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Acting in Opera: A Stanislavsky Approach.

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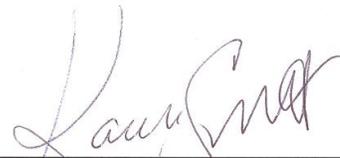
ACTING IN OPERA: A STANISLAVSKY APPROACH

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

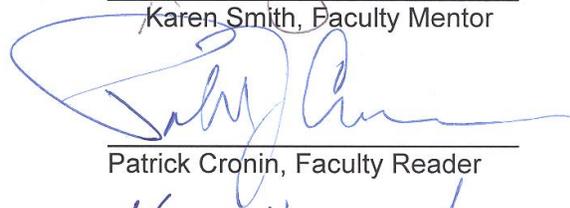
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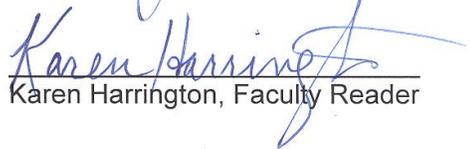
December 12, 2012



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Introduction and Questions Asked

Constantin Stanislavsky once said in *My Life In Art*, Chapter VIII that,

“...not a single artist will ever betray his secrets. How he works and creates is a mystery which he carries into the grave with him. Some do it simply because they don't know themselves, because they create intuitively and have no conscious relation to their creations. Others know very well what, why, and how things are done. But it is their patented secret, which does not pay to pass on to someone else.”

When I was younger, I had no idea what made my acting “tick,” so to speak. I created intuitively, as Stanislavsky says in the aforementioned citation, and did little to nothing consciously relating to what I created in my art. As I learned more about technique, I grew to like delving deeper into a character's history and into his or her motivations. While I still partially tend to keep choices made by my intuition, I now keep those choices consciously and generally find reasons behind why I keep them.

I am a singing actor; or sometimes an acting singer. While the terms “actor” and “singer” are mutually exclusive, I feel like the two categories make a good team, especially in terms of describing what I do as an artist. In my time as a singing actor (or acting singer), and especially within my four years spent at East Tennessee State University, I have mostly only studied Constantin Stanislavsky's system of acting. I have no complaints about these techniques being taught as the sole system in my acting classes; in fact, I believe it is a testament to the paramount importance of this historically significant technique by which dramatic art is produced.

Furthermore, within these past four years especially, it has come to my attention that this system of acting may be particularly viable as a resource for singer-actors to use in creating roles, specifically in an operatic role. I started thinking this way when I was looking for acting technique books by and about Constantin Stanislavsky and came across a book called *Stanislavsky on Opera*. This book first appeared to be a book of reviews which Stanislavsky wrote on selected opera productions which he had seen, but fortunately the discovery of this book opened my mind to a few ideas. First, it reminded me of what one of my acting teachers had taught me; that Stanislavsky actually taught opera singers to act. Stanislavsky had a goal of becoming an opera singer himself earlier in his life, but did not have the strong singing voice required for such a career. Finding this book, *Stanislavsky on Opera*, inspired me to think of a myriad of questions concerning Stanislavsky's system and its viability for opera singers.

My first question (which is perhaps too obvious) was, "Is Stanislavsky's system viable for opera?" If Stanislavsky's system is viable for opera, in what ways is it viable? If it is not viable, in what specific ways is it not? As a singing-actor, what changes must be made in order for this acting system to work well? What challenges does the singing actor face in opera that the straight-play actor or even the musical theatre actor does not face?

Constantin Stanislavsky Biography

Childhood

Constantin Stanislavsky was born in Russia in 1863. His name at birth was Konstantin Sergeyeovich Alexeyev, and he did not adopt Stanislavsky as his surname until he was in his twenties. As a small child, his family often staged small theatrical productions for amusement. Once, when Stanislavsky was six years old, he performed the role of Father Winter. Mel Gordon in *The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia, A Workbook for Actors* writes on page three that, "Placed

on the stage in a fancy costume without reason or logical motivation-not even being told or knowing where to look-produced an intense physical discomfort.” His family had warned him not to place a branch made of cotton into the flame and told him instead to mime the action. He placed the branch into the flame anyway, and had to be carried out of the theatre. Young six year old Stanislavsky valued truthful stage action over miming, even if he had to go against warnings from his family and risk the danger of setting his costume and himself on fire. (p. 3-4 , *The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia, A Workbook for Actors*, Gordon)

Adulthood

In 1888, Stanislavsky's father gave him money to start a semi-professional theatre called The Society for Art and Literature. That summer, they hired Alexander Fedotov as a director who had a great influence on Stanislavsky and his acting. Fedotov taught Stanislavsky to find inspiration from living people, not to interpret someone else's interpretation of the truth. Fedotov also taught Stanislavsky the importance of relaxation on stage and a technique of playing opposites. (Gordon 13) Because of Fedotov's influence, Stanislavsky incorporated into his acting technique many physical relaxation exercises. The technique of playing opposites is something still used frequently today, even by singer-actors such as myself. If one is playing a villain, it is helpful to find out where the villain is good and play that. If one plays a hero, it is helpful to find where the hero is bad, or his flaws. “Playing opposites” creates a multifaceted, dynamic character with layers instead of a static, boring, or cartoon-like character possessing only a two-dimensional personality.

From 1890 to 1896, Stanislavsky tried his hand at directing for The Society for Art and Literature. Eventually, their productions failed as the amateur actors of this company became uninspired. The lack of inspiration in the amateur actors at The Society for Art and Literature

prompted one of the most influential creations in theatrical history: the creation of The Moscow Art Theatre.

Stanislavsky and business partner Nemirovich Danchenko decided to create a theatre company based on their mutual likes and dislikes in the theatre. They both abhorred short rehearsals, a lack of discipline, and overacting. They both admired actors who acted as artists no matter in which role they were placed. The motto of the Moscow Art Theatre was “Today, Hamlet, tomorrow an extra, but even as an extra the actor must be an artist.” (Gordon 17)

In the early days of the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavsky had not quite figured out how to direct, and he “showed nearly every performer exactly how his character should move and behave.” (Gordon 19) Interestingly enough, most directors today frown upon spoon-feeding a role to their actors. Later, Stanislavsky, having lost the trust of his original Moscow Art Theatre troupe, formed other techniques of directing and teaching acting.

Stanislavsky and the Art of the Stage, in the introduction by David Magarshack includes that “[Stanislavsky] thought for a time of becoming an opera singer himself and took lessons from the famous tenor Theodor Kommissarzhevsky...however, he soon realized that he was not cut out for opera, and devoted himself entirely to drama. About thirty years later, he was again active in opera, but this time as a teacher of acting.” (Magarshack 79) He began working with the operatic singer-actors in the Moscow Bolshoy Theatre (Magarshack 79), to be precise, which brings me to the assumption that his system should work as an operatic acting technique even more than one hundred years after his system was published.

Overview of Stanislavsky's System

The Method Vs. The System

My main question remains; is Stanislavsky's system viable for opera? To be able to answer this question, one must first hold a fundamental understanding of the difference between what is called "The Method," and Stanislavsky's system of acting. Even some people who hold a great amount of experience in acting still sometimes use the terms interchangeably, to the detriment of others'

understanding. Method acting was first pioneered by Stanislavsky, but it stems from an emotional memory technique which he later denounced as a viable acting tool. While the Emotional Memory technique came from Stanislavsky's system, it is by no means the only technique upon which the system is formed.

Stanislavsky's system was developed around 1934. At its core, Stanislavsky's is a system in which emotions are produced through the use of actions, analytical research of the given circumstances of the text, and imagination, in order to produce a truthful performance within a play (or opera). To break it down into perhaps simpler terms, Stanislavsky asked his actors to use "The Magic If." They had to ask themselves questions similar to, "What would I do if I were in my character's situation?" Also, while examining the given circumstances including the character's actions, Stanislavsky believed that actors must look beyond the character's actions into his motivation for performing an action. Also, he stressed the importance of objectives, which are the character's goals within each scene.

Many people misunderstand the ways in which Stanislavsky's system can be used. More specifically, the system is often misconstrued as being created only for naturalist drama. In fact, Mel Gordon in *Stanislavsky in America: An Actor's Workbook*, states that,

“Stanislavsky used no methodological approach to acting or directing before 1905. The acting System of Stanislavsky was created long after the [Moscow Art Theatre]'s association with Chekhov's realist plays. In fact, it was when Stanislavsky began to direct experimental and Symbolist dramas in 1906 and 1907, several years following Chekhov's death, that he felt an overpowering need to invent a special training program for actors.”

It is because of this association with Chekhov, it is incorrectly assumed by some that Stanislavsky must only have created his system for naturalist drama. While I concede that a naturalist or realism script is helpful in creating truthfulness using the given circumstances of the play, it is highly arguable that realism scripts are the only plays in which an actor can use the system. In light of Mel Gordon's statement about the time-frame in which the System was created, I would even go so far as to say that Stanislavsky's system was perhaps created in order to bring truthful acting to the more challenging (or less realistic) genres of drama, particularly symbolist drama and even opera.

What Is Stanislavsky's system?

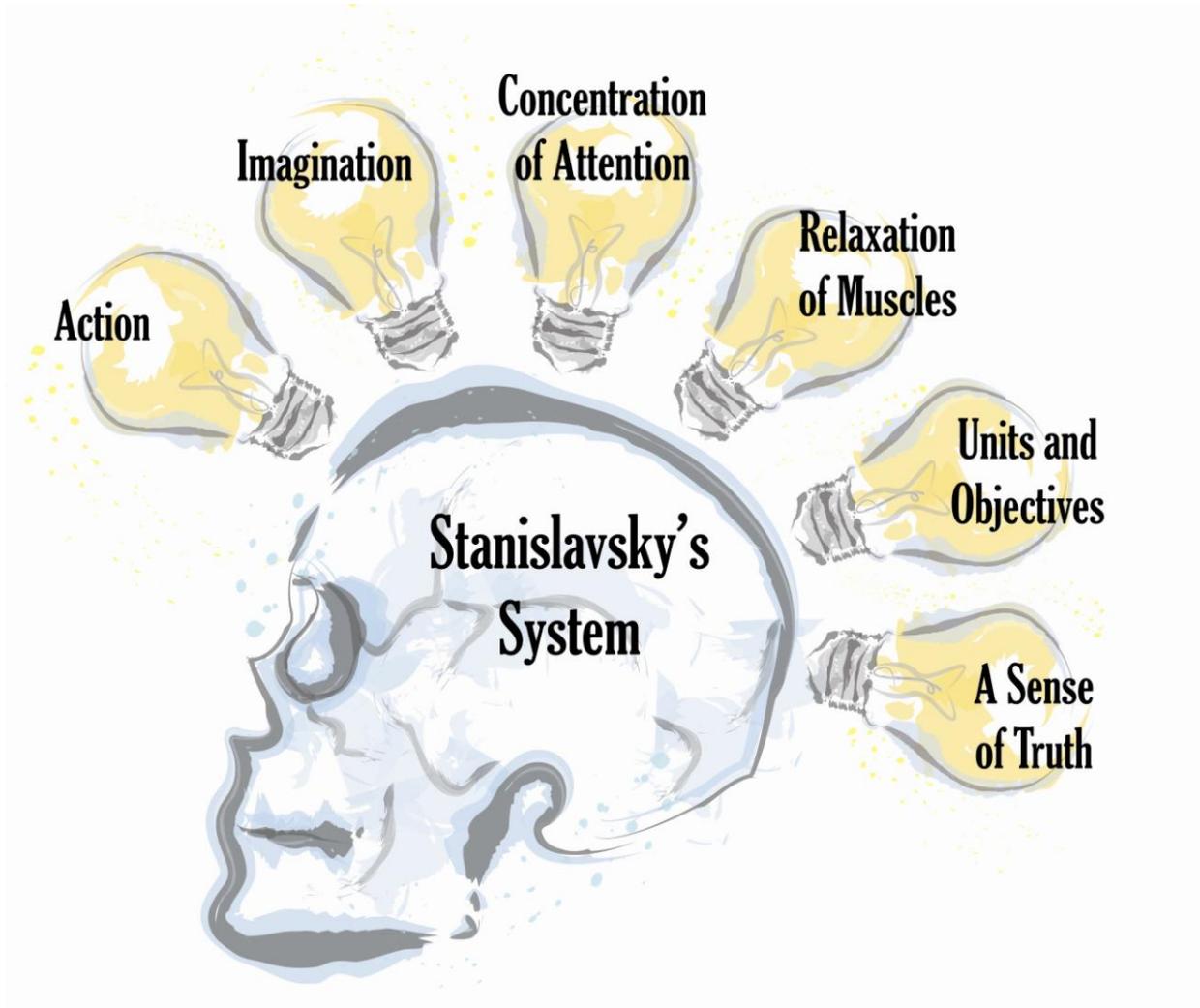


Illustration credit: Mikaela Minihan

When most people think of “system acting,” they think of emotional recall and little or nothing else. In actuality, Stanislavsky's system pertains to much more than emotional recall, and eventually, Constantin Stanislavsky rejected emotional recall in favor of imagination and the use of objectives. As a part of my introduction to this thesis, it is fitting to include examples of the execution of Stanislavsky's system as demonstrated in his book, *An Actor Prepares*, with each example supplemented by my own experience in preparing my role. First, to know if

Stanislavsky's system is viable for opera, one must first know the history of the system created by Stanislavsky, and what the execution of Stanislavsky's system entails. We might also look at what Stanislavsky had to say about Puccini and his operas, the composer in whose opera I performed for my thesis capstone experience.

“Whatever happens on stage must be for a *purpose*.” (*An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky 35) Although brief, this bit of information is of paramount importance, if not the most important fact to know while preparing a role. This sentence comes from the chapter on Action, and it describes almost everything one should know about movement on stage. On stage, I always try to find a purpose for every small gesture or facial movement, such as the way I raised my eyebrow inquisitively while playing the Lawyer, while asking if the relatives should be present for the writing of the will. I have sometimes even been criticized for not moving enough on stage. To those people who would believe that I am an uninteresting artist for not having danced about the scenery, flailing my arms with intense gestures on every line of text, I would again quote Stanislavsky who said, “Frequently physical immobility is the direct result of inner intensity, and it is these inner activities that are far more important artistically.” (*An Actor Prepares* p. 37) I often choose to not move, in order to avoid unnecessary distractions and action without purpose, particularly for the sake of the audience's already divided attention. I also find that my acting is more real and meaningful to myself and those actors or singers with whom I share a scene.

Imagination is the next key to the preparation of a role. “During every moment we are on the stage...we must be aware either of the external circumstances which surround us, or of an inner chain of circumstances which we ourselves have imagined in order to illustrate our parts.” (63- 64) My super-objective was to be the most successful (and by that, I mean wealthy and

adored) doctor that Bologna or any other town in the world had seen. Part of my objectives I therefore had to accomplish included making polite house-calls to the ill Mr. Buoso (my patient), and spreading my name as an educated doctor among the myriad of relatives who were visiting Buoso's house at the same time of my house call. In hindsight, perhaps I should have even made business cards to give to the relatives as I greeted them all. The irony of my imagined super-objective is that Spinelloccio remains completely oblivious to the previous death of Mr. Buoso. For my role as Spinelloccio, the part called for me to be mostly oblivious to the external circumstances. If not, how could I possibly ignore the fact that my patient had died, and another man wearing a ridiculous nose-piece was lying in his bed impersonating his voice most unsatisfactorily? Therefore I relied on the “inner chain of circumstances.”

Concentration of attention is for me the most difficult of subjects within *An Actor Prepares*, especially when applying it in an operatic role. The lights are shining on the stage with their uncomfortable warmth, a large audience of people is staring at me, and all I can think is, *My goodness! I don't want to sing and count measures of rests at the same time, much less act!* “In order to get away from the auditorium you must be interested in something on the stage.” (75). Stanislavsky mentions that once you concentrate on something behind the footlights, you cease to think about what was going on in front of them. (75) While our auditorium in Mathes Hall does not have footlights, there is a clear division between the elevated seats in the auditorium and the somewhat small, brownish-colored stage floor. My central point of focus tended to be the objects I carried or wore onstage, such as my legal notepad for the Lawyer scene. Giving myself a point of focus by focusing my attention on my nearest object was a sense of comfort onstage, as well as an aid to natural acting. Whether the focus of attention on my nearest object

necessarily drew my attention far away from the conductor is one of those aforementioned artist's secrets which she never divulges to the public.

Relaxation of muscles is an important step in gaining control over one's instrument. In the Opera Workshop class, often we will start by doing stretches and relaxation exercises to warm up for actual scene work. Not only does relaxation of muscles help an actor with his or her artistic instrument; it also helps free the voice to speak or to sing.

“When [muscular tension] occurs in the vocal organs a person with otherwise naturally good tones becomes hoarse or even loses his voice. If such contraction attacks the legs, an actor walks like a paralytic; if it is in his hands, they grow numb and move like sticks...This muscular tautness affects other parts of the body also and cannot but have a deleterious effect on the emotions the actor is experiencing, his expression of them, and his general state of feeling”

(An Actor Prepares, Stanislavsky, p. 96)

I cannot stress how important the exercises at the beginning of each of our class periods have been in influencing my craft. My classmates and I generally start by stretching our necks from side to side; then we extend each arm, one at a time, over our heads to stretch our arms, shoulders, and backs. Then, bending down, we try to touch our toes. Later, we lift our legs from the knee and twirl our ankles until they pop. It is, for an actor, as important to stretch one's body as it is for a singer to warm up the voice. If an actor does not stretch, or likewise if a singer does not warm up, injury may occur, or at least a sense of awkwardness on the stage may develop.

“In every physical objective there is some psychology and vice versa. You cannot separate them...go by your instincts, always leaning a little toward the physical.” (An Actor Prepares, p. 121)

I have always been taught to pick simple, physical objectives rather than purely psychological ones. For one, a physical objective is much easier for a less experienced actor, and therefore the truth of the role is made easily available to an actor who picks such an objective. I started with the through-lines, “to be successful, possibly famous” for Doctor Spinellochio. When I entered the scene as Doctor Spinellochio, the through-line influenced me in choosing all of my objectives. I first used the objective “to make a house-call,” which got me through the door, despite the other characters' anxiety. Then, I used “to boast,” which added a great bit of sub-text to all of my lines.

“In ordinary life, truth is what really exists, what a person really knows. Whereas on the stage it consists of something that is not actually in existence but which could happen.” (An Actor Prepares, p. 128) The chapter from which I took this citation emphasizes the importance of the *given circumstances*. This is a term we often use in the theatre world, and it means that the play's script (or in this case, the opera's libretto) contains information about the character's world which an actor can use to supplement his imagination during a performance.

My Experience in *Gianni Schicchi*

My first experience of acting in a non-chorus role in an opera was an enjoyable one. It took a great deal of patience and perseverance to learn the musical dialogue which was spoken between each of my two characters and the other characters within the scenes in which I played. Adding to the excitement and challenge of being in an opera, I had to develop a certain way of preparing for roles which is usually unheard of for actors who perform in straight plays. In

addition to learning my lines, I learned melodic lines of pitch, musical rests, and how to ask an Italian person if his or her friend has had the use of his bowels lately. In all seriousness, that is one of the Doctor's lines in *Gianni Schicchi*, and once I learned its meaning, I had a hard time keeping a straight face while singing it. This is just one of the many challenges I faced as an actor performing in an opera production. Although preparing two roles proved to be challenging, I was grateful for the chance to do more research and expand my level of skill by applying my knowledge of Stanislavsky's technique to both roles.

Character Analysis of The Doctor

One of the roles which I was fortunate enough to work on was Doctor Spinelloccio – nicknamed “Spinelloccia” by the cast and director, since the character was written as a male but played as (and by) a female. In my research on Doctor Spinelloccio, I took information from the words in the score as well as other sources. Doctor Spinelloccio says at one point that he went to a Bolognese school, with which he credits all of his success. (*Gianni Schicchi* part 2, p. 15:) I took this to mean that he is, in fact, Bolognese himself. In the score, he is often simply called Il Dottore, or “The Doctor.” I found this interesting, because I later learned that Il Dottore is the name of a stock character in commedia dell'arte. Unsurprisingly to anyone slightly familiar with commedia dell'arte and the opera *Gianni Schicchi*, the character of Doctor Spinelloccio was based on “Il Dottore.”

Since the doctor is based on a character from commedia dell'arte, it seems fitting to include some information about the original character on which he was based. Il Dottore is often one of several *vecchi*, which means “old men” in Italian. I decided in conjunction with Mrs. Smith that I would not play him as an old man, but rather a woman close to her thirties, since my gender, body type, and age make it difficult if not impossible to play an older gentleman. My

vocal type and range are also an issue with playing a convincing man. Since the character is written in the bass clef as a baritone voice, I usually had to sing each line up an octave in order for it to sit in a comfortable place in my mezzo-soprano voice.

Beyond being an old man, the doctor is an arrogant character, whose main purpose is to be an obstacle to the young lovers, who in this opera would be Rinuccio and Lauretta. I saw much of the doctor's pompousness in his lines within the opera; and if not actually within his lines, I created a subtext by my actions and facial expressions. “Non ho delle pretese... Il merito l'è tutto della scuola bolognese!”(Puccini p. 15) for example, is one of Doctor Spinelloccio's lines. Roughly translated into English, it means, “I don't claim it, all the merit goes to the Bolognese school!” Because I know that the stock character Il Dottore is an arrogant character, I took this to mean that Spinelloccio was only narcissistically feigning modesty, and therefore I used gestures such as pridefully fanning my labcoat as if to say, “Look what I did! I have healed someone because of my education and skill!”

As for the truthfulness that I tried to impart upon my character, I soon found that even the smallest, seemingly insignificant character choices can somehow become such an integral part of the role that it is difficult to take the *suspension of disbelief* away from the audience.

Suspension of disbelief is a term we often use in the theatre, but it is a term coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the 19th century, meaning that the audience sometimes finds a character or a story so real as to believe that the aspect of the play or opera exists in real life. This can happen with a simple aspect of a character which the audience willingly believes about the actor.

I chose in rehearsal to use a speech impediment to make the character's voice humorous. *Gianni Schicchi* is a comedic opera, after all. I feigned the sort of lisp that an adolescent might have if he or she wore headgear and braces on his or her teeth. Part of my intention was humor,

but it partially stemmed from the image I have in my head of an intellectual, boastful sort of person, perhaps what modern day audiences would consider to be a nerd. I tried this type of lisp during rehearsal as a sort of joke one afternoon, and the whole cast roared with laughter! I thought the choice of a speech impediment would work wonderfully for the doctor as comic relief in the dramatically intense scene. However, I was so in practice with my lisp that I had many audience members on opening night absolutely convinced that it was actually the way I talk and sing! Even my director's mother came backstage after opening night and told me her thoughts about my convincing lisp. She said, "I thought, 'That poor girl! She has a lisp, but she loves to sing opera!'"

Although my attempts at being humorous were lost on most audience members, I heard a few chuckles throughout the house as I asked about Mr. Buoso's bowel movements in a foreign language with my speech impediment, super-titles proudly displayed above my head on the projector screen in Mathes Hall. My favorite part, I think, of this particular experience, was hearing the stifled giggles coming from the audience members who weren't sure whether they should laugh at the poor girl with the lisp or not.

Character Analysis of The Lawyer

Much like Doctor Spinellochio, I played the lawyer as a female who was closer to my age. Perhaps she is in her mid-thirties, and unmarried for reasons similar to the Doctor. Both characters are very career-minded, and on some level, both characters are socially inept for different reasons. The Doctor is so inept that he should lose his job. He makes a house call to check on Mister Buoso, who is dead. The Doctor doesn't even notice that his patient is dead, and another man, Gianni Schicchi, is in the bed in place of Mister Buoso. The lawyer is only slightly socially inept. We see this because she becomes distracted at the slightest hint of flattery or

flirtation. In order for the story to work, or to be believable, we must have clear motivations for the actions within the play. One of the verbs that Mrs. Smith and I chose to work with for the Lawyer was, “to flirt.” The Lawyer character is an attractive, single lady in mid-adulthood. A couple of Mister Buoso's attractive male cousins start to flirt with her from the beginning of the scene as she is trying to write the will. She ends up writing flirtatious notes to her new friends, and exchanging phone numbers.

I soon discovered that “playing the opposite” is a useful technique no matter the genre of drama in which I am playing. In the scenes in which I played in *Gianni Schicchi*, both of my characters seem to me to be completely inept airheads, yet I played the opposite. More accurately, I played them as human beings, both who wanted to achieve great success in their professional lives, but became distracted. In one case, the Doctor's more than slight preoccupation with boasting about his career humorously and ironically caused him not to notice that his own patient had died. In another case, the notary, or lawyer, wants to earn money and to earn the affections of those around her so desperately that she cannot realize that Gianni Schicchi is an imposter. Instead, she is too busy flirting with Mister Buoso's cousins.

Self-critique of performances

My performance as the Doctor has honestly become one of my favorite roles I have played onstage. Although difficult considering my slight musical inadequacy, it was my very first ensemble role within an opera. I had previously played a Gingerbread Child in *Hansel and Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck, but that was only a chorus role. I took the role of Gingerbread Child very seriously in 2009, but I had no solos and therefore as a freshman it was difficult to find a particular motivation for the short time I was onstage. As Doctor Spinelloccio in *Gianni*

Schicchi, I was both well-prepared from an actor's viewpoint to understand my through-line and wants, enough so to feel comfortable with a small ensemble part with my own dialogue.

The role of the lawyer in *Gianni Schicchi* seemed increasingly more difficult for me than the role of the Doctor. Besides having more time onstage and more lines than the Doctor, I had a marginally shorter amount of time to prepare this role. Originally another girl had been cast as the lawyer, but she dropped out of the production. I had been cast as Guccio, a witness. When the original girl dropped out of the production, I was asked a few weeks into rehearsal to take on her part. There were more difficulties with the lawyer's role for other reasons, such as having to switch octaves between melodic lines and remember in which octave was most comfortable for me to sing. Counting rests within the music has always been a challenge for me as well, and I struggled at times to keep on beat. One night I even missed half of a line, but I kept going as much as possible in character. Rhythm, even for the straight-play actor, was incredibly important to Stanislavsky, and I feel as though I was inadequate at finding my rhythm. However, I look at this shortcoming as a growth experience, not as one of which I should be ashamed...at least not too terribly much so.

Challenges in Operatic Acting

Operatic musical style, melodic lines of opera, singing/acting in a different language than one's native language, filling the rests of music with action, looking as if you're not thinking too hard about the music and being "in the moment," are all challenges that the operatic actor faces. Being "in the moment" becomes surprisingly difficult especially while counting measures of music in your head, or even listening to the score at all. I mean, who walks around in real life with everyone singing something composed by Puccini? Add the aforementioned difficulties to the

fact that operatic singers have to project over orchestras in large halls, or even just a somewhat loud piano in Mathes Hall, and it multiplies the intensity of the difficulty.

First and foremost, the operatic style of music is not meant for the faint of heart. As a singer, I know that not only intricate arias with coloratura passages require great breath support, but even a line or two from a Puccini score requires consistently appropriate posture to project sound from the instrument. The melodic lines add to the difficulty of memorizing a role especially. You may have heard perhaps a teacher say something along the lines of, "Putting words to music can make facts and words easier to memorize!" I would add that only simple melodies make facts easier to memorize, if you can associate them together. Here is where memorization becomes extremely difficult. I was not only singing in a non-native language, but Italian is one that I have never formally studied. The only phrases that I know in Italian, aside from "Hello," "Goodbye," "My Name is Kayla," and "What is your name?" I only learned directly from the libretto of the opera. As a French and theatre major, I can testify to the fact that acting in any language other than one's native language, even if it is your second language with which you are quite familiar, is extremely difficult. Because of the nature of the operatic melodic line coupled with the singer's lack of proficiency in speaking the primary language used in the composition, even the smallest roles take sometimes weeks and months of memorization work.

Filling the rests with action, continuously being in character is a challenge that any actor faces, yet I would say the weight of the work rests doubly so on the singer-actor in operatic works. As a singer-actor, you must always be listening. Actors continually listen to their scene partners in order to be able to truthfully react to the other person's lines. Singers must do the same, while simultaneously listening to the accompanist for their turn to come in. All of this

must be done while making the character come to life. It is impossible to focus on a character and his or her actions while the actor is busy counting rests in the music. This rhythmic awareness must be intrinsically achieved or the whole production could fall apart.

This section of the paper stems not from a desire to excuse myself from my lack of superior musical or theatrical technique, but rather from a source of continual admiration that I have for operatic actor/singers who are more experienced than myself, making it appear simultaneously effortless and truthful. My journey into the world of operatic singing and acting has been a spectacular growth experience, but I feel that my performance, especially musically, was merely an actor attempting to sing.

Part of my personal difficulty stemmed from memorization of my role. I would be in later rehearsals, struggling to hold on to my score and libretto while Mrs. Smith, I am sure, wanted to rip it out of my hands. Instead, she suggested kindly that it is easier to act without holding on to unnecessary objects. I finally put down the score and was amazed at how much I remembered from numerous practices, and how much easier it was to impart sub-text into my role and follow my objectives. In *Stanislavsky on Opera*, Romyantsev writes that Stanislavsky had once said the following:

“When you are learning the text and music of a role, be extremely careful not ever to go over it by rote, but always combine it with the inner course of your part. Relate the enunciation, the text, the music all to the through-line of action that goes through your whole role. This is how I interpret this thing. A role is not made interesting by words alone but by what the actor puts into them.”

(Romyantsev 293)

While learning my text and music, I feel that I may have sometimes failed to connect it to the through-line, at least in the beginning. This is what made memorization so particularly difficult. I started with the individual lines of music, singing them on a “la,” or some similar syllable, and then I added the diction of the Italian. Later, I looked up the Italian words, translated my part into English, and wrote the translation into my score. Looking back, I should have first looked up the English translation to put my actor's “thinking cap” on, so to speak, and written in my translation of the libretto so as to gain a rough idea of my character's thoughts, wants, and any background information I could find. Then, I would have worried with the music; I have said earlier that some teachers argue that lines are easier to memorize when you put them to music. After having this experience, I would say that music is easier to remember when you pair lines of music with a through-line.

Conclusion

As a beginning actor, I was unable to divulge any reason why I chose what I did onstage. I had little training in any technique, and therefore could not explain any choice besides that it came from my intuition. While I have always had a strong imagination, I needed to learn technique in order to put my imagination to use as an actor. This is where Stanislavsky's system, which I learned in my acting classes, came into play. As a singer and actor, it makes sense that I apply Stanislavsky's acting techniques to my work for acting in opera. After all, Stanislavsky himself at one point in his life had wished to become an opera singer. Perhaps not everyone is born with a voice suited for a grand opera hall, including myself. I know I have much work to do on my voice before I can ever hope to become a professional singer, but that is not my goal. My goal is to bring truthfulness to the stage, whether I am acting in a straight play, or by some blessing I am able to combine my two loves, acting and singing.

In *Gianni Schicchi*, I was able to bring the aforementioned truthfulness to the stage by using techniques learned from Stanislavsky's method. I did not employ every single technique he has ever spoken of, because that would take too much time for the short semester I worked on my roles in the one-act opera. I had even less time to work on the lawyer role than the role of Doctor Spinelloccio. Constantin Stanislavsky even disregarded some of his own teachings later in life, and revised his system many, many times in his books.

Further than a generalization of employing generic techniques of Stanislavsky, I used *The Magic If* to determine my characters' personalities and physical traits and I “played the opposite” in order to create a deeper, more dimensional character. I also used active action verbs, such as “to boast,” or “to flirt,” in order to achieve a sub-text for each of my lines. Finally, I chose specific wants and needs for my character to heighten the stakes within each scene.

One of the challenges I had in employing Stanislavsky's technique is that I learned the role backwards. I started with the music, I ended with the objectives and through-line. I should have started with the translation and found the through-line, and then started to learn the music. Reversing the way in which I learned my roles would have given the opportunity for stronger memorization technique and a more truthful performance. If I could do it all over again, that is what I would have done differently.

Because of the myriad of problems that any actor in an opera faces, it is not surprising that I experienced many shortcomings while working on my roles. Most of these problems such as a split concentration on the role in which you are playing and the music, the thought of which can sometimes bring one out of character and completely destroy a dramatic performance if one is not careful to pay more visible attention to the role's objectives, and keep listening to the music as an internal device which guides one's rhythm and pitch.

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