev may change his action as well. For example, during his line "Well I burnt it!" he may choose *to make Nina feel guilty*. However, such choices are always made because the previous action may not accomplish the objective. Successful playing of actions requires that the actor as character fully commit to the task of making another actor as character (or image or thing) feel, regardless of whether the objective is accomplished or not.

When training actors, the final question Gister asked the actor to address is *What do I do after I get or fail to get what I want?* This question is related to the objective in several ways. In order to determine whether the character has accomplished what it is that he wants, it obviously must be defined what it is that he *does* want. The question *What do I want?* is the starting point for determining that answer. The actor also knows in advance, though the character does not, whether or not he accomplishes his objective. If the character accomplishes the objective by getting what he wants Gister advised that he either get more of what it is that he wants, such as getting someone to *treat me more respectfully* if *getting him to treat me respectfully* was the objective, or begin to realize a new objective that relates to

the superobjective. In the example above, by accomplishing the objective *to make Treplev go away* Nina can then focus on the new objective *to get Trigorin to fall in love with me*. Both objectives serve the superobjective. Gister also said that the playwright would often answer the question for the actor by having the character exit after accomplishing or not accomplishing the objective. An example is in the above, when Treplev exits as Trigorin enters. If the character does not accomplish the objective, a new objective can be introduced or the same objective might be pursued. This choice is often dictated by the playwright. After Treplev's exit in Act II he does not reappear until Act III. It is indicated that in between the two acts he has attempted suicide, but only suffered a minor head wound. While the actual suicide attempt was not shown, the actor as Treplev could relate the event of having made the attempt a reaction to Nina's rejection of him, which might be articulated as an objective such as *to get Nina to pay attention to me*. However, the next major scene for Treplev is with his mother. He has asked her to fix his bandage because the doctor is late. According to Gister, the scene with his mother is only indirectly related to Nina.

When teaching his method, Gister always wanted the actor to make the scenes in which characters appeared about those characters in those scenes, i.e., the Treplev and Irina scene in Act III should primarily be about Treplev and Irina not Trigorin or Nina. By the time the scene between Irina and Treplev occurs, the actor playing Treplev should have created a new objective for that scene, abandoning the prior unfulfilled objective between Treplev and Nina. An example of a new objective for Treplev might be *to get his mother to intervene in the budding relationship between Trigorin and Nina*. This certainly serves his superobjective to get Nina to fall back in love with him if his mother can somehow stop Trigorin from pursuing Nina (as she attempts to do later in Act III.)

There are several ways to answer the question *What do I do after I get or don't get what I want?* One: the playwright answers the question for the actor by having the character exit. Two: the actor as the character chooses to get more of what he wants upon accomplishing the initial objective. Three: the actor waits until the character has another opportunity to accomplish the objective if he fails in the initial attempt. Four: the actor moves on to another objective that serves the superobjective.

The final element in addressing the subject of action lay in considering *how* an action is played. Gister calls this detail “the how of an action” (7 September 1995). The *how of an action* deals with the ways in which an actor might play an action. For example, in the scene between Nina and Treplev, the actor playing Treplev may choose to make Nina feel loved *in a desperate kind of way*. Making this choice is directly related to the given circumstances of the play because he does in fact kill himself in the end. Conversely, Nina might make Treplev feel strange *in a cold sort of way*. By *making Treplev feel strange in a cold way* the actor playing Nina actually helps her scene partner, the actor playing Treplev, by providing a source for his line “You’re cold to me...”

In considering how an action might be played it is important for the actor to try and connect the choices to answers to the question *Who am I?* Treplev might try to make his mother feel angry *in a sarcastic way* as he suggests that her boyfriend is “cultivating Nina’s potential” out in the garden. Sarcasm can be connected to his bitterness and jealousy of Trigorin, who threatens Treplev’s desire to make himself successful in the eyes of those who love him, because he’s lived so long in the shadow of his mother’s success and fame. Another example is Doctor Dorn in the scene with Masha at the end of Act I when she painfully confesses her love for Treplev. The actor playing Dorn may choose *to make Masha*

*feel consoled in a nurturing kind of way.* The important point for how an action is to be played is that it should somehow relate to the way in which the character has been defined through the question *Who am I?*

With answers to the central questions the actor begins to have a foundation for performing a role. This foundation can be a map that the actor uses to take the journey on behalf of the character from the beginning to the end of the play. Guiding his journey can be simple action choices that he plays from his first entrance until his last exit. This chapter showed examples of only a few possible answers to the central questions of Gister's methodology. With those answers, action choices were made and examples were given of how action might be applied to a scene. While this chapter is meant to provide the actor, director and educator with an example of ways the methodology might be applied, the practice of applying the methodology to a scene can further the practitioners' understanding of the approach. Gister explained his methodology in a relatively short period of time. It took time and practice before the students began to develop a pragmatic understanding of it. In large part, the students learned by doing. Only small amounts of class time were spent analyzing the scenes, while large amounts of time were spent in training the students to play actions. Playing actions did not often come easily to the students. There was no rubric for determining whether or not a student had successfully fulfilled an action choice. Early on it was Gister who would determine if an action was effectively played or not. His criterion for making the assessment was his own feelings. Over time, the students began to develop a visceral understanding of when they had and had not fulfilled action choices through Gister's observation, assessment and coaching. By the end of the year, for most students, playing action was second nature.

**CHAPTER 7**  
**THREE LEVELS OF THEATRICAL REALITY**  
**THIRD-YEAR METHODS**

The final chapter of this dissertation explains and examines Gister’s advanced approach to training that he called “Three Levels of Theatrical Reality,” which he taught to his third-(final) year acting students at the Yale School of Drama. It begins with the students selecting two-character scenes from plays written by playwrights the students had yet to encounter. The students would then apply all of the principles of Gister’s methodology explained in the previous chapters to analyses of the roles. Following this they would then apply another kind of analysis which further defined the characters and scenes by using three distinct levels: 1) the stereotype, 2) the character and 3) the actor. Finally, they would work on the scenes in class and Gister would coach them in effectively using the levels in their work.

This chapter provides an overview of that work by explaining the three levels, how they should be applied in an analysis, and how the exercise should unfold using examples. The explanation of the “Three Levels of Theatrical Reality” is based on a workshop Gister conducted at the University of Texas at Dallas in 1993 and his lecture on the first day of the third-year acting course at the Yale School of Drama on September 7, 1995. More specific details of applying the levels are based on his coaching in subsequent classes during the third year.

Unlike the methodology that was explained and examined in the previous chapters, “Three Levels of Theatrical Reality” was not designed to be a technique or method of acting. Rather, it is a process invented by Gister that the students would engage in to develop sensitivity, proficiency, and comprehension. It enhanced their ability to transform into characters, and expanded their knowledge and skills-base developed over the first two years of the three-year program. This was achieved through exercises that led them to transform into a much wider range of characters than the catalogue of plays required in that first two years of training.

As has been mentioned, early on in the first year of training, students were limited in their choices of characters to those that were similar to themselves, for example, in age, such as lovers Trofimov and Anya in *The Cherry Orchard*. As they became more and more proficient in the work, he expected them to play characters that required greater and greater degrees of transformation. For example, Chekhov’s dialogue would often reveal, indicate or suggest specific details about characters, such as Serebryakov’s limp due to gout in *Uncle Vanya* and Anna’s cough due to tuberculosis in *Ivanov*. Gister would require that these details be taken into consideration in the students’ application of the question *Who am I?* and their subsequent transformation into character. Such details could also require that a student play a character much older or younger. Students would make physical adjustments in order to transform and play such characters, changing their posture, rhythm of walking or vocal pitch. Although these physical adjustments could be challenging, the exercise of transformation into character in “Three Levels of Theatrical Reality” was often much more demanding. The exercise in applying “Three Levels of Theatrical Reality” was not limited to transformation into three-dimensional characters, such as those found in the plays of

Chekhov, but included “broad” characters such as clowns and jesters, “stereotypes” such as quack doctors and romantic lovers, and historical figures such as President Nixon and Adolph Hitler.

Gister began the third year by explaining what the specific levels were and how they should be applied. He chose specific playwrights because he believed that some of their writing could serve the kind of exercises required. Gister used the term “contemporary playwrights” to designate whose plays would be used in class:

- Samuel Beckett
- Bertolt Brecht
- Jean Genet
- David Mamet
- Eric Overmeyer
- Suzan-Lori Parks
- Sam Shepard

Using the same two-character scene structure as the first year, students would work as partners and select scenes from plays by the playwrights above. They would thoroughly analyze the scene and characters, and make choices using the first-year methods. Following this, they would analyze the scenes using the three levels. The three levels were designated by Gister as: Level One: “The Stereotype,” Level Two: “The Character” and Level Three: “The Actor.”

### **Level One: The Stereotype**

For Gister a stereotype covered a wide range of possible characters, characterizations, personas and types. The stereotype could be general, such as “the girl next door” or more

specific such as a “crazy professor.” It could be an historical figure, such as Mahatma Gandhi or a TV newscaster such as Barbara Walters. It could take many forms, such as a witch, a good-natured uncle, a nerd, or even a frog. Gister said that stereotypical characters who are drawn from world theatre would also be good choices for the student to use, such as “the miser” Pantalone from Commedia dell’Arte. He also included cartoon characters, such as Pepe Le Pew, the skunk from Looney Tunes (actually used by a student in class) as possible choices. He suggested that certain people in present time, who become known as stereotypes because impressionists started to imitate them or because there were traits they exhibited repeatedly, could also be used. President George W. Bush would be an example of this type of stereotype.

Although there are many definitions of “stereotype” Gister’s definition was necessarily very broad, as he wanted the students to draw from a wide range of possibilities. Despite the seemingly limitless possibilities for Level One, Gister said that in order to qualify as a stereotype to be used in Level One, it must be recognizable by a general audience as a specific person, type or thing when the student enacted it. It was not useful to pick someone who could not be identified.

In addition to the stereotype being recognizable, Gister wanted the student to be very specific about the choice. For example, if the student decided that he wanted to play a romantic lover, Gister would ask the student to be more specific. His questions would be the type that would require the student to probe further: Was the romantic lover based on a film star, such as Robert Redford, or on a type, such as “sensitive” or “manly?” suggesting that there are differences between types of romantic leading men depicted in movies, such as Clark Gable versus Tyrone Power, or, more currently, Jude Law versus Hugh Grant.

Gister cautioned the students that the previous generation's perceptions of certain stereotypes were different from the generation of which the students were a part. Gister suggested that older generation's romantic lovers, such as Rudolf Valentino, were beginning to disappear from the consciousness of new generations. Such figures might not be recognizable to a present-day audience. Therefore, the student should be particular careful in choosing a stereotype that could be recognized by the hypothetical audience. But making an appropriate choice for Level One was only part of the exercise. The student had to find a way to transform himself into the choice, so that the audience *could* recognize it.

Gister required that the student transform himself as much as possible into the stereotype chosen. When applying Gister's method, if the student chose, for example, Marilyn Monroe or John Wayne (and it could have been a male student choosing Monroe or female student choosing Wayne, as any gender-choice for Level One was permissible) he or she had to imitate the voice, manner and movement of the person. If the students chose Monroe then they might develop a sultry way of moving with breathy speech, if Wayne then in addition to his voice, his attitude and swagger would be embodied in some clearly recognizable way. If the stereotype was based on a fictional person, he expected the student to invent a trait, such as how a six year old "brat" might sound, embody that sound and reveal it in such a way that an audience would immediately recognize it as the voice of a bratty little six year old girl. If the stereotype was based on a trait, such as "stingy," Gister would require the student to invent a stereotype in such a way that the audience would recognize a "miser." If the student used a cartoon character the same rules for specificity applied. The student who used Pepe Le Pew transformed into a romantic lover with a French accent as he imitated the "skunk" to the class's delight.

But Gister taught that he wanted the student to do more than imitate the voice and physical characteristics. In class, he expected the student to embrace the entire stereotype as best as he could. He might suggest students imitate gestures and mannerisms particular to the character. Level One transformation might also include defining and finding ways to reveal psychological traits, such as the shyness of a nerd, the aggression of a tough guy, the temperament of an artist, and the patience of a singing teacher. Gister directly encouraged the student to be as specific as possible in embodying the image, voice, attitude, rhythm, and any other traits that defined a given stereotype. However, regardless of the stereotype chosen, there was no improvisation of the lines in the actual scene work in class. The lines used were always from the required playwrights' plays. It was the character or stereotype that would inform the ways in which the lines were spoken, but regardless of whether the lines were spoken by Mother Courage or Daffy Duck, they remained as written.

Gister did not require nor encourage the students to use make-up, costumes or props in depicting the stereotypes. He wanted them to use their own bodies, voices and speech as much as possible. It was through the challenges of transforming into stereotypes that the students would learn how to be resourceful and to develop skills that would help them with their professional work in the theatre. For example, one resource the students used for understanding romantic lovers was old films. By watching and listening to Cary Grant's way of interacting and unique way of speaking the student could then begin to imitate him to the point whereby an observer would recognize the student as Grant. The skills developed would include learning to understand and replicate rhythms of moving and speaking, learning to define particular attitudes toward the world, and learning to observe and replicate a specific gesture to the point whereby it starts to affect one's entire body and persona.

## Level Two: The Character

Gister defined Level Two as “The Character.” Level Two refers to the same type of three-dimensional character that the students worked with in the first year. Although Gister designated the character as Level Two, he wanted the student to examine this level first.

Like the first year, the student would apply all of the questions to their analyses:

- *Who am I?*
- *Where am I?*
- *When am I there?*
- *What do I want?*
- *How do I go about getting what I want?*
- *What do I do after I get or fail to get what I want?*

For example, the way of applying the methodology to an analysis of the character Treplev in the scene with Nina would be applied to the character, Hamm, in a scene with Clov in *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett. Generally, this work would be done outside of class. The students had already gained the knowledge and skills needed in order to successfully address the above questions in the first year, and could now do so, for the most part, without Gister’s help. It should be noted that of particular importance in defining and playing this level is a clearly articulated objective. An important distinction Gister drew in explaining the levels was in requiring the student to connect the pursuit of the objective to the shift back and forth from Level One to Level Two. If, for example, two students might choose to work on the first scene between Mae and Eddie in Act I of Sam Shepard’s *Fool for Love*, then student playing Mae might decide that her objective is *to get Eddie to stay with me*. As the scene unfolds, it appears that Eddie is going to leave. The student playing Mae might adopt the

persona of Monroe in order to try a new tactic *to get Eddie to stay with me*. By using Monroe's sultry voice, the actor as the character, Mae, can attempt to get Eddie to stay through seductive means.

### **Level Three: The Actor**

Gister defined Level Three as "The Actor." This meant that the actor, in playing Level Three, would drop the character or stereotype he was playing by shifting from Level One or Two into his real self. In being himself he was required to speak directly to the audience using a line or more from the chosen play. In choosing lines from the play for Level Three Gister would ask the student to select whatever lines he (the student) thought might work as socio-political comments. For example, in one of his monologues in *Endgame*, the student playing the character Hamm may choose to drop whichever level he was playing, shift to Level Three and say Hamm's line "One day you'll be blind, like me. You'll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, forever, like me" directly to the audience as the actor himself, rather than to Clove. This would constitute a successful choice and execution for playing Level Three if it was connected with a specific action; action as defined and examined in Chapter 5. For example, the student playing Hamm might choose *to make the audience feel sorry for him*.

### **Direct Address to Audience**

There are plays that specifically indicate that characters in it should at times speak directly to the audience. For example, in his opening monologue the character Wang in Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* explains to the audience that he is waiting for the appearance of several gods, the stage directions clearly stating that he "introduces himself to the audience" (17). Directly addressing the audience defines an aspect of a play's aesthetic

as not having a “fourth-wall.” The “fourth-wall” is an imaginary wall that exists between audience and actor. Thus, a play is staged as if it is really happening when the illusion of the fourth wall is maintained. By breaking the illusion and speaking to the audience, the audience is reminded that it is watching a play. In being reminded that it is watching a play, the audience is detached from the illusion that what is happening is real.

As was explained in Chapter 1, with an attitude of detachment, the audience can reflect on the socio-political ideas that the playwright expresses through the dialogue. While the audience can reflect on the socio-political ideas expressed in a realistic play, Brecht’s argument was that those ideas are better remembered through a detached viewing rather than an emotional one. What is important to understand about direct-address to the audience for Three Levels of Reality is that the student must recognize where in the text the playwright specifically intended or implied direct-address. However, in those plays from Gister’s third-year catalogue that do not readily lend themselves to direct-address, the student must simply choose a line or lines that seem appropriate, as the point of the exercise is transformation and not how a play from the catalogue *should* be staged.

It is easy to see that Brecht’s plays should be staged *without* a fourth-wall. It is equally easy to see that a Sam Shepard or David Mamet play *can* be staged without a fourth-wall, though it can also be staged with one. But Gister chose Mamet, Shepard and the others for the catalogue because he saw challenges that served his purpose: empowering the students in the art of transformation. And most plays can be staged with or without a fourth-wall, even if the playwrights intended that they be staged one way and not the other. While a director, (through the actors), can shift the aesthetic of dialogue that clearly addresses the audience to dialogue that does not, Gister was not so concerned with specific aesthetic

approaches with writing that was subject to interpretation in terms of the fourth wall. He was concerned with training students to act effectively in three theatrical realities: the stereotype, the character and the actor.

### **The Scene from *Waiting for Godot***

Examples will be drawn from the following scene from Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot* in order to show how the levels can be applied and how the exercise works. The reader should remember that the levels were generally applied by the students with some freedom of choice, as the point was not to learn the "right" way to act Beckett but to exercise transformation, as well as reinforce those skills learned in the first year.

*Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again. As before. Enter Vladimir.*

ESTRAGON. *(giving up again)*. Nothing to be done.

VLADIMIR. *(advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart)*.

I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything.

And I resumed the struggle. *(He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.)* So there you are again.

ESTRAGON. Am I?

VLADIMIR. I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone for ever.

ESTRAGON. Me too.

VLADIMIR. Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? *(He reflects.)* Get up till I embrace you.

ESTRAGON. (irritably). Not now, not now.

VLADIMIR. (hurt, coldly). May one inquire where His Highness spent the night?

ESTRAGON. In a ditch.

VLADIMIR. (admiringly). A ditch! Where?

ESTRAGON. (without gesture). Over there.

VLADIMIR. And they didn't beat you?

ESTRAGON. Beat me? Certainly they beat me.

VLADIMIR. The same lot as usual?

ESTRAGON. The same? I don't know.

VLADIMIR. When I think of it...all these years...but for me...where would you be...*(Decisively.)* You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it.

ESTRAGON. And what of it?

VLADIMIR. *(gloomily)*. It's too much for one man. *(Pause. Cheerfully.)*

On the other hand what's the good of losing heart now, that's what I say. We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties.

ESTRAGON. Stop blathering and help me off with this bloody thing.

VLADIMIR. Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days. Now it's too late. They wouldn't even let us up. *(Estragon tears at his boot.)* What are you doing?

ESTRAGON. Taking off my boot. Did that never happen to you?

VLADIMIR. Boots must be taken off every day, I'm tired telling you that.

Why don't you listen to me?

ESTRAGON. (*feebly*). Help me!

VLADIMIR. It hurts?

ESTRAGON. (*angrily*). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

VLADIMIR. (*angrily*). No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what you'd say if you had what I had.

ESTRAGON. It hurts?

VLADIMIR. (*angrily*.) Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

ESTRAGON. (*pointing*). You might button it all the same.

VLADIMIR. (*stooping*). True. (*He buttons his fly*). Never neglect the little things of life.

ESTRAGON. What do you expect, you always wait till the last moment.

### **Applying Three Level of Theatrical Reality**

The first step in applying the three levels is to analyze the play using first-year methods. For example, the student playing Vladimir would start with the question, *Who am I?* As was explained in Chapter 2, the student would begin by examining what the character liked, disliked, loved and hated, as revealed through the text. It is clear from the text that Vladimir likes, and quite possibly loves to engage in dialogue:

VLADIMIR. And yet...(pause)...how is it—this is not boring you I hope—how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there—or thereabouts—and only one speaks of a thief being saved.

(Pause). Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?

The student would continue to explore the text in the way that was done in the first year. The question *Who am I?* would continue to be a source of ongoing inquiry while some of the other questions might find quicker answers. For example, Beckett gives the reader the time of the play in a very simple way: “evening.” But the question of time must also be seen in another way: how long have they been waiting at the start of the play and how long do they wait over the course of the play? Does the question *Where am I?* in *Waiting for Godot* need little or greater exploration because Beckett makes it clear at the beginning of the play that it takes place on “a country road” with “a tree”? The student might consider that the *Where am I?* question can be answered as *a huge, vast, scary and possibly godless universe*, because Beckett gives no other details. Gister always referred the student to the text in order to find answers to the major questions. But those answers can be deduced, at times, through implication rather than always through what is explicitly given through stage directions and/or dialogue.

Finally, like in the first year, the student would choose a superobjective, objectives and action choices for the character. The objective has double importance for the work in that it becomes the impetus for shifting from level two to level three and back again. Ideally, after analyzing the questions the students would have the same kind of understanding that they produced through application of the questions to a Chekhov, Ibsen or Strindberg play in the first year. It is from that understanding that the application of the three levels would begin.

Once an analysis of the scene has been done using Gister’s methodology, which would define and develop Level Two, the students would then analyze the scene using the three levels. In order to show how the three levels are applied and exercised it is necessary to refer to the objectives that have been chosen. The reader should recall that objectives are

formulated by addressing the question *What do I want?* While there are many plays in which the dialogue clearly reveals what a character seems to want in a given scene, there are others that do not. Regardless of whether the dialogue suggests a specific want or need, it is the actor who must articulate that need. For the purposes of the exercise this author created the following objectives for the above scene:

Vladimir: *to get Estragon to engage with me in a cheerful dialogue*

Estragon: *to get Vladimir to help me to get my boot off*

While the students might initially play the scene only in Level Two (the three-dimensional character) in order to make specific action choices and other discoveries about the scene, this process was generally done as homework by the students. Assuming that some action choices had been made or at least considered, the students would then analyze the scene using the other levels.

The first step for the students would be in defining the stereotypes that they would use. While Gister did not limit the number of stereotypes a student might use while playing a character in a scene, generally only one stereotype was chosen by a student in a particular scene. Sometimes the students would choose stereotypes that had actually appeared together, such as Laurel and Hardy, but Gister did not require such combinations. He wanted the student to freely choose anyone or anything that he wanted to. Occasionally a student would choose more than one stereotype for a scene, but the work was so difficult and complex that it could become unnecessarily difficult with more than one.

For the scene above, this author has chosen the Level Ones as: Vladimir: W.C. Fields and Estragon: Ralph Kramden (from “The Honeymooners” television show). Once the student selected Level One he would practice imitating and portraying the stereotype until it

was recognizable. Watching “The Honeymooners” and films of W.C. Fields are examples of ways the students would begin their initial efforts at transformation. Using the films as resources, they would mimic and imitate the stereotypes in any number of ways in order to successfully depict them. In class Gister would determine whether or not the students had sufficiently embodied the stereotypes through their homework. However, the choice was often confirmed by the class (as the audience), as it responded to the stereotypes with laughter and applause. This was particularly true when the student was very effective at “being” the stereotype, as well as when unusual or famous choices had been made, such as Bella Lugosi as Dracula or Marlon Brando as the godfather.

When the students had sufficiently embodied the stereotypes they would then use them at random times in the scene in order to practice shifting from Level Two to Level One. After they became adept at making the shifts and maintaining each level when they were in it, they would go through the scene and designate in the script with pencil specifically which level they would be playing and when they would play it.

It was very important that the student make a choice to move from Level One to Level Two or the reverse *as a tactic* for accomplishing the objective. For example, in the scene above the student playing Estragon could be in Level Two while Vladimir is in Level One, speaking his line as W. C. Fields: “We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties.” Vladimir is trying to accomplish the objective *to get Estragon to engage in a cheerful dialogue* by attempting to make the actor as Estragon laugh. Then very quickly, the student playing Estragon might shift from Level Two (the character) to Ralph Kramden (his Level One) with the line “Ah stop blathering and help me off with this thing, ” because

staying in Level Two has failed to help him to accomplish his objective, *to get Vladimir to help him to take off his boot*.

The same point that was explained and examined in the previous chapters is equally true for the application of three levels: the actor knows, for example, that Vladimir does not help him to take off his boot, but the character, Estragon, does not know that. Therefore, the student using three levels pursues his objective in much the same way that the student playing Nina in *The Sea Gull* might. However, the difference is that the student playing Nina does so *only* at Level Two, which is a three-dimensional character. The student exercising three levels might start by playing Estragon at Level Two, but then at times shift into and back out of Level One (the stereotype Ralph Kramden). Further, periodically the student will shift from either level one or level two, depending on which one he is being at the moment, into level three (the actor). In level three, the student as himself, will use direct address to the audience saying whatever line(s) he has chosen for the purpose of making a socio-political comment.

Those readers who are familiar with “The Honeymooners” might also envision the student playing Vladimir choosing Ed Norton, rather than W.C. Fields. However, the point of the exercises was not how aesthetically interesting the choices might be in combination with one another (or individually) but for the student to develop skills and sensitivities for transformation. While the choices to move back and forth between Levels One and Two should be connected to trying to accomplish the objective, the choice to move to Level Three should be to directly address the audience with a line from the text. For example, in some plays there are lines that are written in a way that seems to imply that the playwright intended for them to be spoken to the audience. In the scene above, the lines “Hurts! He

wants to know if it hurts!” which is spoken by both Estragon and Vladimir at different times, could clearly be spoken to the audience as if the author actually intended them to be. But Gister did not require the lines chosen to necessarily have been written to specifically be spoken to the audience. He only required that they be chosen and spoken by the student to the audiences as socio-political statements, regardless of their intended use. For Gister, Vladimir’s line “Now it’s too late” could be made directly to the audience, though it could as well be spoken to Estragon. What was most important about the choice to go to Level Three was that the actor drop whichever level he was playing in order to be himself and speak directly to the audience. However, there are times when the author intended the character to speak directly to the audience, such as Wang does in *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. In this case, it simply made more sense for the student to make those times part of his Level One.

Importantly, Gister wanted the student to constantly be playing action, regardless of what level he was in. This made the training very demanding, because the student would not only have to focus on transformation transitions, but fulfilling action choices. Further, the student was not given a “break” from action when transitioning to Level Three, but would have to define *how he wanted to make the audience feel* and execute the action just as effectively as he would on a scene partner. A general example of this would be that the student would drop whichever level (One or Two) he was playing, turn and face the audience in Level Three (as his real self) and send an action while speaking the line that he had chosen as the socio-political comment he wished to make. He would then immediately shift back into either Level One or Level Two and continue to pursue the objective by engaging in the scene with his scene partner through whatever action he had chosen.

The work was difficult because it would require, for example, the actor playing the character, Vladimir, transformed into the stereotype, W.C. Fields, to play an *action* on the actor playing the character, Estragon, transformed into the stereotype, Ralph Kramden, such as *to make him feel stupid* while saying the line “Boots must be taken off every day.” Then the actor as Estragon might shift into Level One if in Level Two or the reverse while simultaneously sending the action, for example, *to make the actor as Estragon (transformed into W.C. Fields) feel cruel* while saying the line “help me.” If in Level One, the line must be said just as Ralph Kramden would have said it, imitating voice, facial expression, and manner. If in Level Two the line would be said in whatever way the actor’s unique three dimensional transformations into the character (Level Two) Estragon might express it.

Generally the above scene would begin with both actors in Level Two. The scene might start with Estragon seated, engaged in the *activity* of trying to take off his boot while simultaneously playing an action on Vladimir, such as *to make him feel sorry for me* in order to accomplish the objective *to get him to help me to take off my boot*. For Vladimir the scene might start with the activity of entering from off right, while simultaneously seeing Estragon and playing an action, such as *to make him feel important* in order to accomplish the objective *to get him to engage with me in cheerful conversation*. At some point previously decided, the actor playing, Estragon might shift into his Level One, Ralph Kramden, because Vladimir has not done what Estragon has wanted him to (*help me to take off my boot*). It is up to the actor playing Estragon if he also wants to change his action, which is *to make Vladimir feel sorry for me*. He could keep that action or change it when he shifts into Level One. An example of changing the action might be *to make Vladimir feel guilty for not helping me*. Vladimir might quickly shift into his Level One, W.C. Fields, on his line “May one inquire

where His Highness spent the night?” and, like the actor playing Estragon, he might continue to play the action *to make Estragon feel important* or he may change it to something else.

Another important distinction that the actors might include in playing the stereotype is the *how of the action* which was explained in Chapter 6. While the how of the actions for Level Two should already have been considered and determined in the actor’s analysis of the character, importantly, when analyzing and embodying the role at Level One (The Stereotype) the student might consider that the how of the action by the stereotype might be drastically different from the how of the action by the character. The student may determine that Vladimir does not use sarcasm when playing action, but W.C. Fields does. For example, the student as Vladimir can make Estragon *feel foolish in a caring way*, but as W.C. Fields in a *sarcastic way*. Such distinctions help the actor to create finer and more subtle choices for transformation.

Finally at a certain point, while the actor playing Vladimir might drop whichever Level he is playing and deliver the socio-political comment to the audience (Level Three) , it must be considered what the other character is doing. While Vladimir was delivering his comment to the audience, Gister expected the actor playing Estragon to continue to be actively involved in the scene. He did not want one actor to “freeze” while the other spoke to the audience. He expected the actors to be specifically embracing one level or another, and not vaguely in one or half in one and half in another, except, of course, for the split-second transitional moments between levels. He also expected the students to constantly be playing actions toward pursuit of the objective. Therefore, the student was required to always be engaged in one action choice or another. Eventually, he expected the students to quicken not only the pace of the scene, which might at first get bogged down due to the density and

complexity of the work. But he also expected the student to quicken the speed of the transformations in transitioning from one level to another. However, Gister expected the student to maintain the integrity of complete transformation as the pace of the scene improved and the transitions picked up speed.

It is important for the reader to keep in mind that Three Levels of Theatrical Reality is an approach to training an actor in transformation through exercise. Its benefits are the skills, sensitivities and knowledge that the student can gain, which help the actor to become practiced in the art of creating characters. While Three Levels of Theatrical Reality was not invented as a technique for acting, the knowledge gained can prove invaluable for creating and performing a wide range of characters and roles.

For the director Three Levels of Reality might offer an interesting approach for staging a play. While Gister maintained that he never intended it to be used as a production aesthetic, nonetheless he did not object to using the levels as a directorial concept, as elements such as the stereotype have been used in the theatre for centuries. Taken out of context, the element of direct address, which is a part of “Level Three,” goes back at least to early Greek drama. While it might be highly worthwhile investigating how the three levels can operate as a directorial approach to a production of a play that is written with direct address and stereotypes, such as Bertolt Brecht’s *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, it might also prove a worthwhile venture in a play that is not, such as Sam Shepard’s *Fool for Love*.

There is nothing particularly mystical or innovative about Gister’s individual levels. However, together, exercising the three levels coupled with a full application of the methodology can have a profound impact on the actor’s growth and abilities to transform into a character. By exercising the three levels, the actor must not only have fully embraced the

methodology, but clearly made three distinct choices and embodied those choices to the point whereby he can shift in and out of them in a fluid way. By continually shifting back and forth from character, stereotype and actor, the student has the experience of being the direct source of his or her own ability and power to transform. Thus, the student begins to master the art of creating character.

## CRITICAL COMMENTARY

### First Year

Earle Gister was very rigorous in seeing to it that his students learned and applied the major principles of his methodology. He required the students to be very specific in answering the six questions:

- *Who am I?*
- *Where am I?*
- *When am I there?*
- *What do I want?*
- *How do I go about getting what I want?*
- *What do I do after I get or fail to get what I want?*

According to Gister, these questions provided the student with a clear and succinct structure for approaching most roles they would likely encounter in their careers.

Upon leaving the program the students would know what to do if given a role in a play. They would know, for instance, that the play itself is where answers to the above questions would be found. They would make the distinction that it was a character they were playing, rather than themselves. They could begin to examine who the character was through a set of clearly defined ideas, such as by asking, *What does the character like, dislike, love and hate?* They could examine the character in terms of the familial, social and political

constructs within the play. They could use the findings of their examinations to create clear and specific objectives defined as *what one character wants from another*.

Through training in class, Gister helped empower them and give them the confidence to make strong, informed choice consistent with realizing the needs of the characters as presented by the playwright. The students were also taught to clearly and specifically define the places and times in which a given play occurred. In a very logical and coherent way, the students learned that there is often a direct correlation between the place and time in which a play occurs and the behavior of its characters. The student was taught to act believably within the imaginary times and places by using them to help inform specific choices for objectives, actions and the ways in which those actions might be fulfilled.

One of the key elements of Gister's methodology is the definition of action: how one character wants to make another character, image or thing feel. Gister spent many, many hours teaching the students how to play actions through his coaching and watchful eyes. He took action to another level, introducing the "how of an action:" the way in which action can be played. For example, the actor as the character can choose to make another actor as the character feel stupid in a *mocking* kind of way.

Gister would link the how of an action to the *Who am I?* (character). For example, an actor playing Olga might make an actor playing Natasha feel wrong, but in a *gentle* way, as gentility is part of who she is. Thus, the how of the action, rather than the action itself, was a prime vehicle for revealing the work Gister taught in building the character. He required the student to act wholly consistent with his definition of action throughout the entire three year period at the Yale School of Drama. For many, it helped re-define what it means to act, as

their notions of acting dropped away and they learned in a visceral way an effective acting methodology.

While Gister's work produced profound change and empowerment, it was not without limitations. This author examined the work in great detail and has been applying it to acting, teaching and directing. In so doing, questions were raised not in a vacuum but through practical application of the methodology. For example, Gister's approach to the question *Who am I?* through first examining the passions, age and other personal details and relationships is very useful. However, Gister never fully explained nor taught physical transformation in the way that, for example, Michael Chekhov does. Gister did require physical transformation in the third year advanced training through the stereotypes in Three Levels of Theatrical Reality, but there was very little discussion about transformation in the first year. Gister said that he initially wanted the beginning actors to play characters close to themselves in age. Therefore, the degree of physical transformation might be much smaller for the young actor playing Trofimov rather than Gaev in *The Cherry Orchard*. However, this author saw little work with physical transformation as that first year progressed.

Another concern was that the how of the action, which was quite powerful in revealing character, was inconsistently referred to by Gister. Sometimes he would ask a student what the how of his action was and sometimes he would not. Often, this author did not observe a specific choice being revealed in the scene work. Gister was very adamant about the student making and fulfilling action choices. This author wonders why he was not nearly as rigorous with the how of the action choices as the action choices themselves. One answer might lie in his concern that first and foremost action was being successfully played and that the action was directly connected to the objective. In this way playing action in

whatever way worked took priority over the subtleties of the specificity of how it should be played, because there was only so much teaching time. There were many times when a student had made clear choices and was playing action effectively, but was vague in terms of the how of the action. Often Gister would not question the student, perhaps because there simply wasn't enough time.

Finally, so much time was spent using Chekhov's plays that little time remained to explore Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg's plays. Gister would argue that the work was not about learning how to act a specific playwright. But when the students would work on Ibsen, Gister would show clear differences between, for example, acting in *A Doll House* versus acting in *Uncle Vanya*.

While there are obvious differences between the two plays simply because they are two different works, what Gister would show is how the aesthetics of the writing differed. For example, Gister would frequently say that Chekhov was a humanistic writer. Generally, simple human wants and needs, such as the desire to be loved, were subjects in his plays. But according to Gister, Ibsen differed from Chekhov in that he was concerned with social and political subjects. He required that the student determine a specific social or political point of view when playing a character from for example, *A Doll House*, such as Torvald's point of view about the role of the male versus the female in society. He wanted the student, in such plays, to determine what the character's specific attitude toward the subject matter was. That attitude would then inform choices that were made.

While Gister would point out that different playwrights wrote with different aesthetical approaches, he did not offer the students a formula for understanding what the aesthetics were, so that they might know what to do when approaching a Tennessee Williams

versus a Federico Garcia Lorca play. In large part, the methodology itself will help the actor, but in and of itself it may not be enough to fully understand that, for example, in doing *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller it might be useful to have a principle for determining the aesthetical implications that make it different from, for example, *Long Day's Journey into Night* by Eugene O'Neill. Then, once the aesthetics of the writing are understood, the actor could set about applying the methodology.

### **Third Year**

The third year training was not centered on teaching an acting methodology. However, the methodology was required in the advanced work, and often elements of it were re-explained and re-examined. Gister would sometimes have to coach students as he did in the first year in order to clarify or refine their knowledge of the methodology. It was expected of every student that they continue to apply the methodology fully, but much of the application was done as homework.

The primary focus was on teaching the advanced training approach, Three Levels of Theatrical Reality. The work was very challenging. Not only was the student required to be proficient in the methodology, but the added requirement of creating level one, the stereotype required the actor to transform to the point whereby observers could recognize who or what the transformation was. Once the stereotype had been successfully embraced, the student needed to become proficient at moving from stereotype to character to student (actor), etc. The student had to make these shifts continually throughout the length of a scene. The choice to shift from character to stereotype was based on the same principle of shifting action, as shown in Chapters 5 and 6, i.e., to try to accomplish the objective.

In doing the work the students developed new skills, sensitivities and capacities for transformation into many types of characters, both at level one and level two. In making such difficult and varied transformations, the students' bodies, voices and speech became more flexible, resonate and articulate. The training was analogous to two types of exercise, one that prepares the body, voice and mind for the demands of performing a wide range of roles and the other that teaches skills, sensitivities and brings about freedom from limiting habits of tension and misuse of body and voice.

However, because the work was very difficult and complex, often the students would not fulfill the requirements of Three Levels of Theatrical Reality. For example, it was typically difficult as an observer to distinguish when a particular student was in level two, (the character) versus level three, (the actor) other than through the fact that level three was always direct address to the audience. While the fact that direct-address was an accurate way of making the distinction "actor," the point of the work is transformation into three clearly distinct levels. If an observer cannot tell the difference between an actor in level two and the same actor in level three in the course of a given scene, then either: 1) the student is not fully being himself in level three, 2) he has not fully defined and transformed into level two or 3) there is vagueness in both levels. This author questions why Gister did not stop the scene and coach the student who failed to fully distinguish between level two and level three.

### **Conclusion**

The lack of clarity between actor and level two in the third year training is the same concern this author raised regarding the first-year training. In short, the line between actor and level two is blurry in terms of physical transformation. Thus, a student can play Treplev in *The Seagull* but the only clear distinctions between the student and Treplev, are 1)

dissimilar likes, dislikes, loves and hates, 2) historical background, such as date of birth or simply, age, and past events that were meaningful and 3) relationships to family and society. Much of the information in the above is useful in defining objectives, actions and how the actions are played. But the question of physical transformation was not fully examined nor even fully addressed at level two, neither in first nor third year.

The fact that Gister greatly admired Michael Chekhov perplexes this author. For Michael Chekhov, perhaps more than any other theorist, first and foremost greatly valued physical transformation into character. However, this author is not sure whether the criticism should be directed at Gister's methodology for not including physical and image based principles of transformation or at Gister for failing to articulate and teach it fully if it was supposed to be a part of the methodology. Ultimately, perhaps, it only matters to those who are concerned with or see value in physical and image based transformation with three dimensional or, as shown in *Three Levels of Theatrical Reality*, Level Two characters. But it might be a very useful addition to a textbook that builds on the foundation that Gister's work provides, not only for those artists and teachers who see value in it, but those who *could* see value in it.

But this author saw Gister perform once. He played Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape* at UTD in 1994 after he had lost his voice to cancer and spoke through the use of a mechanical larynx. What struck this author most was Gister's complete physical transformation into the role of Krapp. So much so that he was hardly recognizable as the great, great teacher that he is.

## APPENDIX

### OBTAINED FROM THE YALE UNIVERSITY REGISTRAR: GISTER'S STUDENTS AT THE YALE SCHOOL OF DRAMA 1979-1996

#### 1979

Mr. Robert E. Dean	1979
Mr. Peter B. Crombie	1979
Ms. Nancy Mayans	1979
Mr. William M. Peters	1979
Mr. Eric S. Elice	1979
Mr. Richard C. Grusin	1979
Ms. Rebecca Nelson	1979
Mr. William D. McGlinn	1979
Ms. Elizabeth L. Norment	1979
Ms. Marianne Owen	1979
Mr. David Keith Miller	1979
Mr. Anthony W. Sherer	1979
Ms. Anne-Marie Gough	1979
Mr. Mark Linn-Baker	1979
Mr. Geoffrey M. Pierson	1980

#### 1980

Donna L. Leavy	1980
Mr. John J.G. Rubin	1980
Mr. Anthony M. Shalhoub	1980
Mr. Edward W. Chell, Jr.	1980
Mr. Thomas L. Derrah	1980
Ms. Robin M. Clark	1980
Mr. David E. Wiles	1980
Ms. Kristine E. Nielsen	1980
Mr. William J. Keller	1980
Mr. Warren M. Manzi	1980
Ms. Polly Draper	1980
Ms. Carol Susan Ostrow	1980
Mr. Harry S. Murphy	1980

#### 1981

Mr. Reginald E. Cathey, Jr.	1981
Mr. Steven Hendrickson	1981
Ms. Kate Lyn Reiter	1981

Mr. Mitchell W. Lichtenstein	1981
Ms. Isabell M. Monk-O'connor	1981
Mr. David Prittie	1981
Mr. Jeffrey M. Ginsberg	1981
Mr. David Alan Grier	1981
Mr. Jeffrey E. Natter	1981
Ms. Katherine R. Borowitz	1981
Mr. Fred Melamed	1981
Ms. Eve M. Gordon	1981
Mr. Bernard J. Sundstedt	1981

#### 1982

Ms. Diana L. Benson	1982
Professor Keith H. Grant	1982
Mr. Vyto Ruginis	1982
Mr. Scott R. Wheeler	1982
Ms. Cecilia M. Rubino	1982
Mr. Robert Curtis Brown	1982
Ms. Jane Kaczmarek	1982
Ms. Katherine Burton	1982
Mr. David C. Keith	1982
Mr. John B. Lloyd	1982
Ms. Frances L. McDormand	1982
Mr. Jonathan M. Krupp	1982
Mr. Gary D. Basaraba	1982
Ms. Becky London	1982
Ms. Cynthia Zakiah Barksdale	1982
Mr. William E. Mesnick	1982

#### 1983

Ms. Sabrina M. LeBeauf	1983
Ms. Barbara Somerville	1983
Mr. Charles S. Dutton	1983
Mr. John E. Harnagel	1983
Mr. John M. Turturro	1983
Mr. William Kux	1983

Ms. Marcy J. Mattox 1983  
 Mr. Ricky L. Grove 1983  
 Mr. David F. Thornton 1983  
 Ms. Angela E. Bassett 1983  
 Mr. Matthew D. Sussman 1983  
 Ms. Elly R. Koslo 1983  
 Mr. William P. Skipper 1983  
 Ms. Marilyn Sommer Feinstein 1983  
 Mr. Roger G. Smith 1983

**1984**

Ms. Sharon A. Mitchell 1984  
 Mr. David B. Jaffe 1984  
 Ms. Cordelia Gonzalez 1984  
 Mr. Kenneth L. Marks 1984  
 Ms. Gabriele Schafer-Fracaro 1984  
 Ms. Julie Boyd 1984  
 Mr. Bruce M. Hurlbut 1984  
 Mr. Jonathan P. Emerson 1984  
 Ms. Joan M. McMurtrey 1984  
 Ms. Laila V. Robins 1984  
 Mr. Tyrone K. Wilson 1984  
 Ms. Julie Ann Fulton 1984  
 Mr. Christian D. Clemenson 1984  
 Mr. John R. Little 1984  
 Mr. Thomas K. Isbell 1984  
 Mr. Dennis R. Green 1984  
 Mr. William A. Cohen 1984

**1985**

Mr. Jack A. Evans 1985  
 Susan Cameron 1985  
 Mr. Michael V. Rogers 1985  
 Mr. Thomas P. Costello 1985  
 Mr. Christopher D. Noth 1985  
 Ms. Patricia D. Clarkson 1985  
 Ms. Annette Chapman 1985  
 Mr. Steven J. Gefroh 1985  
 Ms. Tessie Hogan 1985  
 Mr. Joseph Urla, Jr. 1985  
 Mr. Tony Spiridakis 1985  
 Mr. Steven Blye 1985  
 Ms. Melissa Weil 1985  
 Ms. Jayne Atkinson 1985  
 Mr. Dylan Baker 1985  
 Mr. Donald Patrick Harvey 1985

**1986**

Ms. Kimberleigh Aarn 1986  
 Mr. Mark H. Rafael-Truitt 1986  
 Ms. Holly F. Hayes 1986  
 Mr. Neal Alan Lerner 1986  
 Mr. Aloysius W. Gigl 1986  
 Mr. Jeffrey B. Tagher 1986  
 Mr. Spencer P. Beglarian 1986  
 Mr. Abba I. Elfman 1986  
 Mr. Timothy E. Douglas 1986  
 Mr. Courtney Bernard Vance 1986  
 Mr. David W. Nelson 1986  
 Ms. Theresa E. McElwee 1986  
 Ms. Devora Millman 1986  
 Ms. Catherine S. Crooks 1986  
 Ms. Amy L. Aquino 1986

**1987**

Mr. Dwight P. Bacquie 1987  
 Mr. Patrick Kerr 1987  
 Mr. Gregory D. Wallace 1987  
 Ms. Barbara Coburn Bragg 1987  
 Mr. Marcus B. Giamatti 1987  
 Mr. Peter Gray Lewis 1987  
 Ms. Susan Marie Gibney 1987  
 Mr. William J. Dawson 1987  
 Mr. Frank S. Palmer 1987  
 Mr. David L. Stocker 1987  
 Ms. Dana S. Croll 1987  
 Ms. Lesly Jane Kahn 1987  
 Mr. Anders P. Bolang 1987  
 Ms. Kimberly A. Scott 1987  
 Mr. Philip Moon 1987  
 Mr. Daniel Chace 1987

**1988**

Mr. Pearce Bunting 1988  
 Mr. Kirk Roberts Jackson 1988  
 Ms. Mary Constance Ball 1988  
 Mr. Thomas John McGowan 1988  
 Mr. Steven A. Skybell 1988  
 Mr. Bruce Abram Katzman 1988  
 Mr. Mark Anthony Wade 1988  
 Ms. Gail A. Dartez 1988  
 Mr. James Louis Glossman 1988  
 Ms. Stephanie Bridgman Nash 1988  
 Mr. Benjamin Lloyd 1988  
 Mr. Brennan Murphy 1988  
 Ms. Jane H. Macfie 1988

Ms. Sharon Washington	1988	Ms. Jean Z. Zimmerman	1991
Ms. Sharon L. Brady	1988	Mr. Robert L. Beatty, Jr.	1991
Ms. Colette Ann Kilroy	1988	Mr. Jay P. Goede	1991
<b>1989</b>		Ms. Kristin L. Flanders	1991
Mr. Quentin O'Brien	1989	Mr. Thomas M. Beckett	1991
Mr. Erik Alexander Onate	1989	Mr. Douglas Spitz	1991
Mr. Robert Isaac Russell	1989	<b>1992</b>	
Ms. Jacquelyn Mari Roberts	1989	Mr. Liev Schreiber	1992
Mr. Walker Jones	1989	Mr. Thomas Andrew Whyte	1992
Ms. Mary T. Mara	1989	Mr. Bernard John Sheredy	1992
Mr. Archie Benard Cummings	1989	Ms. Martha Josephine New	1992
Mr. Peter Andrew Marshall	1989	Mr. Michael Anthony Manuel	1992
Mr. Roger Keith Bechtel	1989	Mr. Mark C. Bauer	1992
Ms. Cathleen Suzanne Fay	1989	Mr. Malcolm Gerard Gets	1992
Ms. Susan Knight	1989	Ms. Amy Joyce Povich	1992
Ms. Carol Hope Harrison	1989	Ms. Maria A. Sanes	1992
Mr. Cameron Miller Smith	1989	Mr. Harris Artemis Fishman	1992
Mr. Dennis Marshall Reid	1989	Mr. Darryl Theirse	1992
Ms. Gail S. Shapiro	1989	Ms. Elaine S. Tse	1992
<b>1990</b>		Mr. Michael A. Potts	1992
Mr. Christopher Centrella	1990	Ms. Simi Nofritari Junior	1992
Mr. C. Phillips Kaufmann	1990	Mr. Lars Jon Hanson	1992
Mr. Michael William McCarty	1990	Ms. Sarah Long	1992
Ms. Marilyn A. Salinger	1990	<b>1993</b>	
Mr. Charles Wesley Bartlett	1990	Mr. Enrico L. Colantoni	1993
Mr. Mary K. Walden	1990	Mr. Barry M. Bovshow	1993
Ms. Cindy E. Katz	1990	Mr. Gregory W. McClure	1993
Mr. Joseph B. Fuqua	1990	Mr. Sean Michael Paul Haberle	1993
Mr. William Langan	1990	Mr. Reginald Lee Flowers	1993
Mr. Bruce Altman	1990	Ms. Julie F. Lawrence-Edsell	1993
Ms. Rosalyn E. Coleman	1990	Ms. Melody Juatain Garrett	1993
Ms. Deborah Lee Goldberg	1990	Mr. Dallas Adams	1993
Mr. Shawn Hamilton Brown	1990	Mrs. Roxanna A. Manuel	1993
Mr. Rafeal Fernando Clements	1990	Mr. Reginald Hunt Rogers	1993
Ms. Jill Ryder Patterson	1990	Ms. Mary Magdalena Hernandez	1993
Mr. Sean James Cullen	1990	Mr. Craig P. Mathers	1993
<b>1991</b>		Ms. Drew E. Richardson	1993
Ms. Linda Maurel Sithole	1991	Mr. Declan R. Lane	1993
Mr. Alexander F. Draper	1991	Ms. Karen A. Bishop	1993
Ms. Pamela Jane Gray	1991	Mr. Brendan K. Corbalis	1993
Mr. Robert Alexander Campbell	1991	Mr. James E. Kall	1993
Ms. Kadina de Elejalde	1991	<b>1994</b>	
Mr. Michael A. Early	1991	Ms. Sarah A. Brown	1994
Mr. Joshua E. Fardon	1991	Ms. Ashlee A. Temple	1994
Mr. William F. McGuire	1991	Mr. Brendon B. Foxworth	1994

Mr. Scott A. Sherman	1994
Ms. Elizabeth Lande	1994
Ms. Nina Landey	1994
Mr. Andrew Pang	1994
Mr. Peter M. Gantenbein	1994
Ms. Robin D. Miles	1994
Ms. Sarah E. Knowlton	1994
Mr. Lance S. Reddick	1994
Mr. Anthony C. Ward	1994
Mr. Albert J. Espinosa	1994
Mr. Paul Edward Giamatti	1994
Mr. Phillip C. Smith	1994

**1995**

Ms. Sanaa McCoy Lathan	1995
Mr. Thomas Joseph McCarthy	1995
Ms. Mercedes Z. Herrero	1995
Ms. Greer Goodman	1995
Ms. Vicki Pesetti	1995
Ms. Susan Mary Cremin	1995
Ms. Suzanne R. Cryer Luke	1995
Mr. Earl L. Baker	1995
Mr. John Harrington Bland	1995
Mr. David Richard Grillo	1995
Mr. Trevor Frederic Anthony	1995

Mr. James Sheldon Hallett	1995
Mr. Michael Eric Strickland	1995
Mr. Nathan Anthony Hinton	1995
Mr. Stephen Victor Derosa	1995

**1996**

Ms. Jennie E. Israel	1996
Ms. Ann Marie Malloy	1996
Mr. Daniel M. Blinkoff	1996
Mr. Michael Gabriel Goodfriend	1996
Mr. Mark Henry Dold	1996
Michael Dale Eaddy	1996
Mr. Jeffrey K. Talbott	1996
Mr. Kevin Scott Henderson	1996
Mr. Max Chalawsky	1996
Ms. Rene Michelle Augesen	1996
Mr. David Brian Woodside	1996
Ms. Amanda Lynn Fox	1996
Ms. Susan Elizabeth Stevens	1996
Ms. Sarah Gray Rafferty	1996
Mr. Elijah Alexander	1996

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