

## **Report for SWPS University, Institute of Humanities (Warsaw)**

**From:** Professor Sharon Marie Carnicke,  
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**Re:** The doctoral dissertation of Ewa Danuta Godziszewska,  
The Interdisciplinary Doctoral Studies Program,  
Supervised by Professor Tomasz Kubikowski

**Title:** *Transmission of the Russian Acting System to the American Theatre and Movie Industry*

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### **I: The Structure of the Dissertation**

Ms. Godziszewska's dissertation examines the development of the American Method from its roots in the System for actor training that Stanislavsky created in Russia. More particularly, she draws a direct line of succession from two of Stanislavsky's proteges—Richard Boleslavsky (a Pole) and Maria Ouspenskaya (a Russian)—to the Method's two most prominent teachers—Lee Strasberg (an immigrant from Galicia) and Stella Adler (the daughter of Yiddish actors who had fled from Russian pogroms to the US).

The dissertation is presented in two parts. Part I employs three chapters to trace this line of development through its institutions: the Moscow Art Theatre, which toured the United States in 1923 and 1934; the establishment and curriculum of the American Laboratory Theatre where Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya taught American actors in the 1920s; the Group Theatre, where their students Americanized the Russian techniques in the 1930s; and the Actors Studio, where the Method moved from the fringes of art into the commercial theatrical and film industries, starting with the 1940s. Part II focuses more deeply on the biographies, pedagogies, and careers of Ouspenskaya, Strasberg, and Adler, with particular regard paid to their differing conceptions and approaches to acting. These three chapters effectively trace the transformative evolution of

Stanislavsky's ideas and practice within American culture. Each chapter is preceded by a well-chosen historical photograph, most of which I have not seen before.

As Ms. Godziszewska explains in her introduction (page 14), she limits her study to only those American teachers who studied directly with Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya. By leaving aside other Russian émigré teachers in the US (such as Michael Chekhov, Vera Solievova, etc.) and treating some figures in American theatrical history (such as Elia Kazan, Bobby Lewis, Sanford Meisner, etc.) as secondary characters, her decision to limit her dissertation in this way productively allows her to focus more attention on: (1) Ouspenskaya, whose influence on American acting has been severely understudied; and (2) the debate between Strasberg and Adler on the place of personal emotion in acting, each of whom has spawned a different branch of Method acting.

## **II: Methodology and Literature Applied in the Research**

In her study of the American Method, Ms. Godziszewska has conducted traditional scholarly research by selecting and analyzing pertinent sources of information. She has focused exclusively on sources in English, particularly emphasizing archival research in many US cities: New York, Los Angeles, Austin, and Scranton (among them). Her ability to secure grants for travel to archives is admirable, exceeding that of other graduate students whom I have mentored in the past. While abroad, she also interviewed a range of scholars and acting teachers with expertise in her topic, including a semester spent in residence at my university where she observed my classes and tapped the cinema archives at the University of Southern California, the University of California at Los Angeles, and the Academy of Motion Pictures.

### **III: The Candidate's Demonstration of Research Ability, Knowledge of the Subject, and Writing Style**

The archival resources that inform the dissertation along with Ms. Godziszewska's close analyses of film performances speak to her strong ability to conduct research and assess her findings. The selected historical information demonstrates expert knowledge of her subject. Her bibliography testifies to the range of her research in that it includes classic and recent books as well as archival resources. Given her strong preference for English-language sources, I assume that she has chosen to exclude the literature on her topic in Polish (particularly studies on Boleslavsky, as well as her own translations of his works) due to her focus on the American context.

Ms. Godziszewska writes in a straightforward manner, without the professional and theoretical jargon that mar so many academic studies. In my view, her clarity is all the more admirable because she writes in English, rather than Polish. As an academic who also functions in an adopted language, I know how much more difficult it is to express the complexity of ideas in a language that is not one's native tongue. There are remarkably few typing, spelling, and grammatical errors that I have found in my reading of her dissertation. I have annotated these and made a few other small notes on the PDF of her dissertation (marked with my initials SMC) in order to assist her when she revises her dissertation for publication.

### **IV: Detailed Evaluations on the Strengths of the Work**

The introduction clearly sets out the dissertation's scope and structure, as described above. In addition, it describes the larger goals behind Ms. Godziszewska's research, which involves identifying the "values, skills, knowledge and behaviors" (page 9) that undergird the

transformation of Stanislavsky's System into the Method. As the dissertation develops, these larger issues emerge from the history described in Part I and from the pedagogies of the three key teachers examined in Part II. Chapter 0 contextualizes the entire study by providing a concise but sufficient history of Stanislavsky's tours to the US, during which Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya served as members of the Moscow Art Theatre's ensemble of actors. Their emigration planted the seeds for the line of direct succession that then becomes the dissertation's primary focus.

Part I describes the history of that succession in 3 chapters. The first examines these seeds through the curriculum of the American Laboratory Theatre, founded specifically for Boleslavsky to teach Russian methods of acting to American actors. Because his directing on Broadway and Hollywood limited the time that he could devote to the Lab, he invited Ouspenskaya to join the enterprise. Thus, while he lectured about the principles of performance, Ouspenskaya became the Lab's primary teacher of acting techniques. In the process, she turned Boleslavsky's theoretical words into practice for the students. As Ms. Godziszewska observes, the Lab's commitment to art over commerce already suggests a growing tension between Russian and American values.

Chapters 3 and 4 on the Group Theatre and the Actors Studio trace the histories and goals of these two major American institutions, which adapted Russian approaches to the needs of American drama and moved the Method from the artistic fringe into the mainstream of US theatre and film. Along the way, Ms. Godziszewska stresses four key ideas: that the Group's desire to stage plays with social messages did not succeed in the commercial environment of Broadway (page 50); that the Russian-inflected commitment to ensemble acting contradicted American individualism (page 58); that Strasberg was unique among his colleagues in his

emphasis on personal emotion in acting (page 64); and that Strasberg was largely responsible for a radical shift from the family-friendly atmosphere of the Group to the challenging environment of the Actors Studio (page 66). These important ideas advance Ms. Godziszewska's larger goal of exploring the cultural values that impeded the acceptance of Russian acting in the US.

Part II of the dissertation selects for deeper examination the three acting teachers who defined the evolution of the Russian System into the American Method: Maria Ouspenskaya (Chapter 4), Lee Strasberg (Chapter 5), and Stella Adler (Chapter 6).

Ms. Godziszewska's original contribution to the field is undeniably strongest in Chapter 4. Because Ouspenskaya never wrote about her pedagogy and played only secondary characters in her films due to type-casting in Hollywood, she has largely been overlooked in scholarly discussions. In contrast, her male artistic partner, Boleslavsky, has received more attention, in part because of gender bias, and also in part because he, as a notable film director, wielded more power in Hollywood than she could as an actor of small roles. Ms. Godziszewska has gathered important biographical and pedagogical information about Ouspenskaya from unpublished archives and memoirs about her teaching. Also included in the chapter are carefully detailed analyses of her film performances. The most important idea behind Ouspenskaya's approach to acting is that its techniques are not bound by media, but move easily from stage to screen and back again (page 117). In my view, this chapter would be in and of itself sufficient proof of Ms. Godziszewska's research skills, analytical prowess, and scholarly contribution to the field of interdisciplinary studies.

Much has been written in theatre studies about both Strasberg and Adler, therefore it is unsurprising that chapters 5 and 6 include much that is familiar to the field. Nonetheless, Ms. Godziszewska brings important new emphases to bear upon her topic. With regard to Strasberg,

she undercuts his grounding in the Stanislavsky System by examining how little time he had actually spent at the American Laboratory Theatre (pages 126-7). This is an important fact that has long been ignored. She also juxtaposes Strasberg's casual treatment of text (page 140) with Adler's careful analyses of plays (Chapter 6). This difference shows that Adler did in fact follow the Stanislavsky System more closely than did Strasberg. Finally, Ms. Godziszewska's close examination of Strasberg's film performances, which have generally been undertheorized, extends beyond my own article on this topic (which is, as far as I know, the only other study that examines his acting).

The chapter on Adler (along with that on Ouspenskaya) contains some of the most vivid writing in the dissertation, bringing Adler's personality to life for the reader. In addition, this chapter contains one of Ms. Godziszewska's most important theoretical points—that Boleslavsky's direction was "external" in its approach, while the directorial approach established by Strasberg at the Group Theatre was "internal" (page 162). This point not only explains Adler's famous debate with Strasberg over his overemphasis on the actor's "internal," personal life, but also again suggests that she was the better representative of Russian techniques in the US than he.

## **V: Irregularities and Suggestions for Future Revisions**

As I was reading the dissertation, I felt that, in a few places, the work could benefit from more explicit statements or expanded discussions of some few ideas. I list these places here, so that Ms. Godziszewska can consider these revisions when she revisits her work for publication:

While Ms. Godziszewska does a fine job within the dissertation as a whole of identifying the "values, skills, knowledge and behaviors" (page 9) that transformed the Stanislavsky System

into the American Method, a more explicit listing of these items in the Introduction, followed by an expansion in the Conclusion that summarizes and comments upon them would better assist the reader in isolating the author's keys findings.

Stanislavsky's term *perezhivanie* is raised in a number of chapters, at times with reference to the Russian word and at other times with reference to commonly employed translations of it such as "living through the role," "living on stage," or "living the role." Since this term and its problematic translations are widely contested by current scholars on Russian theatre, I would suggest that the dissertation could benefit from adding a discussion that places Stanislavsky's use of the term to name what the actor experiences sensorially and creatively during performance next to the Method's reinterpretation of it as the evocation of authentic emotion through affective memory.

Ms. Godziszewska also refers in a number of places to the use of improvisation techniques in the American context without further exploration. If, when conducting her research she had found more specific information about this topic, it might be worthwhile for her to consider including it in the dissertation (or, alternatively, mentioning that little can be found), because, at present, there is a growing interest among scholars and actors in Stanislavsky's use of improvisatory etudes in his late rehearsal technique of Active Analysis.

There are two other areas that might also benefit from the inclusion of additional information. First, in parallel with Ms. Godziszewska's discussion of the directors' unit at the Actors Studio, she might consider how the playwright's unit at the Studio helped establish what audiences came to consider the Method style of drama. Lastly, given the careful descriptions of film performances by Ouspenskaya and Strasberg in Part II, Ms. Godziszewska might consider including similar examinations of Adler's filmed performances.

## **VI: Overall Evaluation**

In conclusion, I enthusiastically congratulate Ms. Godziszewska on a fine dissertation. While her chapter on Ouspenskaya would be enough to make her research outstanding, she has also contributed new angles of vision on the ways in which Russian acting has been adapted to American values (as documented in Section III above). Overall, the dissertation demonstrates her unquestionable abilities to conduct research, assess her findings, and contribute to scholarship at the doctoral level.