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ACHIEVING FLOW IN THEATRE PERFORMANCE

by  
Lynn Marie Boianelli

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts in Theatre Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
September 2, 2005

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Elisabeth Hostetter

Date Approved Sept. 2, 2005

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## ABSTRACT

Lynn Marie Boianelli  
ACHIEVING FLOW IN THEATRE PERFORMANCE  
2004/05  
Dr. Elisabeth Hostetter  
Master of Arts in Theatre

This study examines the idea of “flow,” the state of optimal experience, and determines how it relates to theatrical performance. Using the methodology presented in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s FLOW: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, I examine the rehearsal and performance processes of theatre in terms of the steps needed to reach a state of optimal experience. I specifically look at the issues of repeatability (reaching the state of flow night after night), consciousness (awareness), self-consciousness and concentration. In addition, I discuss options performers have for receiving feedback as theorized in the works of Anne Bogart, Constantin Stanislavski, David Mamet and interviews conducted with professional actors, George DiCenzo and Ellen Tobie. Although tracing the steps to flow can help performers improve and give them an insight into their successes and failures, performers are merely human and may not reach the zone every night.

MINI-ABSTRACT

Lynn Marie Boianelli  
ACHIEVING FLOW IN THEATRE PERFORMANCE  
2004/05  
Dr. Elisabeth Hostetter  
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This thesis looks at the steps needed to reach “flow,” the state of optimal experience, in terms of how flow correlates to theatre performance. This study determines that analyzing acting in this way is beneficial, however, not a full proof plan for reaching the desired zone every time.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has studied optimal experience for over a quarter-century. In his book, FLOW: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, he discussed a theory for consistently reaching “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (4). He conducted studies with a few hundred “experts” in the arts, professional sports, medicine and the gaming industry (Csikszentmihalyi 4). Initially he used interviews and questionnaires to inform his research. However, later he developed a technique called “Experience Sampling Method” where subjects wore electronic paging devices for a week. When their pagers randomly went off, they wrote down their feelings at that particular moment. His study now includes over a hundred thousand such journals of data from people of all walks of life and from all different areas of the world.

He found that people feel most content when their minds expand as they try to accomplish something difficult and fulfilling (Csikszentmihalyi 3). The key to happiness begins with controlling consciousness, thereby grasping control over one’s inner life. Csikszentmihalyi says, “When a person organizes his or her consciousness so as to experience flow as often as possible, the quality of life is inevitably going to improve. [...] In flow we are in control of our psychic energy [or our concentration] and everything we do adds order to consciousness” (40). The way to optimal experience begins with setting a clear and attainable goal (49). Next a person has to fully

concentrate attention on the task at hand. Csikszentmihalyi classifies concentration as psychic energy:

Because attention determines what will or will not appear in consciousness, and because it is also required to make any other mental events—such as remembering, thinking, feeling, and making decisions—happen there, it is useful to think of it as *psychic energy*. Attention is like energy in that without it no work can be done, and in doing work it is dissipated. We create ourselves by how we invest this energy. Memories, thoughts, and feelings are all shaped by how we use it. And it is an energy under our control, to do with as we please; hence, attention is our most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience. (33)

A dancer described in FLOW says that her concentration remains so complete that her mind does not wander and she cannot think of anything else but the task at hand (53). One concentrates because of the clear goals, and feedback helps to gauge the success or failure in attaining a goal. In order to reach the state of optimal experience one absolutely needs to receive feedback, another step in the flow process (49).

Csikszentmihalyi does admit that some activities prove harder to rate as successes or failures. In those instances, mostly those in the area of subjective art, he says artists need to judge their own success and failure:

In some creative activities, where goals are not clearly set in advance, a person must develop a strong personal sense of what she intends to do. The artist might not have a visual image of what the finished painting should look like, but when the picture has progressed to a certain point,



she should know whether this is what she wanted to achieve or not. And a painter who enjoys painting must have internalized criteria for “good” or “bad” so that after each brush stroke she can say: “Yes, this works; no this doesn’t.” Without such internal guidelines, it is impossible to experience flow. (55-56)

Because a person gauges his own performance, gets immediate feedback and immerses himself in his quest for a goal, he loses all concern for the self, he loses the negative effects of self-consciousness and finds himself free of worries, another important part of the flow experience. The sense of self becomes stronger after flow (Csikszentmihalyi 49). The person in flow enjoys the experience so much that it allows him to feel in control over his actions, which makes him stronger.

When in flow, time often becomes distorted. Hours can feel like minutes and minutes can feel like hours. Csikszentmihalyi uses the word flow because people who reach this state often describe it with words like, “It was like floating.” “I was carried on by the flow” (40).

To keep achieving flow, one has to challenge oneself to improve. In terms of tennis, when a person plays for the first time, they may love it and remain in flow. Then they play again and become bored. They need to challenge themselves so they become better in order to regain this state of flow. Then they may realize they cannot play as well as their neighbor. They may feel frustrated, anxious and leave the state of flow. So they practice until their skill increases to that of their neighbor’s. They again reach the state of flow. So, to stay in flow one has to become better and better and better (Csikszentmihalyi 65).

In flow a person needs a fulfilling *autotelic* experience. This means that a person does an activity because they want to, not for a future reward, money or ego-driven. Simply doing the activity offers a reward itself. Csikszentmihalyi says “when the experience is autotelic, the person is paying attention to the activity for its own sake; when it is not, the attention is focused on its consequences” (67).

### Purpose of the Study

This study attempts to identify a step-by-step approach to more regularly reach what some people call the “zone,” the place of flow or the state of optimal experience. In an industry where talent does not always correlate to professional success and chance and connections sometimes mean more than education and skill, an actor only has control of himself and his acting process. This thesis explores a tool for actors trying to develop a positive philosophy about their progress. As an actor struggles for success, he can use this study as a guidepost to help control the one thing in his power, himself. If a theatre artist can understand how painters, musicians, dancers, surgeons, athletes and blue-collar workers reach the state of happiness, he or she can see what might add to their own approach in the profession of acting.

In addition, this understanding of flow can reignite pleasure in an actor no longer experiencing flow when in performance. Just as a beginning tennis player enjoys tennis, so too does the beginning actor. Novice actors often feel something they have never felt before, a euphoric feeling. The acting bug bites them and they feel confident and excited. However, as they become more advanced, more vested in the process and more aware of the competition, acting becomes a pressure filled internal struggle; no longer a flow

experience. If actors understand their initial flow experience, they may once again reach that state and may rediscover their initial love for acting.

### Relevance of the Study

This study of flow and the steps towards optimal experience, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi began at the University of Chicago, has now reached Canada, Germany, Italy, Australia and Japan. The Institute of Psychology of the Medical School at the University of Milan now houses the most comprehensive data collection outside of Chicago. The idea of flow extends to encompass an understanding of the evolution of mankind and to a study of religion. Csikszentmihalyi says that flow not only proves a worthwhile subject for academics but can also apply to any aspect of improving the quality of life. In fact it has been used to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents, to design museum exhibits and to plan activities for people in assisted living (4). The time is ripe to apply the idea of flow to acting. We live in a society in which people look for ways to improve almost everything, in a society where self-help books exist for anything and everything. Actors also strive for improvement and fulfillment and this study may help them foster a new understanding of their technique.

Csikszentmihalyi does warn that his work on flow is not a recipe for happiness, however the full title of this book FLOW: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, Steps Toward Enhancing the Quality of Life, does indicate there are quantifiable steps to achieving pleasure. However, these steps only apply based on one's ability to control consciousness and dependent on an individual's creativity, commitment and efforts (5).

## Limitations

Even keeping this step-by-step method in mind, an actor will not reach the zone every moment on stage. In the end human beings are imperfect. It is unrealistic to think that these steps, discussed and analyzed in the following thesis, can always allow participants to reach flow. Actors can look to improve their psychological attitude but not necessarily perfect their performance through the idea of flow. A performer's concentration may wane during a performance or the audience they use for feedback could be quiet and unreadable, making feedback impossible for them. There are no absolutes. However, if someone understands the steps to reaching flow, they can identify what went wrong in their performance and try harder to use another tactic during the next performance. To reach flow more often than not, one has to continue to grow. Mistakes and failures also offer avenues to growth.

In addition readers must recognize that, if taken to an extreme, the idea of flow can be harmful. Csikszentmihalyi says that the self needs to be both integrated and differentiated. Unhappiness strikes those too selfish and/or too conforming (42). In this study, I will not look at these adverse effects. I will only concentrate on the idea of flow and how it can translate into the rehearsal process and theatrical performance. In the Foreword of Sonia Moore's The Stanislavski System Joshua Logan said, "But to enjoy one's creativity to excess, to fall in love with one's inspiration, was furthest from Stanislavski's belief. When I left him that summer he wrote on the photograph he gave me, 'Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art'"(16).

## Methodology

Using Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's FLOW as a research tool, I will assess the idea of flow and how it correlates to the teachings and practice of director, actor and teacher, Constantin Stanislavski, director Anne Bogart and the theories of writer, director, David Mamet. In addition, I will assess the idea of flow in relationship to interviews I conducted with two professional actors of theatre, film and television, George DiCenzo and Ellen Tobie. I chose to look at the above-mentioned people because of their relevance to today's school of acting. Most western schools of acting teach and focus on Constantin Stanislavski. Anne Bogart's teaching offers a more modern, avant-guard perspective on theatre performance. To remain objective and explore alternate schools of thought I reviewed David Mamet who offers a candid opinion on theatre performance, which challenges standard theories of acting, particularly the opinion of Constantin Stanislavski. I chose to interview respected and accomplished actors, teachers George DiCenzo and Ellen Tobie to gain a current, practical point of view of theatrical performance.

## Survey of Literature

Research on the idea of flow and the quest for optimal experience comes from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's National Bestseller FLOW: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. In her review of the book, FLOW, in the *Chicago Sun-Times* dated March 18, 1990 entitled "Going with flow: What gives us joy? A psychologist's inquiry," Delia O'Hara says, "Flow couldn't come at a better time for us. As a people, in the past few decades we have gone through countless self-help fads, from open marriages to the

glorification of greed, not to mention addictive behaviors, in hopes of enhancing our enjoyment of life” (par.9). She continues saying, “Flow reminds us that the truest approach to making ourselves feel and function better – and Csikszentmihalyi notes again and again that this message is by no means new - is to look within”(par. 12).

While director Anne Bogart does not directly relate her theories of acting to Csikszentmihalyi’s book, her theories address issues that can be viewed through that lens. The primary research on Anne Bogart came from two of her books. Her 2001 book A Director Prepares, Seven Essays on Art and Theatre expands her ideas about theatre and theatre artists. Bogart, a tenured Professor at Columbia University and Artistic Director of the SITI Company, speaks about the need for finding shapes that can be repeated in rehearsals. These shapes and this restriction through blocking actually create freedom and spontaneity. Bogart addresses “consciousness” by saying actors should not reflect during the moment of creation. The analysis and criticism of acting belong before and after the performance. She also addresses the dangers of self-consciousness, saying most of the time self-consciousness gets in the performer’s way.

Bogart’s 1995 book Viewpoints is a collection of essays, one written by Bogart and the rest written by people who worked with her. In the chapter she wrote called “Terror, Disorientation and Difficulty” she talks about the fearless trust needed in acting. She describes directing as intuitive, saying that during an unsure moment, she faces her fear, moves towards the stage and during that “crisis of the walk” something happens, insight occurs and she directs her actors (Viewpoints 10).

The supplemental research on Anne Bogart comes from Joan Herrington’s article in The Drama Review from Summer 2000 called “Cabin Pressure (Theatrical

Production).” This article provides a production history of Bogart’s staging of an original work called Cabin Pressure performed by the SITI Group at the Actors Theatre of Louisville in Kentucky. It provides a detailed account of their production process of Cabin Pressure from its conception, through rehearsals, to the final product.

When researching the work and beliefs of Constantin Stanislavski, Sonia Moore’s book The Stanislavski System proved helpful. Moore, a pupil of both Stanislavski and Eugene Vakhtangov and a teacher herself, wrote The Stanislavski System in 1965 to demystify the teachings of Stanislavski, to put his thoughts in layman’s terms. George Freedley of the New York Drama Critics Circle, cited in the Introduction of The Stanislavski System, called it “the clearest explanation of Stanislavski’s methods yet published. Mrs. Moore has the double advantage of having been in Russia with Stanislavski and yet living in America and teaching here”(i).

Research also came from reading Stanislavski’s own thoughts on the acting process, which he recorded in his books commonly referred to as the ABC books, An Actor Prepares, Building A Character, and Creating a Role. Although aware of his autobiography, My Life in Art, I decided to concentrate my research on his three teaching guides. In An Actor Prepares, Stanislavski speaks about consciousness and intuition as well as about concentration of attention and the Circle of Attention. In Building A Character, Stanislavski teaches his students to use pictures in their minds to illustrate the words they speak, to correctly accentuate words; to use movement to help them in performance; and to use metronomes to find tempo-rhythm. In Creating a Role, he speaks further about conscious and unconscious objectives.

David Mamet's 1997 book True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor answers questions regarding how acting can be taught and the role the audience plays in assisting the actor. Mamet strongly believes that theatre education has no place in a performer's life, and suggests that an actor only needs to fearlessly speak the written words and use the audience as guides for feedback. Actor Alec Baldwin, in the introduction of True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor, says, "I agree with almost nothing Mr. Mamet says in this book and encourage you to devour every word. Mamet is a genius" (i).

Written by some of the younger members of The Atlantic Theater Company, A Practical Handbook for the Actor, serves as a supporting source because major sections of the book come from notes taken in David Mamet's and William H. Macy's classes (xiii). The Atlantic Theater Company, founded by Mamet and Macy, uses this book as a teaching guide. This book developed from an assignment from Mamet at his workshop in Montpelier, Vermont in 1984. A great deal of this text discusses the important role of action in theatre performance. In the Introduction, David Mamet calls A Practical Handbook for the Actor, "the best book written in the last twenty years" saying it "offers some wonderful, simple advice and suggestions" (x).

I also conducted original interviews with George DiCenzo and Ellen Tobie as primary resources for this thesis. A comprehensive list of the questions asked during the interview can be found in the Appendix. George DiCenzo, a veteran actor with more than thirty years in show business, played Vincent Bugliosi, the prosecutor, in the television movie Helter Skelter. He has appeared in over thirty feature films, and has made a wide variety of TV show guest appearances, including recent roles on Law &



Order: Criminal Intent and Judging Amy. He appeared on Broadway with Nathan Lane in On Borrowed Time directed by George C. Scott. DiCenzo currently teaches a master acting class in New York City and Philadelphia.

Ellen Tobie has appeared in countless Broadway and Off-Broadway productions including The Rose Tattoo with Mercedes Ruehl and The Heiress with Cherry Jones. A graduate of Julliard School, she has performed at such regional theatres as Actors Theatre of Louisville, The McCarter, The Kennedy Center, George Street Playhouse and The Walnut Street Theatre. Her television credits include Law and Order, Sex and the City and St. Elsewhere. Tobie was nominated for the 1999-2000 Philadelphia Barrymore Award for Best Leading Actress for her work in Collected Stories.

William Roudesbush's Acting By Mistake, published in 2000, also serves as an important resource. In Acting By Mistake, Roudebush addresses the issue of repeatability saying that nothing should be repeated. Performance should be different every night. He believes actors need to make mistakes, identify the protections (Performance Protection, Inside Protection, Outside Protection and/or Pacing Protection) that hold them back and fully learn to trust themselves. William Roudebush, a director and teacher for over thirty years, won the Philadelphia Barrymore Award for Outstanding Direction in 2002 for his production of Equus and was nominated for the Barrymore Award for Outstanding Direction in 2004 for A Christmas Carol and in 1997 for Oleanna. He directed at such theatres as Actors Theatre of Louisville, The Cleveland Playhouse, The Walnut Street Theatre, The Mum Puppet Theatre, The Samuel Beckett Theatre and the Ensemble Studio Theatre. He taught at such institutions as The American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York, Temple University, University of Memphis, The

University of the Arts and served as the Theatre School Director of the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

## Organization Of The Study

This study includes six chapters. The first chapter introduces the thesis, explains the idea of flow, and outlines the steps to optimal experience, as defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book FLOW. Chapter Two discusses the issue of repeatability. It probes possible solutions to the critical question of how performers get to the zone every night. This chapter will also deal with the role of instinct and faith in flow and theatre performance. Chapter Three discusses the idea of consciousness as it relates to an awareness of surroundings during theatrical performance and while in flow. This chapter will discuss the necessity to lose self-consciousness in flow and performance and the role concentration plays in this process. Chapter Four discusses the necessity for feedback and how it relates to theatre performance. Chapter Five discusses the issue of whether or not acting can be taught. Chapter Six looks at the missing ingredient in flow, the role of imagination. It concludes by assessing the data and the need for further study.

## Chapter 2: Repeatability

“How do we repeat the discoveries without affectation?  
How do we create conditions for God to speak through us on a regular basis?”  
- Anne Bogart (A Director Prepares 127).

### Repeatability In Flow

To remain in the state of flow, goals have to match skill, meaning that in order to continue reaching a state of flow, goals must be reshaped and become more difficult. If not, a person becomes bored or anxious (Csikszentmihalyi 75). This notion of continuing to challenge oneself, always raising the stakes, leads to “growth and discovery.” This desire to regain this state of flow pushes people not to accept initial success but to stretch their skill and/or discover a new opportunity for this skill (Csikszentmihalyi 75). This notion of repeatability proves extremely relevant to theatre acting where shows can run anywhere from weeks to years. Unlike film actors, theatre performers must repeat the same show night after night with the same emotional intensity each time and often face the task of continuously trying to reach state of flow without succumbing to boredom or anxiety.

In his book, FLOW: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, Csikszentmihalyi says, “Although the flow experience appears to be effortless, it is far from being so. It often requires strenuous physical exertion, or highly disciplined mental activity. It does not happen without the application of skilled performance” (54). Because moments in flow occur when a person stretches his mind and/or body voluntarily in order to succeed in something hard but worthwhile, Csikszentmihalyi says, “optimal experience is thus

something we *make* happen” (3). Therefore flow does not result from faith or intuition. It happens because of the effort one puts forth. Individuals control their successes or failures.

Csikszentmihalyi actually criticizes the idea of intuition saying:

It has recently become fashionable to regard whatever we feel inside as the true voice of nature speaking. The only authority many people trust today is instinct. If something feels good, if it is natural and spontaneous, then it must be right. But when we follow the suggestions of genetic and social instructions without question we relinquish the control of consciousness and become helpless playthings of impersonal forces. (18)

In addition, as stated in Chapter 1, in order to continuously reach flow, one must have an autotelic personality, meaning one must be involved in an activity for the sheer love of it, not for a future reward (Csikszentmihalyi 67). Similarly, in order to continuously achieve flow, emphasis cannot be placed on the performance but rather on the experience. For example, if a child studies violin and his parents put tremendous pressure on how well he plays, if it is more important for him to win awards than enjoy playing, this student might become very anxious and learning music turns into a “psychic disorder.” Csikszentmihalyi describes Lorin Hollander, a child prodigy at the piano, as getting lost in playing the piano when alone. However, whenever his perfectionist and demanding father entered the room, he would shake. For years he shut down. He finally recovered from his state of paralysis and began teaching young musicians to enjoy their music rather than putting pressure on themselves (Csikszentmihalyi 112).

## David Mamet on Repeatability

David Mamet, author of such plays as Oleanna, Speed-the Plow, Glengarry Glen Ross and Sexual Perversity in Chicago as well as a director and, for a brief time, an actor describes the pressure actors feel trying “to get their character” and “to get their role.” He says they feel guilty when they do not believe their situation, and stay aware of performing in a scene. They feel like failures because they have not reached the state Mamet calls “psychosis,” a condition in which “acting [is] not an art and a skill but only the ability to self-induce a delusional state” (67). In his book True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor, he relieves this pressure on the actor by saying to him or her merely “Give yourself a simple goal onstage” (step one in the flow experience), “and go on to accomplish it bravely” (120). He continues by saying an actor must say his lines “simply, in an attempt to achieve an object more or less like that suggested by the author” (9). He says that actors should imagine that something has happened rather than force themselves to believe something has happened, because their mind will not accept this command (Mamet 69).

Mamet does not address the idea of repeatability in performance, however, he does say that an actor needs to go to rehearsal with an open mind and spirit, ready to discover and perform actions truthfully and simply (Mamet 74). In addition, he does not believe an actor needs faith but instead needs to do his job without over preparing. He calls this job of performing “unprepared” “heroism” (Mamet 117). In Acting By Mistake William Roudebush expresses a belief similar to Mamet’s. He says that actors in rehearsal and performance should not try to get it “perfect” or “right.” Instead actors should embrace mistakes, for creation lies in turning those mistakes to their advantage

(20). This relates to the emphasis Csikszentmihalyi puts on the necessity to enjoy the work rather than to focus solely on the product. In many ways the process is more important than the product because a healthy process will most likely result in a good product.

David Mamet states that actors should not put tremendous pressure on themselves in their pursuit of playing the role. This pressure, as illustrated with Lorin Hollander the child prodigy who stopped playing the piano due to his father's pressure, will hurt and not help them (Csikszentmihalyi 112.) However, just saying the lines bravely, simply and understanding what the character wants may not get an actor to the zone night after night. Mamet gives simple, uncomplicated acting advice, however he no longer performs. He said that he "wanted to be an actor, but it seemed that [his] affections did not that way tend. [He] learned to write and direct so that [he] could stay in the theatre, and be with that company of people" (Mamet 3). Perhaps he did not directly address the idea of repeatability because he does not face firsthand the demands of nightly performances.

Csikszentmihalyi says hard work and not being completely satisfied are the key ingredients to repeatability. Acting takes hard work, using clear goals, which most change as skills improve. Mamet does cite the need for actors to keep a specific goal in mind. He does believe in hard work, saying the actor determines his level of dedication (Mamet 120). He advises the actor to work on those things that can be controlled; work on the voice so that audiences can hear, work on the body to make it strong, learn to read a script to find the action within to bring it to life for the audience (Mamet 99).

## Stanislavski on Repeatability

Constantin Stanislavski, famous director of the Moscow Art Theatre and a renowned actor and teacher, strongly believed that hard work makes an actor better. Stanislavski never felt satisfied with his own acting and continuously demanded more of himself (Moore 22). Developing, practicing and revising the Stanislavski System took over 40 years of hard work and experimentation (Moore 25). Stanislavski studied all aspects of life including psychology, physiology as well as historical and theoretical writings on the theatre (Moore 68). In her book The Stanislavski System, Sonia Moore states that greatness in art happens because of persistent work. She speaks of Talma, the eighteenth century actor, who needed twenty years to master his profession and of the nineteenth century Russian actress Glikeria Fedotova who said “that actors were wasting their time waiting for the god Apollo to send them inspiration from heaven; Apollo was too busy with his own affairs” (36-37).

Stanislavski demanded that his students work hard on every aspect of their profession. He challenged them to do scenes beyond their level of expertise so they could see their shortcomings and know where they needed work (An Actor Prepares 128). He told his students they needed a “clear goal,” like in flow, or their activities would remain unformed and they would only feel certain moments in the role (An Actor Prepares 238). He also expected them to work on everything from developing their imagination to stabilizing their personal lives. They must observe and communicate with people and go to museums and acquire materials from books, science, art, and life around them (An Actor Prepares 180). As the fictitious teacher, Tortsov, in Creating A Role he told his students:

The more an actor has observed and known, the greater his experience, his accumulation of live impressions and memories, the more subtly will he think and feel, and the broader, more varied, and substantial will be the life of his imagination, the deeper his comprehension of facts and events, the clearer his perception of the inner and outer circumstances of the life in the play and in his part. With daily, systematic practice of the imagination on one and the same theme everything that has to do with the proposed circumstances of the play will become habitual in his imaginary life. In turn these habits will become second nature. (44)

In fact, by using the imagination to create images for text and subtext, Stanislavski taught his pupils one approach to consistently truthful acting (or in terms of this thesis to achieving the state of flow) in Building A Character. By using visual memory to create an accessible sequence of pictures, actors connect to the subtext and the through line of the action. In addition, it arouses “recurrent sensations” stored in the emotion memory (135).

Let this inner film unroll frequently before your mind’s eye and like a painter or a poet, describe what and how you see during each daily performance. During this review you will at all times be aware of what you have to say when you are on the stage. It may well be that each time you repeat the review and tell about it you will do so with certain variations. That is all to the good, the unexpected and the improvised are always the best impetus to creativeness. (Building A Character 135)



Grab this inner vision like a “life-belt” every time your concentration wanes or the subtext “threatens to break down.” He also said that these visual images will not “wear out” from frequent repetition, instead they grow stronger and more extensive because the imagination will not rest (Building A Character 136).

Stanislavski’s second tactic for repeatedly reaching truthfulness involved using physical actions. In An Actor Prepares, Dasha, a fictitious female student in the class, performed a scene from Brand. In this scene a girl came home to find an abandoned baby on her steps. This made her sad at first but she then decided to adopt the baby. Unfortunately, the baby died in her arms. Dasha, who lost a child of her own not long before, performed the scene. She cried and transformed the stick in her arms into a seemingly real baby. Tortsov, a.k.a. Stanislavski, said inspiration created these real moments. However, he warned his students not to count on this “phenomenon” to happen daily. Dasha disagreed with him and tried again but stopped herself midway through realizing she could not do it. Dasha thought her feelings would be enough to get her through the scene. However, Stanislavski said:

I can understand that you want to get straight to your emotions. Of course that’s fine. It would be wonderful if we could achieve a permanent method of repeating successful emotional experiences. But feelings cannot be fixed. They run through your fingers like water. That is why, whether you like it or not, it is necessary to find more substantial means of affecting and establishing your emotions. (144)

Dasha tried again without success. Stanislavski explained in the first scene she physically transformed the piece of wood into a baby. She held it like a baby, kissed it,

spread out its little legs and arms and smiled at it through her tears. However, in the second scene she treated it like a piece of wood and the scene did not work. Dasha tried again, this time treating the wood like a baby as she did in the first scene. Stanislavski wrote she “was finally able to recall consciously what she had felt unconsciously the first time she played the scene. Once she believed in the child her tears came freely” (145).

Stanislavski never wanted successful moments recreated, his motto was “today, here, now” (Moore 97). He wanted “a new, living scene” each time (An Actor Prepares 156). William Roudebush concurs with Stanislavski’s belief in the here and now. In Acting By Mistake he says not to focus on what worked yesterday. Leave that in the past. Today is different. You are different. Do not spend energy trying to recreate something that cannot be recreated. Trust the preparation already done to eliminate self-doubt and reinvent the scene today. Do not hold on to yesterday (23).

In An Actor Prepares Stanislavski tells of a young man who tried to recreate the successful rehearsal he had had in his previous class rather than create a new moment in time. Stanislavski said to him, “A ready-made external form is a terrible temptation to an actor. It is not surprising that novices like you should have felt it and at the same time that you should have proved that you have a good memory for external action. As for *emotion memory*: there was no sign of it” (156).

Emotion memory, a memory that helps an actor to relive a sensation once felt, would have helped him repeat this scene in a fresh way (An Actor Prepares 158-159). Stanislavski warned that actors sometimes find success and then try to repeat it by going directly after their feelings. This approach does not work. He emphatically said, “Never begin with results” (An Actor Prepares 175). Roudebush calls results the “enemy” saying

that by its own definition, results “place your focus on the end of the journey instead of the road beneath your feet” (Acting By Mistake 50). Stanislavski believed if an actor stumbles upon a great inspiration in rehearsal or performance, he should not try doing it the following night without analyzing why he acted in that way. Once he determines the reason then he can use this stimulus for future performances (Moore 64-65).

Therefore, intuition in the Stanislavski system does not play an accidental role. Intuitive moments occur only with hard work and actors must understand what they stumbled upon and not accept the intuitive moments as a divine gift and hope they occur again. An actor consciously prepares for his role and approaches each performance or rehearsal as a new experience. Spontaneous actions occur which are congruent to those emotions and experiences of the character he portrays. Stanislavski said, “There are no accidents in art-only the fruits of long labor” (Moore 30-31).

Like intuition, Stanislavski believed in faith but only under certain conditions. When students had problems believing in the big picture of the play, he had them break it up into smaller and smaller proportions. Stanislavski said in An Actor Prepares “from believing in the truth of one small action an actor can come to feel himself in his part and to have faith in the reality of a whole play” (133). So faith, to Stanislavski, came when one believed in the reality of a character and situation. This faith in the play could lead to intuitive moments, which in terms of this thesis could lead to the state of flow.

Stanislavski, like Csikszentmihalyi, does not believe that intuition yields results, but rather that the hard work an actor does can create intuitive moments. However, these moments should be investigated and not manufactured for future performances. Because Stanislavski says each night should be different; he takes pressure off the actor by not

burdening him with the impossible task of recreating yesterday's experience. Both Stanislavski and Roudebush say let yesterday go and create something new and wonderful. This coincides with Csikszentmihalyi's notion of not focusing on the product. Stanislavski's methods to find the truth in the scene seem tangible in terms of successfully repeating honest, realistic and emotional connections. Actors can choose to use mental images, physical actions and/or emotion memory. Actors can experiment with these different options to see which if any work for them. Stanislavski offers a variety of different tools to use to challenge actors to remain in flow.

### Anne Bogart on Repeatability

In her book A Director Prepares, Bogart asks: "How do we create conditions for god to speak through us on a regular basis? How do we repeat the discoveries [of acting] without affectation?" (127). Bogart's question epitomizes the problem actors performing in a long running show may face in their attempt to reach the zone repeatedly with truth and without becoming bored. She answers her self-imposed question saying performers need to get out of their own way. (This will be discussed in Chapter 3). Bogart uses blocking, (i.e. staging,) to make her actors feel free so they can lose their self-consciousness and, consequently, have faith in the work.

Bogart, a director who uses movement first and the voice second in order to create a sense of truth on stage, believes "it is better to set the exterior (the form, the action) and allow the interior (the quality of being, the ever-altering emotional landscape) freedom to move and change in every repetition" (A Director Prepares 102-103). Bogart continues saying "the form becomes a container in which the actor can find endless variations and

interpretive freedom” (46). So in terms of flow, repeatability occurs because the form gives the actors a place in which to grow and change every time.

Her staging demands what she calls “violence.” Bogart defines art as violent, saying that “to be decisive is violent” (A Director Prepares 45). When Bogart tells an actor to sit in a certain chair at a certain time, it proves violent for the actor because the actor will never be able to spontaneously do it. However she says that actors know that “improvisation is not yet art. Only when something has been decided can the work really begin” (A Director Prepares 45-47). This violence, which may at first seem to be limiting, actually opens up more doors and gives the actors a great deal of freedom. So this needed violence brings the actor to the place where his power, imagination and skill “resurrect the dead” and the actor can find a stronger “spontaneity” within the structure (A Director Prepares 45).

Even by setting a rigid structure Bogart says, “When things start to fall apart in rehearsal, the possibility of creation exists” (A Director Prepares 86). Bogart embraces obstacles and resistance. They should be considered allies not hindrances. Obstacles in a theatrical process produce thought, curiosity, alertness and eventually result in elation. If an actor has a good attitude breakthroughs will result rather than failure (A Director Prepares 141). Bogart believes that without any obstacles, a production lacks “rigor and depth” (A Director Prepares 142).

Bogart believes intuition plays a huge part in her role as a director and should play a role for her actors as well. She says in her essay “Terror, Disorientation and Difficulty:”

Because directing is intuitive, it involves walking with trembling into the unknown [*sic*]. Right there, in that moment, in that rehearsal, I have to say, “I know!” and start walking toward the stage. During the crisis of the walk, something *must* happen: some insight, some idea. The sensation of this walk to the stage, to the actors, feels like falling into a treacherous abyss. The walk creates a crisis in which innovation must happen, invention must transpire. I create the crisis in rehearsal to get out of my own way. I create despite myself and my limitations and my hesitancy. In unbalance and falling lie the potential of creation. (10)

Bogart does believe intuition helps the creative process, however she does not believe if things feel good to the actor then the audience will automatically feel the same. In his essay in Viewpoints “The Meat of the Medium: Anne Bogart and the American Avant-Garde,” Porter Anderson says that Bogart does not direct in the style of “do whatever feels right for this moment in the script, darling” (114-115). Bogart says, “I believe that the great tragedy of the American stage is the actor who assumes, thanks to our gross misunderstandings of Stanislavski, ‘If I feel it, the audience will feel it’” (A Director Prepares 36). She further explains saying that good actors know that they are “half marionette” and “the rest is real inspiration, intuitive intelligence and listening” (A Director Prepares 129).

Perhaps Anne Bogart does not directly attack the issue of repeatability in performance because of her faith in her actors. Although she says actors need a structure and space to grow within it, according to the production history of Cabin Pressure as recounted by Joan Herrington in her article “Cabin Pressure” for The Drama Review,

Bogart placed a greater emphasis on faith by giving her actors more freedom than on creating structure, which she said in A Director Prepares helps with repeatability (127).

While rehearsing and performing Private Lives at the Actors Theatre of Louisville in Kentucky, the SITI Company worked on a piece about the audience/performer relationship that they later called Cabin Pressure. Selected audience members would keep journal entries of their thoughts while watching rehearsals and performance of Private Lives. Bogart conducted interviews with these audience members. All of these interviews and journal entries were transcribed and put into notebooks for the company to read. They also researched what already existed on the audience/performer dynamic. The ensemble worked on this piece for four months and then, because of scheduling conflicts, took a break from the project for six months. When they regrouped after their hiatus, ten months after the birth of Cabin Pressure, Bogart had other pressing obligations. So the group worked without their director. They found themselves stuck. Eventually they realized that they missed something in their previous rehearsals months ago. Without asking Bogart, they decided to return to the script of Private Lives, since it gave their audience a common context for the show. They went to Bogart with their discovery and she agreed (Herrington 1-10).

Ellen Lauren, who performed in Cabin Pressure, spoke to Joan Herrington of The Drama Review in an interview on January 20, 2000 in Kalamazoo, MI. Lauren said of her experience:

We pretty much wrenched it around in many, many different ways. Anne is sly in her way; we did exactly what she wanted us to do. Then she went, "Oh yes, and this and this and this" (adding definite structure to the

scenes). So you never know whether she knew it all along and let you just find it through this agonizing meeting process when she could have just as easily told you. Or maybe what we do just trips something in her so that everything falls into place. (10)

Bogart had faith in her company and their collaborative work. She strongly believes in the role of faith and intuition. However, like Csikszentmihalyi, she believes that actors should question their intuition because what feels right for the actor may not necessarily feel right to the audience. Csikszentmihalyi says in Flow:

The problem is that it has recently become fashionable to regard whatever we feel inside as the true voice of nature speaking. The only authority many people trust today is instinct. If something feels good, if it is natural and spontaneous, then it must be right. But when we follow the suggestions of genetic and social instructions without question we relinquish the control of consciousness and become helpless playthings of impersonal forces. (18)

To continuously achieve flow by relying on faith and intuition might leave too much to chance. As the nineteenth century Russian actress Glikeria Fedotova said “actors were wasting their time waiting for the god Apollo to send them inspiration from heaven; Apollo was too busy with his own affairs” (Moore 36-37).

Because working hard helps one repeatedly reach the zone, instead of relying on faith and intuition, actors should strive for improvement and make mistakes. Both Anne Bogart and William Roudebush believe that embracing obstacles and making mistakes



helps actors grow because it pushes them to become better. Also, it does not focus on the product but rather on the process, which leads to the state of flow.

In addition, Csikszentmihalyi shares Bogart's belief that actors need a positive attitude to succeed (or in terms of this thesis, to reach the state of flow).

Csikszentmihalyi says, "When adversity threatens to paralyze us, we need to reassert control by finding a new direction in which to invest psychic energy" (92). He describes a prisoner who would stand out in the prison field with guards and machine guns. Some prisoners would try to smash through the barbed wire but one particular prisoner said he would feel "such a rush of rhymes and images that [he] seemed to be wafted overhead. At such moments [he] was both free and happy." He concludes by saying, "for [him] there was no barbed wire" (Csikszentmihalyi 92). Just as the prisoner with the positive attitude has a more fulfilling life experience, the actor with the positive outlook will reach the zone on a regular basis.

## Interviews

George DiCenzo, actor, director and teacher, reached the zone on several occasions. In a personal interview he recounted his experience as District Attorney Vincent Bugliosi in the 1976 television mini series Helter Skelter based on the Charles Manson murder trial. He was in flow during his wrap up speech to the jurors:

At the end I looked at the jury, which was of course twelve extras, and I realized I was really not going to miss. That this was a slam-dunk. That I was going to knock them out of the box. I was going to make the best speech I had ever made and influence them all. I knew it and I kept

working from there and it happened. I think I worked for three years nonstop doing like thirty movies. So that was in the zone for me.

Although DiCenzo was in the zone that day, he admits it is harder to attain in a long running show. In order to remain in the zone he says *actors* need to find different things that work for them. He says, “Whether it’s a person in the audience you see and decide to dedicate that thing to, or you fantasize of another person in the audience who is dying and this is a performance for them, whatever it takes to keep that level up, the actor, whose other incredible need is imagination, uses his or her imagination to recreate that every night.”

Ellen Tobie, actress and teacher, agrees with DiCenzo saying that a performance needs to change every night otherwise it becomes stale. She explains that actors in TV series sometimes become bored in their roles. Tobie explained that she “never repeats” in a long running show. She said that all good actors change things. Tobie says she knows when she has “hit it” (or in other words reached the zone,) and that she gives herself a “different little goal every night” in order to deepen her character and keep her “performance fresh” and “alive.” For example, one night she may say, “Tonight I want [my character] to be more in denial in the first part of the scene.”

In his book Acting By Mistake Roudebush thinks a long running show is no excuse for actors being bored. He says that when he sees an actor “phoning in” a performance (not really trying, just going through the motions) in a long running show he wants to “pull the actor off the stage” (27).

Roudebush continues:

Every new performance should be an exciting adventure. Use what you have learned from each previous performance to open your vision harder. You can now see things you have never seen before. Incorporate the advantages of accumulated experience. If you don't enjoy this process, get off the stage and let someone who is passionate take over. Don't waste an opportunity. Re-invent yourself each night your confidence builds. The more you absorb the richer your performance will be. When that process stops for you it's time to move on to the next project. (27)

Actors should love what they do and continue to try to reach the state of flow in their art. Both DiCenzo and Tobie realize that repeatedly "hitting it" takes work. Tobie's suggestion to make a clear new goal every night coincides with step one in reaching flow. DiCenzo says the actor needs to figure out what works for him. It is the actor's responsibility to work hard to challenge himself to reach flow in a long running show.

A long run tests an actor. Reaching the zone night after night becomes a challenge. The actor must embrace this challenge and proceed with a positive attitude. One can relish the fact that nerves will no longer interfere, because confidence grows from repeated performances in the same role. The actor should embrace the discoveries that lie ahead. It may be helpful to remember many actors do not have the luxury of performing in a long running show or, in some cases, any show at all. There is validity in Roudebush's opinion that actors should embrace a secure, long run. In front of them lies an opportunity, and in many cases a paid opportunity, to repeatedly do what they love and a chance to challenge themselves professionally. If they are bored, if they no longer love their job, repetition challenges them to rekindle their love of acting. Through

repetition they can explore what works for them as a performer and explore the different avenues to reach flow. Many different tools, (i.e. visual memory, physical action, emotion memory and playing within the set structure,) exist for the actor to use to reach the zone. Actors should employ any and all tools that work for them and should continuously set new goals and experiment with an open mind and spirit.

All actors have certain nights that feel better than others. With the idea of flow in mind, instead of lamenting over a “bad” show, an actor should finish the show thinking “well that moment didn’t work” and question the reason why. Perhaps he or she needs a clearer visualization for that moment. The following day he or she can begin with new tools to explore. They should prepare themselves for a completely new experience. Actors should not work for an end result, for example trying to repeat a successful past performance, but simply have fun creating something new.

### Chapter 3: Consciousness, Concentration and Self Consciousness

“They concentrate on negotiating the artifice—the size of the stage, the blocking, the text, the costumes, the lights, to the point where the conscious mind—that is out to ambush us and make us small—is occupied with something else so that the spontaneity and naturalness can arrive unimpeded”

- Anne Bogart (A Director Prepares 129).

#### Directing Attention in Flow

In FLOW: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, Csikszentmihalyi identifies the function of consciousness as representing “information about what is happening outside and inside the organism in such a way that it can be evaluated and acted upon by the body” (24). Without consciousness we would still understand everything around us but we would react merely on instinct. We would not have the ability to “weigh what the senses tell us and respond accordingly.” Because of consciousness, humans can daydream, lie, write poetry and solve scientific problems (Csikszentmihalyi 24).

Intentions keep information ordered in consciousness. Intentions or “bits of information” pop up whenever a person desires something. Csikszentmihalyi says they act like “magnetic fields moving towards some objects and away from others, keeping our mind focused on some stimuli in preference to others” (27). Attention selects the bits of information to use from the millions available to us and retrieves the relevant information from memory to help us understand the event. This prompts us to make choices (31). According to Csikszentmihalyi, “The mark of a person who is in control of consciousness is the ability to focus attention at will, to be oblivious to distractions, to

concentrate for as long as it takes to achieve a goal, and not longer. And the person who can do this usually enjoys the normal course of everyday life” (31).

Csikszentmihalyi identifies focused attention as “psychic energy.” Without it nothing can be done. He says we choose how to use our psychic energy or attention, our most important tool in reaching flow. He explains, “We create ourselves by how we invest this energy. Memories, thoughts, and feelings are all shaped by how we use it. And it is an energy under our control, to do with as we please” (31).

Human concentration can be very easily broken. Whenever information disrupts consciousness, disorder called “psychic entropy” occurs, which threatens goals and impairs the path to flow. Csikszentmihalyi gives an example of Julio, a man who participated in the Experience Sampling Method. Julio worked in a factory that produced audiovisual equipment. He usually worked flawlessly in the assembly line, joked with his co-workers and finished his job with time to spare. However, one day he had trouble keeping up with the line, felt irritable and did not joke with co-workers. He had a flat tire and no money until his next paycheck. So he filled his tire to go to work and refilled it again to go home. He worried about his car and his inability to get to and from work. He consequently worried about money so his “internal order of the self [was] disrupted.” His problems consumed his psychic energy, his work suffered and he remained unhappy and unproductive (38-39).

Optimal experience, the opposite of psychic entropy, occurs when one devotes complete attention to an activity. Csikszentmihalyi says that flow requires a sense of control because the “sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life” disappears (59). No excess psychic energy exists to process. One

becomes so involved in the task at hand that action becomes “almost automatic” and one does not see himself as separate from his actions (53). Csikszentmihalyi recounts a rock climber’s feelings as he scales a mountain: “You are so involved in what you are doing that you aren’t thinking of yourself as separate from the immediate activity... You don’t see yourself as separate from what you are doing” (53). One does not need to worry about oneself or question one’s adequacy in this state because no obstacles exist and no disorder needs attention (39-40). When in flow, one forgets about the self. When not in flow, one becomes self-conscious and psychic energy dissipates as one tries to reorder consciousness (62).

Not worrying about the self requires bravery and risk. One needs confidence. Csikszentmihalyi says that seeing immediate results builds confidence. (Feedback will be discussed in Chapter 4). Although flow cannot be reached without focus on goals, this is not as hard as it might seem because Csikszentmihalyi states there is “little opportunity for the self to be threatened” because “enjoyable activities have clear goals, stable rules and challenges clearly matched to skills” (63).

Csikszentmihalyi describes a dancer who feels relaxed and calm in flow. She has no fear of failure so she does not expend any energy thinking about herself. She has more confidence in herself at that time than at any other (59). In fact, when a person is not preoccupied with thoughts of self even more rewarding consequences can follow, including a “transcendence” of the self (64).

To feel in control one needs to get rid of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness gives people a false sense of safety. A person may feel protected because she thinks she controls the outcome. However, Csikszentmihalyi explains, “Only when a doubtful

outcome is at stake, and one is able to influence that outcome, can a person really know whether she is in control” (61). He continues by saying that people enjoy, not the “sense of being in control,” but the “sense of exercising control in difficult situations” (61).

When in flow one loses the “consciousness of the self” not a loss of self or a loss of consciousness (64). Also, self-consciousness, worrying about oneself, is not the same as consciousness of self, awareness of self. Optimal experience requires a very active role for the self. Psychic energy (attention) does not dissipate but becomes stronger during flow. Csikszentmihalyi explains, “A violinist must be extremely aware of every move of her fingers, as well as of the sound entering her ears, and of the total form of the piece she is playing, both analytically, note by note, and holistically, in terms of its overall design” (Csikszentmihalyi 64). The same applies for a runner who remains aware of his breathing, every muscle in his body and his strategy for the race. Meanwhile a successful chess player retrieves previous strategies and past combinations during a game (64).

When an actor reaches the zone do these same rules apply? When are actors playing a role conscious of themselves? What happens when self-consciousness enters? If they worry about themselves or feel insecure about their acting do they leave the moment in the play? In order to lose self-consciousness and to reach flow, where exactly should actors concentrate their focus to maximize “psychic energy?” Should they concentrate on technical performance, think about character intention, focus on the space around them, acknowledge the audience response or focus on a combination of these things? Does a unique duality of consciousness exist in the process of acting? How much should actors lose themselves in their role and what should be foremost in their



minds: the character, their body and mind or their acting technique? In addition if actors lack the ability to concentrate can they learn this skill through practice?

### David Mamet on Consciousness, Concentration and Self Consciousness in Flow

In his book True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor David Mamet says actors do not need to think about concentration because it exists naturally. Mamet does not endorse Stanislavski's concentration exercises (which will be explained later in this chapter.) Considering the "mirror game" (a concentration exercise regularly used in acting classes where actors mirror one another,) and the Strasberg Method's concentration on the feeling of past events, Mamet says, "Acting has nothing to do with the ability to concentrate. It has to do with the ability to *imagine*. For concentration, like emotion, like belief, cannot be forced. It cannot be controlled" (94). He gives an example of a wristwatch. If you tell yourself to concentrate on your wristwatch you will think thoughts like "how long can I keep this up?" or "How interesting this all is, look how the hands go around!" which he calls a self-delusion because, of course, it is *not* interesting. So trying to consciously focus concentration forces falsehood and "self-loathing." He calls preoccupation with one's powers of concentration "self-absorption" which he finds boring to watch. Mamet explains, "The more you are concerned with yourself, the less you are worthy of note" (94-95). Similarly, in his book Acting By Mistake, William Roudebush says that actors should not preoccupy themselves with monitoring themselves. This leaves less energy for the character. He says that splitting focus by monitoring oneself is "fear-based." One watches oneself for fear of "making a

mistake” (34). Both Roudebush and Anne Bogart believe actors should embrace obstacles and make mistakes, making the unknown not something to fear, but an invitation to creativity.

Mamet says that actors should outwardly direct their concentration focusing on the “actions of the play.” He says that if the actions of the play on which the actor focuses “are concrete, provocative, and fun, it will be no task at all to do them; and to do them is more interesting than to concentrate on them” (95). Concentration will not be a problem with “fun,” “concrete” choices because everything then “flows naturally” whereas with an uninteresting choice he believes concentration cannot exist (95-96).

Roudebush believes that actors should focus on “composing the words that describe and clarify” the experience, making them up as they go along. He advises an actor to “give yourself the character’s experiences (through visualization), and then recall the dialogue from the visions you’ve created” (35). He says human memory will always be there and the actor need not focus on the “consciousness” of how to interpret the words but on the memory of the experience (37).

Mamet believes if concentration becomes an issue for the performer the audience will notice. He says that an actor should perform as if on a “hot date, not...to give blood” (96-97). Mamet also says that an actor involved in his own feelings becomes more self-conscious and uninteresting to watch. He says boring actors think about either their inability to reach this state or of their success in reaching it. Either way, the performer’s focus is on himself not on the play. According to Mamet, we cannot control our thoughts or emotions. Someone trying to do so only pretends (10-12). He calls emotional memory and sense memory “hogwash,” pronouncing it as useless as “teaching pilots to

flap their arms while in the cockpit in order to increase the lift of the plane” (12).

Concentration techniques also according to Mamet, only give actors a false security because no security exists and this false security can only dull acting (30). He says, “I don’t care to see a musician concentrating on what he or she feels while performing. Nor do I care to see an actor do so. As a playwright and as a lover of good writing, I know that the good play does not need the support of the actor, in effect, narrating its psychological undertones, and that the bad play will not benefit from it” (12).

He stresses that an actor should focus on his character’s intention (24). However, this presents a discrepancy in his logic. He says characters do not exist and actors do not “become” characters. Perhaps because he is a writer, he says of the actor’s job: “There are only lines upon a page. They are lines of dialogue meant to be said by the actor. When he or she says them simply, in an attempt to achieve an object [*sic*] more or less like that suggested by the author, the audience sees an *illusion* of a character upon the stage” (9). So, according to Mamet, the actor must focus on achieving “an object more or less like that suggested by the author.” With this vague language, Mamet admits that perhaps actors need to focus on the desires of the character as written by the author, however, this seems to contradict his statement that characters do not exist. Mamet continues to say that actors can only control what they do, not how the audience feels. He says, “As we strive to make our intentions pure, devoid of the desire to manipulate, and clear, directed to a concrete, easily stated end, our performances become pure and clear” (24). He further explains intention by stating that an actor needs a “simple” action, an “attempt to accomplish a goal.” With a clear objective, getting a job, borrowing the car, getting someone into bed, actors can know if they are close to achieving their goal or

if they need to alter their plans. Mamet continues: “This is what makes a person with an objective *alive*: they have to take their attention off themselves and put it on the person they want something from” (73-74). He concludes saying, “Exercise your own power in your choice. Make a compelling choice and it’s no trick to commit yourself to it.

“Concentration” is not an issue” (97). This of course is not a new philosophy as it is pure and essential Stanislavski.

Unfortunately Mamet only vaguely defines the “simple” action and intentions on which the actor should focus. However, A Practical Handbook for the Actor, used at The Atlantic Theater Company David Mamet and William H. Macy founded, expounds on the idea of action. The authors say, “physical action is the main building block of an actor’s technique because it is the one thing that you, the actor, can consistently *do* onstage” (13). They believe choosing a “good” action comes with practice and that action on stage should have the following qualities:

- Physically capable of being done.
- Fun to do.
- Specific but not manipulative.
- In line with the intentions of the author.
- The test of the action should be in the other person. The goal should deal with the other person onstage. The actor who concentrates on his partner, not on acting, will be less self-conscious.
- Cannot be an errand. The action must have substance and challenge the actor to work, which coincides with the idea of flow.

The authors also add this requirement for actions:

- Have a cap. Because the cap, or the specific end the actor works toward on stage, is so specific, the actor can tell if his actions are successful, a condition for flow (14-17).

Concerning self-consciousness Mamet apparently agrees with Csikszentmihalyi. He says that an actor needs to get out of his own way and learn to be “comfortable being uncomfortable.” Humans try not to expose themselves and Mamet says actors, being human, don’t like to either. Actors sometimes mistakenly try to be real by adding an “I mean” or a “phew” sound before a line. Mamet says actors doing this only hide themselves. Instead if they just say the lines and speak through uncertainty, the audience sees someone “interesting.” They see bravery and courage “not a portrayal of courage.” This courage fuses the lines to create the illusion of a character (20-21). He says of the Method:

The Method got it wrong. Yes, the actor is undergoing something onstage, but it is beside the point to have him or her “undergo” the supposed trials of the character upon the stage. The actor has his own trials to undergo, and they are right in front of him. They don’t have to be superadded [*sic*]; they exist. His challenge is not to recapitulate, to *pretend* to the difficulties of the written character; it is to open the mouth, stand straight, and say the words bravely----adding nothing, denying nothing, and without the intent to manipulate anyone: himself, his fellows, the audience. (22)

Mamet says actors should embrace their uneasiness. He tells the actor who feels uncomfortable on stage, because of his inadequate preparation or because of his scene partner's attitude, to act *in spite* of this feeling, as do uncomfortable characters in the play. In fact, this leads him to the same spot as the character (119). Like the character, the actor does not know what will happen next and remains confused, frightened and anxious. Thus Mamet says, "rewards will come from unexpected quarters" (88).

According to Mamet, actors simply need to go on the stage naked, exposing themselves:

You are going to bring your unpreparedness, your insecurities, your insufficiency to the stage whatever you do. When you step onstage, they come with you. Go onstage and act in spite of them. Nothing you do can conceal them. Nor *should* they be concealed. There is nothing ignoble about honest sweat, you don't have to drench it in cheap scent. (119)

Mamet admits that actors need to be aware of their intentions and of their fellow actors within the scene. So, in terms of flow, actors do need some outward directed consciousness. However, Mamet realizes that actors need to lose their self-consciousness and embrace their own insecurities to reach optimal experience. In other words, actors may acceptably embrace insecurity about acting as they try to immerse themselves in the character's personality. The feeling of insecurity leads to uncertainty, which brings results, when uncertainty is embraced not feared. Mamet believes that concentration naturally comes with good choices. However, in A Practical Handbook for the Actor, a book Mamet praised and influenced, the authors contradict Mamet's opinions saying that concentration can only be improved through practice:

If you consistently return your attention to where it belongs, eventually it will become habituated to the requirements of playing on the stage.

Remember, your concentration is like a muscle—training it is no different from an athlete drilling himself to strengthen his muscles. The only way to improve your concentration, your ability to live in the moment, is through assiduous practice. Through practice, it will become second nature in the scene. (44)

Even though Mamet does not believe actors need to focus on concentration as a learned skill, both the authors of A Practical Handbook for the Actor and Constantin Stanislavski disagree. If human beings can improve their performance, which is a primary assumption in flow, what harm exists in improving concentration skills? Concentration could become the new, simple acting goal for the actor to improve overall skill and believability on stage.

### Stanislavski on Consciousness, Concentration and Self Consciousness in Flow

Stanislavski valued concentration and taught his pupils how to better concentrate. He stressed that an actor's attention should not wander into the auditorium or the audience but stay on the meaning behind the words, on the tempo-rhythm in the scene, on making compelling objectives and partially observing the performance. This will be discussed in Chapter 4 where he seems to admit that a duality of performer and character exists. According to Stanislavski, putting attention on the auditorium or audience makes the actor self-conscious and his movements become unnatural. Actors forget how to walk, sit, talk, and look onstage when performing. He told his students in An Actor

Prepares, “In order to get away from the auditorium you must be interested in something on the stage” (70). He continues by saying they “will have to learn *how to look at and see things* on the stage” (72-73). He continues:

Remember this: all of our acts, even the simplest, which are so familiar to us in everyday life, become strained when we appear behind the footlights before a public of a thousand people. That is why it is necessary to correct ourselves and learn again how to walk, move about, sit, or lie down. It is essential to re-educate ourselves to look and see, on the stage, to listen and to hear. (73)

So Stanislavski taught his students how to look naturally at objects on stage. He gave every student an object. He instructed them to look at their object, noticing its “form, lines, colors, detail, characteristics.” Then in the dark the students described their objects. The students did not concentrate enough and could not recall the objects correctly, proving his point that concentration was a skill one should exercise to acquire. The Assistant Director told them when they next attempted the exercise they would have less time to observe the objects, forcing them to really concentrate (76-77).

Next Stanislavski taught the students about the “Circle of Attention.” He showed them a “Small Circle of Attention,” a small area of light. In this small circle an actor can find “Solitude in Public,” which means that, although the actor remains in public, he stays divided from everyone because of the small circle. Stanislavski advised that during a performance an actor “can always enclose (himself) in this circle like a snail in its shell” (77-78).



To further explain the Stanislavski teachings, Sonia Moore who studied with Stanislavski and taught his technique, describes Stanislavski's "Solitude in Public" in The Stanislavski System as a place where actors feel calm and fearless. She says one can achieve this state by concentrating "all attention" on the execution of a physical action (51). She says Stanislavski believed in physical actions because in life all actions had a psychological undertone, (for example opening a door is a physical action but one opens the door for a psychological reason.) Even immobility has an "inner activity." Because an actor cannot believe he becomes another character, he needs to concentrate on the appropriate physical actions (39-40). However, Moore says, "There is a level on which an actor finds coincidence between himself and the character. This is the level of physical actions. The only thing an actor can fulfill truthfully on stage as a character is a simple physical action" (40). This is essentially what Mamet and the authors of A Practical Handbook for the Actor say about physical actions.

In An Actor Prepares, after Stanislavski instructed his students about "Solitude in Public," he showed them the Medium Circle and then the Large Circle. Stanislavski then turned all the theatre lights on, forcing the students to mentally find these different circles. He said, "your attention must replace the light" (77-78). He showed them how parts of the set could represent the different circles, meaning a table could outline the Small Circle, a rug could make the Medium Circle and the largest rug could form the Large Circle. He told students that if their border wavered, they should go back to a smaller circle and choose an object to focus on within that circle. Then they applied the same principles to a larger circle (79-80).

In addition to concentrating on objects and light, Stanislavski told his students in Building A Character to concentrate on the meaning behind the words. Stanislavski said to “forget entirely about the feelings and put all your attention on the inner images. Study them as carefully and describe them as fully, as penetratingly and vividly as you can” (134).

Stanislavski said that actors should be observant on the stage and in real life. He says in An Actor Prepares that unobservant people can be taught to use their full powers of observation by looking at nature, both the beautiful and “darker” sides:

How can we teach unobservant people to notice what nature and life are trying to show them? First of all they must be taught to look at, to listen to, and to hear what is beautiful. Such habits elevate their minds and arouse feelings which will leave deep traces in their emotion memories. Nothing in life is more beautiful than nature, and it should be the object of constant observation. To begin with, take a flower, or a petal from it, or a spider web, or a design made by frost on the windowpane. Try to express in words what it is in these things that give pleasure. Such an effort causes you to observe the object more closely, more effectively, in order to appreciate it and define its qualities. (86)

Stanislavski also taught students to concentrate by teaching them the importance of tempo-rhythm. Sonia Moore says that tempo-rhythm exercises help actors bring authenticity to their physical actions because “every action on the stage must be executed in the tempo-rhythm required in life” (65). She continues to say, “correct tempo rhythm contributes to concentration and consequently keeps the actor’s attention from distracting

factors. It plays an important role in mastering the logic and consecutiveness of actions” (65-66).

In Building A Character, Stanislavski began his exercise by defining “tempo” as “the speed or slowness of beat” of any units and “rhythm” as the “relationship of units – of movement, of sound.” He set up metronomes and made them tick, sometimes slow and sometimes fast, showing the different rates of speed. At some points the metronomes sounded like an orchestra. The metronomes illustrated that when tempo sped up, less time existed for action and speech, and reversibly when the tempo slowed down, more time existed for action and speech (201-204). He made his students aware of movement and time in terms of the metronomes:

The same thing occurs in acting. Our actions, our speech proceeds in terms of time. In the process of action we must fill in the passing time with a great variety of movements, alternating with pauses of inactivity, and in the process of speech the passing time is filled with moments of pronunciation of sounds of varying lengths with pauses between them.

(204)

Using metronomes, he showed his students how different speeds emotionally affected them. However, actors must attach images to these tempo-rhythms in order to recall their emotions. In combination with given circumstances, tempo-rhythm can excite emotional memory. For example, a military march and a funeral procession may be measured in the same tempo-rhythm; however, they have completely different emotional meanings for the actor. He explains, “that is why it is wrong to take tempo-rhythm to mean only a measure and speed” (217).

Stanislavski's assistant in Building A Character, Rakhmanov, played music on the piano and had the students react to it. Each student interpreted the music in his or her own way. The music affected their imagination and creativity as they created stories in their minds and in their movements by concentrating on the music, completely absorbing their awareness in it (223).

Stanislavski believed in accord with leading scientific theories of his time, that an actor reaches his subconscious through his consciousness. He says in An Actor Prepares, "I do not give you any technical methods to gain control of the subconscious. I can only teach you the indirect method to approach it and give yourselves up to its power" (267). The indirect method lies in creating the visualizations, emotion memory, and physical actions explained earlier. In Creating A Role, Stanislavski says that all the preparatory work done for the role prepares the "ground for the inception and growth of living passions and for inspiration which lies dormant in the realm of the superconscious" (93). He warns that it will only occur in "prepared circumstances" when the actor accepts the given circumstances as his own (93). In An Actor Prepares, he says that once an actor dwells in the subconscious there exists a "sincerity of emotions" and freedom exists for the actor. As a result the creative experience differs each time (267).

Stanislavski tries to develop consciousness through all of his techniques to create a greater chance for the subconscious to work. Through hard, conscious practice the actor has a greater opportunity for inspiration. Stanislavski knows that inspiration does not just happen. Actors have to work for it and when it does occur an actor does not always know how it happened. This is similar to the rock climber's account in Csikszentmihaly's Flow. Because he becomes so involved in his activity, he does not see

himself as separate from it, hence he does not know exactly how it happened (53). Stanislavski believes that concentration must be complete to reach the “zone” in theatre performance, hence his extensive training on concentration on objects and circles of light as well as work with tempo-rhythm. Sonia Moore said, “When an actor succeeds in concentrating, he is truly active inwardly and physically, and therefore “turns on” his mechanism of emotions” (53).

### Anne Bogart on Consciousness, Concentration and Self Consciousness in Flow

Anne Bogart’s approach to teaching and directing encourages concentration on the body and surroundings, not on character objectives. Concentrating on the body and physical surroundings helps rid actors of their self-consciousness because they do not concentrate on self-evaluating their performance. The members of her SITI Company use Source-work, The Viewpoints and Composition. Source-work and Composition, which will be discussed in Chapter 5, awaken the imagination whereas The Viewpoints improve concentration and awareness. In her essay, “Source-Work, the Viewpoints and Composition: What are They?,” in Viewpoints, Tina Landau describes The Viewpoints as the “points of awareness that a performer or creator has while working” (20). The SITI Company works with nine viewpoints and their subcategories. Some viewpoints relate to sound instead of movement. According to Landau, for the “Viewpoints of Time” there exists: the Viewpoint of Tempo, “how fast or slow something happens on stage,” the Viewpoint of Duration, how long a certain movement lasts, the Kinesthetic Response Viewpoint, “a spontaneous reaction to motion which occurs outside you,” (for

example how long it takes your eyes to blink after someone slaps their hands in front of your face) and The Repetition Viewpoint. Within the Repetition Viewpoint there exists: the “Internal Repetition,” “repeating a movement within your own body” and “External Repetition,” “repeating the shape, tempo, gesture” (20-21). There also exists the “Viewpoints of Space,” which include: “Shape,” the outline the body or bodies make, and “Gesture,” a movement someone makes with a part of their body. “Behavior Gesture” comes from observation and includes things like “scratching, pointing, waving, sniffing, bowing” whereas “Expressive Gesture” signifies the inner emotion.

Landau says the Architecture Viewpoint relates to the “physical environment in which you are working and how awareness of it affects movement” (22). With this Viewpoint actors investigate their space and become aware of what surrounds them and then become involved with the physical environment.

With the Spatial Relationship Viewpoint actors become aware of the “distance” between themselves and their fellow actors as well as their distance between items on stage. Finally Landau says with the Topography Viewpoint actors play with the idea of “movement in the space.” Part of the stage can be dense while the other part can be easy to move in (22-23). These Viewpoints allow actors to become aware of their surroundings and provide an opportunity to interact with space in new ways. Landau says:

The actor, in the case of the Viewpoints, exercises awareness (awareness of the different Viewpoints), the ability to listen with the entire body, and a sense of spontaneity and extremity. The actor trains to take in and use everything that occurs around her, and to not exclude anything because

she thinks she knows what is good or bad, useful or not. The Viewpoints enable performers to find possibility larger than what they first imagine—whether it is in creating a shape they didn’t know their body was capable of or in discovering a range of unexpected gestures for a character. By using the Viewpoints fully, we eliminate the actor’s ability to state “my character would never do that.” By using the Viewpoints fully, we give ourselves surprise, contradiction and unpredictability. (23-24)

Music also plays a part in Viewpoints. When the SITI Company rehearses, they spend the first twenty minutes working with music and light. When the music changes the actors go with it and respond with spontaneous movement. However, they do not get swept away by the music.

The Viewpoints often set the structure for the staging of the piece. In this way actors help create their own blocking. Landau says, “The information which causes movement doesn’t come from a direction as much as a response to what is already happening around them in the playing space” (25). Actors should feel more secure, more comfortable and less self-conscious because they helped create their own movements. Someone else did not dictate them.

Bogart believes being self-conscious can stop actors from reaching full potential, or, in terms of flow, from reaching optimal experience. She says in A Director Prepares:

Good actors know intuitively that they are half marionette and the rest is real inspiration, intuitive intelligence and listening. They concentrate on negotiating the artifice—the size of the stage, the blocking, the text, the costumes, the lights, to the point where the conscious mind—that is out to

ambush us and make us small-is occupied with something else so that the spontaneity and naturalness can arrive unimpeded. (129)

Bogart says actors can get out of their own way and lose their self-consciousness by first accepting that their search for authenticity exists in unnatural conditions. She continues, “Despite the artifice we search for spontaneity and freedom. But to enter that paradise, you cannot enter through the front gates; you must go around to the back door” (128). She says Stanislavski invented things like given circumstances, the magic if, and objectives to keep the actor’s frontal lobe occupied so that he could get out of his own way. She admits that actors struggle with this problem of self-consciousness but can learn to “handle the artifice through training and practice” (128-129).

Instead of being self-conscious Bogart says an actor needs to “choose death” in the moment. There can be no hesitation (A Director Prepares 50). Actors need to take chances and risk personal embarrassment in order to achieve success (A Director Prepares 113).

In addition to the dangers of self-consciousness, Bogart believes energy plays a huge part in the theater. Csikszentmihalyi agrees with this, though what Csikszentmihalyi calls “psychic energy” or attention, Bogart describes as “stepping up to the bat, facing down the obstacle” (A Director Prepares 148). Bogart says:

An actor is only as successful as the quality of interaction with the emergent resistance of circumstance. The opposition between a force pushing towards action and another force holding back is translated into visible and feelable energy in space and time. This personal struggle with the obstacle in turn induces discord and imbalance. The attempt to restore



harmony from this agitated state generates yet more energy. This battle is, in itself, the creative act (A Director Prepares 148).

Though Csikszentmihalyi's vocabulary differs from Bogart's, in a way they mean the same thing. In order for someone to reach flow they must attempt something difficult. Bogart describes this difficulty as an obstacle the artist faces which creates "discord." The actor attempts to fix this discord, and through this attempt creates art. The undying drive to succeed makes someone reach flow. Csikszentmihalyi said, "Only when a doubtful outcome is at stake, and one is able to influence that outcome, can a person really know whether she is in control" (61). Bogart calls this battle with the obstacle "energy" and Csikszentmihalyi calls energy attention. Without either energy or attention, flow would not be possible. Like Csikszentmihalyi, Bogart realizes the value of concentration. Through the Viewpoint system, Bogart's actors concentrate on their body and surroundings in order to awaken their awareness of the world around them and to rid themselves of self-consciousness.

## Interviews

In addition to the theoreticians presented above, interviews with current working theatre and film professionals prove useful for a commentary on concentration as it pertains to theatre performance. Ellen Tobie agrees with David Mamet in that she says concentration comes naturally and actors must concentrate on the character's situation and intentions in that moment, rather than on the lines.

Tobie becomes very protective when she does a show. She says, "I don't like to go out between shows. Other actors sleep. I don't want anything upsetting to happen during the day." She says that younger actors begin to "mentally" prepare in the

afternoon before a performance. However, more experienced actors need less time. They may only need half an hour.

In An Actor Prepares, Stanislavski speaks of the need to prepare for a performance, coinciding with Ellen Tobie's opinion. He says that actors should spend time physically getting ready for their role with costumes and makeup. However, they also need to prepare internally. They need to arrive at the dressing room two hours ahead of time. They need to release muscular tension and then choose an object in the room and concentrate on it, focusing on its size, color, etc. Then after the concentration exercise, the actor needs to focus on a physical objective, motivating it with the imagination. Stanislavski says, "Think up various suppositions and suggest possible circumstances into which you put yourself" (250).

George DiCenzo says that concentration plays an "imperative" role in an actor's performance. He says, "You must have concentration. You can't be distracted, whether it is acting or running a machine or teaching or cooking."

Tobie and Mamet say concentration comes naturally while DiCenzo insists that it must be there. What if concentration doesn't come naturally? The initial step in the flow process is to have a clear and simple goal. Since avenues exist to improve concentration, I think actors should use their clear and simple goal to work on concentration in terms of the character's intentions and the world around them, as it exists on the stage. I believe beginning actors need to practice exercises of concentration as Stanislavski taught and exercises of physical awareness as taught by Bogart. As they progress, they should concentrate on their physical actions and their scene partner, as taught by Stanislavski and Mamet. In an ongoing show actors can refine their physical action or "simple goal"

every night. Actors have many tools at their disposal to improve their concentration, (i.e. Stanislavski's exercises of concentration and tempo-rhythm, or Anne Bogart's Viewpoints, which in some respects is a complex and fleshed out combination of Stanislavski's tempo-rhythm with Mamet's idea of a strong objective.) Actors may use whichever tool works to help them concentrate. As Csikszentmihalyi said, without concentration one cannot reach flow. From my own experience, I must consciously concentrate. In a recent show, at the beginning of the run when I felt insecure, I thought in my head, "Oh I am ok. The words are coming out ok." In that moment my concentration ended and it took me a few minutes to get back into the scene. If I had worried less about my performance and focused more on my scene partner and on what I wanted from him at that moment, perhaps my concentration would have remained intact. Thus I believe concentrating on the objective and focusing on the actor can help actors remain in the moment. Also, embracing my insecurities as Mamet suggested would have helped me in that situation.

Regarding the role of consciousness vs. subconsciousness, it seems that the road to the subconscious runs through the consciousness. As we have seen over and over, hard work pays off. Once an actor completes his homework, flow will likely occur. He need not worry about the results. He needs to focus his attention and consciousness on his character's objective, or in terms of flow, his simple goal. Many actors are insecure and worry about their performances. Contrary to what William Roudebush teaches his students, many actors intellectualize and analyze their performances as they happen because they worry about the outcome. How can actors overcome these feelings of inadequacy and insecurity and focus on what they need in order to reach their full

potential? Actors need to trust themselves. This will not happen over night. It is a gradual process. Understanding theatre performance in terms of flow may improve an actor's confidence. If actors understand that if they do their homework and concentrate on their objectives, they are doing their job. They do not need to be insecure. They can trust their process and realize that since perfection does not exist, failure will only make them stronger.

If an actor truly reaches the zone, he probably will not know how he got there. However, he has not lost himself. He knows he reached the zone. He was not in a comatose state. Like the violinist, an actor remains aware of his movements; he just does not worry about how to play. It just comes. But the extensive preparatory work can get him there more consistently. If he works really hard and remains totally focused, his subconscious will take over. Assuming the actor does not psych himself out by being self-conscious, he will more often than not achieve a sense of flow.

## Chapter 4: Feedback

“Salvini said: ‘An actor lives, weeps, and laughs on the stage and all the while he is watching his own tears and smiles. It is this double function, this balance between life and acting that makes his art.’”

- Constantin Stanislavski (An Actor Prepares 252).

### Feedback In Flow

Feedback plays a crucial and continuous role in flow, without it flow could not occur. In Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains that because feedback exists, a person does not worry about his performance because he can measure his success against a clear goal. For example, a tennis player knows what he has to do to win the game. He needs to hit the ball to the other side and block his opponent’s hits. In the end he knows whether or not he succeeded (54).

Csikszentmihalyi admits that some activities prove harder to rate as successes or failures. Theatre performance falls into this category. In those instances, mostly those in the area of subjective art, he says the artists need to be their own judges. The artist needs to “develop a strong personal sense of what she intends to do. The artist might not have a visual image of what the finished painting should look like, but when the picture has progressed to a certain point, she should know whether this is what she wanted to achieve or not” (55). This painter must know internally what he likes and does not like after each stroke of paint, being able to decipher what works and does not. However, can an actor do this? If an actor evaluates his performance as it occurs, doesn’t he leave that moment in the play? Can an over critical or over confident actor give himself accurate feedback?

Csikszentmihalyi says artists need to have internal guidelines (55). Also, in subjective art, clear goals do not exist as readily as in tennis. For example, a composer knows that he wants to write a good song. His goal remains somewhat vague (55). In terms of theatre performance actors can form more concrete goals, such as concentrating more in this scene, finding a stronger objective in that scene or being “more in denial in the first part of the scene” as Ellen Tobie suggested in Chapter 2.

It may be difficult for an actor immersed in his role to gauge his own performance. However, the audience and the director can be his third eye in some instances. Csikszentmihalyi admits that the criterion for feedback varies. For instance, he gives the contrasting examples of a psychiatrist and a surgeon. A surgeon receives direct feedback during and after a surgery. If he took out the diseased organ, no blood remained in the incision and the patient lived, then he succeeded and will be in flow. However, a psychiatrist’s professional success does not have such black and white criteria. Csikszentmihalyi says the psychiatrist receives feedback through his patient by “the way the patient holds himself, the expression on his face, the hesitation in his voice, the content of the material he brings up in the therapeutic hour-all these bits of information are important clues the psychiatrist uses to monitor the progress of the therapy” (56). Similarly the director and/or audience can help the actor. But what happens if the actor does not trust or respect his director or if he has a quiet or disrespectful audience? In those instances the director and/or audience cannot be used to gauge feedback.

## David Mamet on Feedback

However, in True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor David Mamet says the audience teaches the actor to act, how to write and direct (19). Mamet does not discuss the role of the director as a monitor for feedback but merely says he uses the audience to gauge the success of a performance calling them the “barometer of theatrical merit.” If the audience laughed, then they thought the play funny. If they sighed, they thought it moving. If they gasped then the second act surprised them. A standing ovation can be forced but a gasp from the audience cannot (126).

He believes that today’s “preoccupation” with character really lies in preoccupation with self and, as such, is a symptom of “ham” acting. Checking in with oneself in theatrical performance wastes energy and takes away from the playwright’s story. Trying to reach a “mythical perfection,” leaves the actor self-conscious (109).

The beauty of theatre, according to David Mamet, lies in the “communion with the audience” (45). The audience comes to a show to have fun, to be surprised and to respond to the actors and other audience members. They do not come to judge, as do the casting directors, producers and agents. He says when an actor goes to an audition with one or more of these people present, the actor evaluates his performance and leaves the room thinking he failed. Mamet believes this expression of defeat does not help one improve, instead it expresses a need to please authority. When only the audience remains, the actor still beats himself up. He says this cycles down from formal education where actors learn subservience and continue the cycle of being the “bad parent” to themselves. Therefore, he deems it unacceptable if an audience member tells an actor that he enjoyed the show only to have the actor disagree and respond he did a better job

last week. This, Mamet says, “feels like a slap in the face. Reflection would inform the actor that the correct response is ‘Thank you very much.’ The audience didn’t come to watch a *lesson* but to see a play. If they enjoyed it, you, the actor, have done your job” (46-47). The actor should be pleased with the audience response. If a need arises for improvement, like working on the voice, or not eating before a show, then the actor should do it. However, he says self-loathing does not lead to self-improvement (48).

According to Mamet, actors do not always evaluate themselves correctly. He knows this from first hand experiences. He recounts:

I have watched long runs over the years, and have heard actors say “Tonight was fine” or “Tonight was atrocious” of performances in which I could find no difference. And I’m speaking of plays which I wrote and directed, and in which I had a great stake—plays and performances I would have improved if I could have. Generally the “I’m garbage” and the “I’m brilliant” performances were the same. (48)

This discrepancy according to Mamet occurs because actors cannot accurately gauge their own performances. Because they cannot objectively rate their own performance, he thinks it pointless for them to lament their “failures.” He says if the actor remembers that feedback comes from the audience and “the purpose of the performance is to communicate the play to the audience,” then the actor can stop beating himself up.

Mamet’s evaluation of theatrical performance in terms of the audience gauging the actor’s performance proves extremely useful to insecure actors. Many actors are very hard on themselves, some are even perfectionists. Not self-criticizing their performance, as Mamet instructs, can help them be less self-conscious, a goal in flow. Also, they may



not be accurate in their self-evaluations, as attested by Mamet. In these cases, actors need a third eye for feedback and this third eye can be the audience. However, Mamet does not address what happens when an audience is quiet or disrespectful. In those instances, another form of feedback would be needed. A director could be this third eye. The director as a third eye will be discussed later in this chapter.

### Anne Bogart and William Roudebush on Feedback

Although Anne Bogart does not elaborate on the idea of feedback, she does agree with Csikszentmihalyi that artists should not reflect and evaluate their performances in the moment of creation because once actors start questioning their actions they censure themselves and sabotage their spontaneity. Csikszentmihalyi says in everyday life we doubt ourselves thinking thoughts like “Why am I doing this? Should I perhaps be doing something else?” He continues saying, “Repeatedly we question the necessity of our actions, and evaluate critically the reasons for carrying them out. But in flow there is no need to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic” (54). Bogart elaborates in A Director Prepares saying, “one has to ‘choose death’ in the moment by acting fully and intuitively without pausing for reflection about whether it is the right decision or if it is going to provide the winning solution” (50). She admits a place for self-evaluation exists saying reflection and criticism belong either after or before the creative act, but never during performance (A Director Prepares 50). In a telephone interview with Joan Herrington of The Drama Review on December 9, 1999, Bogart said, one needs to throw away intellectual power and “just respond” (5).

According to Bogart in A Director Prepares, the frontal lobe buzzing in the actor's head, trying to censure him, and ambush his every movement. Therefore this frontal lobe needs to be engaged in busywork so that actors can trust their instincts and be spontaneous and intuitive in their actions (127-128).

William Roudebush agrees with Csikszentmihalyi and Bogart, saying that reflection cannot occur during the moment of action. In fact, in his book and classes he gives actors character traits to occupy this part of their brain so that they will not monitor themselves. In Acting By Mistake he says that actors monitoring themselves have less energy for their character. He illustrates this by saying that if he spends forty percent of his energy monitoring himself then it is impossible for him to put one-hundred percent into his character (34). Roudebush admits that acting by definition is a self-conscious medium, however he says if one completely removes self-consciousness there will be so much more energy to redirect into the role. He gives actors ways to lose self-monitoring behavior. He points out that actors need to work on only one monologue at a time. The monologue as written is enough without also working on the self-critical monologue commenting on the actor's performance. He tries to help actors to remove the voices that say, "You missed that beat change! You said that word wrong! What am I doing up here? What's my next line?!" (34).

Roudebush does this by teaching actors to work on character activities during their monologues. Sometimes he will give his students mantras to vocalize between lines. After they have successfully done this, he then asks them to subvocalize this mantra during their monologue. Now they refocus energies previously spent on

monitoring their performance on to developing the heart of the character. A mantra can be as simple as “You will love me.”

Roudebush illustrates another example of a character activity in his book. He had a student who studied with him for almost a year. She made great strides in recalling her character’s experiences without monitoring herself but one day she listened to herself, splitting her attention into her monologue as written and her examining her own performance. So Roudebush asked her how her character felt. She said furious. Since he thought furious too general of a word he prodded her about what this meant to her. She explained, “It’s like when my kids have been told over and over not to do something, yet they continue. I feel betrayed [by my children] to the point that I am almost speechless with fury.” Speechless with fury struck a cord and Roudebush told her to put herself in a spot of speechless fury and recall her visions trying not to lose her temper. Hang on to the fury and “fight your character’s feelings of betrayal and clarify what must be said in order to survive this outrageous situation she has been forced into.” When his student focused on trying to remain composed in a heated situation she stopped listening to herself. This is because she had something else to do and there was no time to focus on evaluating her own performance. Since she committed herself to the action of remaining calm, she performed with more truth.

Roudebush stresses that actors must focus on character activities because the mind won’t listen to a simple instruction of “I can’t listen to myself.” The mind will not respond to a “negative request” (39). He continues, “If you tell yourself not to do something that’s all your mind will focus on-what you don’t want!” (39). For instance, if somebody says, “Do not think about a pink elephant,” the first thing that comes to the

mind is a picture of a pink elephant. When you say what you do not want that is exactly what the mind will see. This approach seems to echo what Bogart spoke about earlier in terms of going after something via an indirect route.

Roudebush identifies different protections actors have. (These will be more fully discussed in Chapter 5.) Outside Protection involves self-monitoring. The outside-protected actor judges his performances as he performs; deciphering what works and what does not. The outside-protected actor fears making a mistake, so he listens to himself to make sure he does it right (58). However, Roudebush explains that this type of actor cannot succeed:

Every time you rise to workout your monologues you must let go of your technique, intellectual knowledge, text analysis and all the decisions you have previously made concerning your character. They are inside of you and, if they are relevant to the present tense moments your character is going through, they will appear. You can't force them! You can't be in two places at the same time; inside your character and outside observing.

(56)

Roudebush believes actors become outside-protected because they spend so much time rehearsing alone. Without an outsider to give feedback they feel obligated to judge their own work. This practice of simultaneously splitting energy into self-monitoring and performing becomes habitual. Roudebush advises students beginning to stage a new piece to step outside of themselves and watch for a moment but asks that they be conscious of this and that they know they are doing it for a particular reason. Also, they

must be able to let it go and focus on the character and not their progress. He says athletes do this all the time:

They work out their problems on the practice field. They focus on their technique, analyze approach and break down the mechanics of their sport to examine every detail. The practice field is designed for this specific activity but in order to win the game they must trust their technique and move their focus directly to the target that registers a score. Nothing matters but that target. The actor's target is staying in the moment---being lost in that particular moment of their character's life. (58)

I had the opportunity not only to digest William Roudebush's book but also to participate in his class "Acting By Mistake." His approach worked for me. When I successfully freed myself of critical voices, (which did not happen every time as it takes a long time to change old habits,) I went on a journey. I was not listening to myself but instead communicating in a direct way, trying to make my point and get what I wanted through my monologue. At the end of the monologue I felt happy and had fun. So, not monitoring myself made me happy. However, at the end of the monologue I knew that I took conscious steps to obtain my goal. I knew I achieved my goal because I felt it and, in hindsight, had the ability to evaluate my progress.

### Stanislavski on Feedback

In live theatre the audience assists the actor in evaluating his performance. Stanislavski said, "The audience is a huge mirror reflecting the actor's creativity. We

must learn to look into this mirror and see what we create. An actor must act as the character and listen as an actor” (Moore 96).

Stanislavski also admitted that a duality of performer and character exists, meaning that as one performs, one can monitor oneself and react. In An Actor Prepares, Stanislavski gives an example of an actor performing “in perfect possession of his faculties.” Everything goes smoothly for a while and then something goes wrong. The actor investigates to see what happens, finds it, corrects it and continues playing. Throughout whole sequence of events and moments of self-observation he continued to play his role. Stanislavski told his students of the famous Italian actor, Tommaso Salvini, who said, “An actor lives, weeps, and laughs on the stage, all the while he is watching his own tears and smiles. It is this double function, this balance between life and acting that makes his art” (252). His sharing this quote with his students leads one to believe that actors can gauge their own feedback.

Regarding the role of directors in gauging feedback, Stanislavski warned his students in Creating A Role that no matter how good a director may be, actors need to rely on themselves. Actors must take artistic responsibility for their performances and not rely on their directors to fix their problems. If actors have great direction that makes thing easier but actors cannot rely on the director to save them and must have internal guideposts to gauge performance.

Stanislavski gives several ways for actors to receive feedback, ways to measure whether or not they succeed, a key component to flow. The actor can use the audience and/or director, but if the audience or directors do not work, he must use himself. So the actor needs to gauge his own performance and will remain on course in the role as long

as he focuses on his physical actions. Stanislavski believes the actor who gauges his performance as it happens and makes adjustment still remains in his role.

## Interviews

Ellen Tobie, an actress with twenty-six years of experience, believes an actor needs a director to give feedback. Tobie says she knows when she “hits it” or in optimal experience terms when she reaches the state of flow. She also knows her performance “is true, when [she is] not pushing, when [she is] in touch with [her] inner self.” However, in rehearsal she needs a pair of eyes to tell her to go further or have a little more shading of this or that moment or emotion. She relies on the director’s eyes to see what the audience sees because she cannot see herself. She needs “someone with extraordinary taste who is usually the director to say ‘That’s it. That’s it. Did you see that right now? That’s it. What you just did is it.’” She says the “actor needs a director.” In the case of preparing for an audition, again she believes an actor needs another “pair of eyes.”

In addition to the director, Tobie believes the audience plays an active part in feedback in the performance of comedies. Feedback in comedies, she says, “is all about the audience.” From the laugh, she can tell if she “hit it.” However, in drama she believes the audience cannot always help gauge feedback. She says in drama she knows she “hit it” when the moment does not feel forced.

George DiCenzo believes an actor can gauge his own performance. However, he finds this “ego driven.” He says, “I think you know when you are “hitting,” you know when you are in the zone and that is about all you have to know.”

DiCenzo finds the director much more important than the audience in terms of feedback, saying the audience responds more on some nights than others. However the director “feeds” the actor by trying to get the best performance from him. He says the actor needs to listen to the director because outside feedback is critical.

Both DiCenzo and Tobie say the actor knows when they “hit” their mark or, in terms of flow, when they reach optimal experience. However, both actors stress the need for a director’s feedback. The director should bring the actor to the place he needs to go. Though once in that spot, it may not be as important for the actor to examine his performance because he knows intuitively when he reached the zone.

Feedback exists for the actor if according to Csikszentmihalyi, he can decipher whether or not he succeeded. No matter which avenue is used, flow becomes possible. The example of the psychiatrist illustrated indirect ways of feedback. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the psychiatrist receives feedback through the patient’s voice, what he or she speaks about in the session and the behavior exhibited (56). When evaluating the different avenues for feedback in theatre performance, it is difficult to decide which avenue works best. Personally I experienced flow when I consciously did NOT listen to myself but in the end I knew something had happened. However, I agree with Stanislavski in that you need to be aware of yourself to fix problems on stage as they arise but must not be controlling, trying to manipulate the outcome. When I started taking class with George DiCenzo, he once asked me after a monologue if I had controlled and manipulated the piece in order to perform it the way I thought it should be performed. In those earlier days I did not quite understand what he meant by that question since I did not consider myself as an over analytic performer. However, looking



back, I see that he was right. I had placed emphasis on the finished product, trying unsuccessfully to control the outcome. But where do I receive my most productive feedback? In some instances I receive feedback from my director, in some instances from the audience and at other times from my own feeling of having “hit it” or not. However, I think in some unfortunate situations, directors, because of inexperience, apathy or distractions, may not fully be there for their actors. Also, sometimes audiences respond quietly and in those cases it is hard to use them to gauge feedback. So to a certain extent, I think the gauge has to be within the performer. Maybe one needs to save analysis for after the performance as Anne Bogart said. However, I do agree with David Mamet that sometimes actors, myself included, wrongly decipher their performances and in many cases judge themselves too harshly. I think younger actors should use the audience to gauge feedback because they need to lose their self-consciousness and following Mamet’s advice can help that happen. More experienced actors, as both Tobie and DiCenzo said, know when they hit it and as DiCenzo put it maybe THAT is all they need to know. Actors need some form of feedback. Although anyone engaged in a purposeful action must have feedback of some kind to continue, actors in particular periodically doubt themselves and their abilities. Feedback gives them the needed validation to continue. Even Sally Field, who had a long, successful career in television and films before she won her second Oscar in 1985 for her performance in Places In The Heart, showed her vulnerability and need for feedback when she said during her acceptance speech, “I’ve wanted more than anything to have your respect. The first time I didn’t feel it, but this time I feel it and I can’t deny the fact that you like me – right now, you like me!” (Rasula par.8).

## Chapter 5: Can Acting Be Taught?

“I have never really believed that acting can be taught. Yet, when I remember what a clumsy beginner I was myself and how greatly I have been influenced, all through my long stage career, by the fine directors and players with whom I have been fortunate enough to be associated, I cannot deny the advantage of teaching, provided it can be followed up by hard personal experiences.”

- Sir John Gielgud (Preface of The Stanislavski System 7).

### David Mamet and The Atlantic Theater Company on Whether or Not Acting Can Be Taught

In his book True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor, David Mamet says acting is “doing the play for the audience. The rest is just practice” (4). He calls the world of academia, college, graduate school and the studio “charming” and “comfortable” but removed from the actor’s job like “aerobics are from boxing” (4). He believes actors can acquire vocal and physical training and script analysis in bits and pieces through observation and that formal education “is not only useless but harmful” because it stresses the academic and not the audience, the people from whom Mamet says actors learn (18-19). Through formal training actors learn to be polite and to please their teachers, casting directors and agents. However, in the end actors only need please the audience (42).

Mamet calls most acting teachers “frauds” (43). These fraudulent schools reward the students for subservience to authority. He says these teachers inappropriately say, “There are ten thousand more where you came from, and if you are not correct in your attitude, not only will you not get the part [the place in the class] but you will not even be

granted an *audition* to get the part.” Over time actors internalize these thoughts and become the “bad parent” and suffer (47).

He also labeled most acting teachers “charlatans” because they only taught “gullibility” in the exercises he saw at acting schools. If actors do go to school, he advises them to bring their “common sense” with them and to question their teachers. He continues, “You can’t live your life believing every ten-penny self-proclaimed teacher, critic, agent, etc., and then walk out onstage and be that model of probity and wisdom and strength you admire and wish to be. If you want that strength, you’re going to have to work for it, and your first and most important tool is common sense” (112).

Mamet even criticizes Stanislavski as a teacher saying he was a great “administrator,” and might have been a great director and/or actor but was still merely a “theoretician” for the “dilettante” because actors cannot use his theories (15). He continues to say that the “hobbyist” uses sense memory, emotion memory and character study to decipher the play without a thought of actually performing it with honesty (54).

Early in his book Mamet says that actors grow because of experience, through innate abilities and in spite of their education (14). He even said that physical and vocal training as well as script analysis could be acquired through observation. However, later in his book he said, “actors must be trained to speak well, easily, and distinctively, to move well and decisively, to stand relaxedly [*sic*], to observe and act upon the simple, mechanical actions called for by the text. Any play can then be rehearsed in a few weeks at most” (54). Herein lies a contradiction in Mamet’s book.

Mamet stresses that the actor needs to develop on the stage, not in school (43). However, Mamet, along with William H. Macy, formed the Atlantic Theater Company

that offers non-academic training programs to actors, on either a part-time or full-time basis. According to the Atlantic Theater Company's website, their program "demystifies the process of acting and gives students a clear set of analytic and physical tools" preparing them for careers in theater, television and film (par.4-5). The part-time program, which uses A Practical Handbook for the Actor as a textual guide, offers students a three level program, ranging in price from \$550.00 to \$600.00 for each level, with a class length of nine to ten weeks (par.1-7). The Atlantic Theater Company also offers a two-year program for \$6,500.00 per year, where students audition to be accepted and again use A Practical Handbook for the Actor. The school invites certain students back for the second year. The following list is taken from the Atlantic Theater Company's website page,

[http://www.atlantictheater.com/acting\\_school/new\\_york\\_programs\\_fs.htm](http://www.atlantictheater.com/acting_school/new_york_programs_fs.htm), (par.1-5):

The Two-Year Professional Actor Training Program Classes include:

- Script Analysis
- Performance Technique
- Repetition
- Improvisation
- Movement for Actors, based on Laban/Bartenieff Theory of Movement
- Voice
- Speech
- Shakespeare
- Advanced Styles
- Film Scene Study

- Monologues
- On Camera Technique, taught by professional Casting Directors
- Suzuki
- Guest classes on casting and the business

Granted, The Atlantic Theater Company's syllabus does not include any emotion memory, sense memory, or any of the typical "Stanislavski" tools, but it is a full time program that gives its actor's tools to improve their skills. So Mamet, who in one moment says these tools can be observed and in the next moment says that they should be taught, presents a contradiction. Either David Mamet is cashing in on his name to earn money or he recognizes some value in giving actors tools with which to improve.

The authors of A Practical Handbook for the Actor call technique "a knowledge of the tools that may be used for a certain craft and an understanding of how to apply those tools." Actors must first learn the tools of their craft just like carpenters must know their tools and how to use them. The actor has 1) action, "what you go onstage to do," 2) moment, what happens as you play the scene at every instant, 3) given circumstances, set forth by the author and writer, 4) preparation where the actor works with the script to find the "physical action" of the scene, and 5) improvisation, "the act of impulsively choosing from moment to moment how to do that action" based on what the other actors do (8-9).

Actors need not worry about their talent because they either have it or do not. Actors need to learn the skills that encompass the craft of acting. The Practical Handbook for the Actor says, "To put it simply, anyone can act if he has the will to do so, and anyone who says he wants to but doesn't have the knack for it suffers from a lack of will, not a lack of talent" (5). In fact the authors believe it takes an actor ten or fifteen years to

master the principles outlined in their book (85). So like Csikszentmihalyi, they believe that hard work is a key ingredient to reaching success. The writers continue to say that the set of skills needed to perform can be learned with training. But qualities, which are part of good acting like “sensitivity, vulnerability and high awareness of the senses” exist in everyone. They continue, “What makes an actor good is the ability to act on the impulses his humanity creates in him” (85). Actors who spend their careers being successful because of their innate qualities do not grow as artists because they never developed skill. They do not bring with them a “bag of tricks” from which to pull. The authors say, “How much greater is the self-respect of the man or woman who can call upon the technique he or she has developed over his or her years in the theatre to see him or her through even the most seemingly insurmountable acting problem” (85).

David Mamet criticizes acting teachers and acting schools. However, whether or not he likes to admit it, he endorses the Atlantic Theatre Company’s Method of teaching acting. He must realize in some way the importance of training for he contradicts himself on this subject in his book, saying that one can learn vocal, physical and text analysis through observation and later saying these things should be taught. The book students at The Atlantic Theater Company (Mamet’s theatre) use stressed the importance of technique, comparing the actor’s set of skills to that of a carpenter.

### Anne Bogart, Constantin Stanislavski and William Roudebush on Whether or Not Acting Can Be Taught

Anne Bogart creates through the Viewpoints system a structure to help actors grow. Tina Landau defines Viewpoints as “a philosophy of movement translated into a

technique for 1) training performers and 2) creating movement on stage” (20). This definition suggests that Anne Bogart believes in training performers.

Constantin Stanislavski spent the greater part of his life developing a system to help actors consistently find truth in their performances. In the Preface to Sonia Moore’s book, The Stanislavski System, John Gielgud says:

I have never really believed that acting can be taught. Yet, when I remember what a clumsy beginner I was myself and how greatly I have been influenced, all through my long stage career, by the fine directors and players with whom I have been fortunate enough to be associated, I cannot deny the advantage of teaching, provided it can be followed up by hard personal experiences. Let nobody imagine, however, that he can learn to act from reading books, however intelligent or profound they may be, about the art of acting. (7)

He later says that actors need to experiment and discover things about themselves to perfect their “technical equipment” so they can relax in their role. Gielgud says Moore’s book about Stanislavski is “full of good and useful observations on the study and practice of acting” (8-9). Gielgud writes, in the Introduction of An Actor Prepares, that a diploma cannot “seal” the acting profession. However he calls An Actor Prepares a “contribution” to theatre and students everywhere because it explains things that have always perplexed and excited actors “in a simple, practical way” (ix).

William Roudebush does not teach students how to act, but instead how to identify their blocks and suggest ways to overcome them so that they can improve and become freer. In Acting By Mistake, Roudebush says fear needs to be removed from the

acting process. He admits actors find this hard to do because they expose themselves to the public and they unknowingly “employ counterproductive behaviors” to feel safe (43). Once an actor becomes aware of his protection and rids himself of it, he can develop a new protection in its place. Roudebush says:

There are so many talented actors that are screened from their own success by these subconscious self-defense mechanisms. These are the things we do as actors that we transplant onto our characters, but they have nothing to do with character. These protections are the enemy of your own true light. This is another reason why nine out of ten actors in an audition look the same. They are all protecting themselves from making a mistake. These protective screens make us all look the same, not because we are safe, but because we’re all screened from our true image by their presence.

(44)

Roudebush believes the following protections exist: Inside Protection, Outside Protection, (which was discussed in Chapter 4,) Pacing Protection, Movement Protection and Performance Protection. He identifies most actors as inside-protected. With this protection, actors look as if they read and interpret their lines inside their head and they barely make eye contact with fellow actors. These “conscientious” actors always try to succeed in their performance and try to get it right. These actors always keep their “feelings “and “passions” internal because “they can’t take the risk to release it or even communicate it to another actor onstage” (48-49). An inside protected actor can remove his protections by forgetting about the results and not working for them (50).



The pacing-protected actor delivers his lines in a certain rhythm, releasing the character's thoughts or accessing the meaning behind the lines at a specific and consistent speed. These actors cannot speed up their speech or slow it down upon request. The pacing-protected actor as well as the inside-protected actor rarely miss a line. The pacing-protected actor only knows one way to say a line and as such Roudebush says, "each never-ending stream of words is completely disconnected from character, let alone any human connection" (60-61). An actor can break this protection by saying his lines at varying speeds, singing them to different types of songs, or saying the lines as different types of characters, like a rock station disc jockey, drill sergeant and/or an auctioneer. Actors who suffer this protection need to understand that each performance should be different because every moment is different. They shouldn't waste energy trying to recreate moments (62).

A movement-protected actor will aimlessly walk around the stage with no motivation influencing his movement. Through this protection the actor releases his "internal uneasiness." This actor might defend his movements saying, "I'm not nervous. My character is working out their dilemma. I'm pacing in thought." If an actor constantly moves, he uses the energy needed to search internally for a solution to his problem (66). The movement-protected actor understands his character but the internal conflict can't be seen because of the whirlwind of movement. To rid oneself of this protection, an actor should "find a way to transplant that restless energy inward. Move only when motivated by a direct character action such as; I must or need to face the protagonist directly, or I need a drink, or I must sit down" (67). A movement-protected actor might also have no movement at all. Constantly staring at a spot on the wall feels

safe for some actors. During a scene this actor might look above or below the eyes of his fellow actor. To fix this, an actor should pay attention to conversations in real life. Where does he look and for how long during a conversation with a friend? In auditions actors pick a spot on the wall and stay with it. He says they should find a spot but not abuse looking at it. They feel safe from distractions by staring at the spot but they shouldn't be afraid of the distractions. In fact they should embrace them (68-69).

Performance-protected actors want to show a "finished product." They do not discover during performance, only perform what they devoutly practiced. These actors go blank (forget their lines) if anything changes in performance. In fact, these actors hate change. These actors, like the inside-protected actors, need to forget about a finished product and realize their work does not end but always grows. A finished product does not exist (74).

Identifying protections and finding ways to eliminate them is pertinent to the acting process. I now know my current protections and fight hard not to fall into their traps. Unorthodox though it may be, by identifying which protections I use, I have not learned how to act, but how to free myself so that I can perform, which is just as powerful as learning to act. I believe, as do Stanislavski and Bogart, that systems exist in which actors can improve their craft. Perfection will not be possible but instruction will point the way to improvement for the actor.

## Interviews

Ellen Tobie does not believe that acting can be taught. She thinks that abilities can be honed but not taught. Tobie has never taught a beginning Acting Class. At the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she along with Seth Rozin, teach a

class called “The Actor-Director Collective.” They teach actors to work more effectively with directors and vice versa, opening up a clearer communication between them.

She says acting books serve as guides for actors but actors really need the power of observation. In terms of theatre performance, she does not believe that all actors have the possibility of reaching the zone. She believes that some actors do not work hard enough, but others, simply do not have the innate ability. She remembers being told in college that some actors have talent and use hardly any of it, while other actors have less talent but use it all. She thinks that actors need a director or coach to push them because “it is hard to push yourself.”

George DiCenzo, who teaches a Master Acting Class in both Philadelphia and New York, says the technical aspect of acting, voice and movement, can be taught.

However, the more important parts of acting cannot be taught:

Yes you can [teach acting]. I often say you can't teach acting and I do believe that. I say it because teaching of acting sometimes results in actors. Actors to me are boring. People are interesting. I would prefer to be with a master who teaches about humanity, about yes, Hamlet does this and yes, Hamlet does that but did you know that there are 8,000,000 Muslims who are dying? Do you know that the Israelis and the Palestinians will never have peace in our lifetime? Did you know that so many babies die of cancer right here in Philadelphia? And let the student be aware of those things as well as the ups and downs of just living and where we are going in this country or in this world. If an individual understands and wants to learn about those things. That's my student. I

don't care about an actor who knows how to move, that can be taught. An actor can be taught to speak louder, clearer, an actor can be taught dialects but an actor, a doctor, a lawyer, a musician, a clinician, whatever, who has soul is a winner.

Similarly, Tobie says that actors become better as they age. She says older actors "have had more life to live. They've had more scenes happen to them in real life." They have an emotional library of real moments and real reactions to draw upon.

I agree with DiCenzo in that an actor's life and his knowledge of the world have an important place in the quality of an actor. I also endorse Tobie's assessment of observation. Through his teachings Stanislavski urged his students to travel, to read, to observe people and basically to do anything that would enrich their lives. These things help actors become better. The question of whether or not acting can be taught, what John Gielgud calls "the eternal argument for and against dramatic schools," is not easy to answer (An Actor Prepares ix). I think techniques exist which give actors useful tools, as seen by the teachings of Bogart, Stanislavski, The Atlantic Theatre Company and even David Mamet. Actors need something to hold onto. In addition, they need to know what holds them back as identified by Roudebush. However, knowing all of these things may not make an actor effective. An actor must be willing to work hard in every aspect of his career, must live a full life and perform in shows to improve. Gielgud was right in his assessment that reading a book will not teach you how to act. I think experience and hard work are as important as training and innate abilities. Nevertheless actors should realize they will never be perfect and will inevitably fail on some nights and succeed on others.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Because human beings are not perfect, flow is not always possible in theatre performance. Looking at theater performance in terms of flow will increase the chances of reaching this state just as learning the Stanislavski system increases the chance of reaching creative inspiration. David Mamet, the authors of A Practical Handbook for the Actor, Constantin Stanislavski, Anne Bogart and William Roudebush believe acting requires hard work. An actor needs to continuously challenge himself in order to reach and remain in flow. An actor needs to set a clear and attainable goal. This is possible in terms of theatre performance because an actor can make it his goal to concentrate more on his partner, to find a physical action in a certain scene or to visualize a certain moment and/or a character's back story. An actor must have a clear goal so that he does not focus on the end product, a danger in flow and theatre performance. Actors can concentrate on their task at hand, whether they concentrate on their action or on their partner. One can improve concentration over time and through exercises. If an actor loses focus, he can regroup by focusing on his partner or his action. An actor can receive feedback, an important ingredient in flow. Different avenues exist for actors to receive feedback and, as long as they use one of them, they will be able to reach flow. Actors should feel optimistic knowing that steps exist to reach the state of optimal experience, or in terms of theatre performance, reaching the zone. However, even though looking at theatre performance in terms of flow can increase the chances of reaching it, one may not always reach the zone. Different nights bring new challenges and sometimes concentration, the

key ingredient in flow, may not be as strong. Actors must accept that they are not perfect.

### Imagination: The Missing Ingredient in Flow

The imagination plays a very important role in theatre performance. However a good imagination is not a requirement to reach the state of flow. Herein lies the discrepancy between the steps of flow as outlined by Csikszentmihalyi and the ingredients needed to reach the zone in theatre performance.

David Mamet says actors use their imagination “to experiment with the dramatic” (68). Not only do actors have fun imagining but also, more importantly, they need to imagine themselves in a situation because they cannot really believe that the events in the play really happen to them (68-69).

Ellen Tobie relies “heavily” on her imagination. She personally uses “creative visualization,” which she thinks all actors do instinctively. For example, if she were to play Juliet, she would fall asleep picturing Juliet, not herself as Juliet. In addition, she thinks it important for actors to watch movies with a prototype for their role and if they play in a period piece, they should go to museums and look at paintings in order to awaken their imaginations. When Tobie performed in The Philadelphia Story at the Walnut Street Theatre in 2004, she awoke her imagination by interviewing the grandson of the character she played. She walked in the house where this woman lived and saw her full-length picture.

George DiCenzo agrees the imagination is very important in theatrical performance. He says actors need their imagination to perform every night. Anne Bogart awakens the imagination through Source-Work. Tina Landau calls Source-work “a series

of activities done at the beginning of the rehearsal process to get in touch-both intellectually and emotionally, both individually and collectively-with “the source” from which you are working” (17). Landau says that Bogart believes “great” theatre “carries inside of it *a question*.” Through a production an audience “needs to” discover this question brought forth by the collaborators. However, the question must be alive for everyone in the production for the audience to comprehend it. Through Source-work this question becomes formulated and answered. Landau says, “Source-work is a way of lighting the fire for everyone to share.” Source-work invites “obsession” for the actor as he discovers the answers to the question. Landau gives an example of Source-work in rehearsal, saying that at rehearsal for Katchen von Heilbronn, Bogart asked, “What is German?” The company came to the following rehearsal with a “list” or “presentation” answering this question. The answers varied. One actor brought in a list of German things while another played “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” from the musical Cabaret (17-19). Landau says the lists, brought to rehearsals answering a specific question related to a production, awaken actors’ imaginations and create a “vocabulary for their “play-world” (19).

Bogart’s exercises of Composition also awaken the imagination. During the time in rehearsal devoted to Source-work, Bogart uses Composition to have the performers create their own work within a large group. The Compositions are assignments given to company members to create something that usually includes a specific “overall intention,” “structure” and “list of ingredients” (28). Landau defines Composition as “a method for revealing to ourselves our hidden thoughts and feelings about the material. Because we usually make Compositions in rehearsal in an unbelievably short amount of

time (anywhere from three minutes to half an hour), we have no time to think.

Composition provides a structure for working from impulses and intuition” (26-27).

Stanislavski devoted a whole chapter in An Actor Prepares to the imagination. In agreement with David Mamet’s thoughts, Stanislavski says no such thing as “actuality” exists on stage, so actors need to use their imaginations to create art. Therefore he developed the magic *if*, (for example, what if my wallet were stolen and someone stole my identity.) Stanislavski says, “The aim of the actor should be to use his technique to turn the play into a theatrical reality. In this process imagination plays by far the greatest part” (51).

In the Stanislavski System Sonia Moore says that a “rich” imagination fills in the meaning behind the lines and creates the “subtext.” The author’s lines come alive when the actor analyzes the text and brings out the author’s meaning. She continues saying the imagination must influence every movement on stage. Actors must have a “definite picture of an imaginary life.” The imagination helps actors execute actions “naturally” and “spontaneously” (48-49).

When an actor uses imagination to visualize his character’s life, he must visualize himself at the “center of the household” and must be an active participant in the fantasy. In Creating A Role, Stanislavski illustrates an active imagination by imagining the world in Woe from Wit in minute detail. He walks through the house, shifting his attention to what surrounds him. He had one moment where he believed he walked in the house. This moment occurred when he opened the door to the “antechamber” and pushed the armchair aside. Then his energy dissipated as he walked among “undefined objects.” He then encountered a live person and wondered if he waited for Liza would his sense of “I



am” become stronger. Next he questioned his “own life experience to feel what the life of all the other inmates of the Famusov household is like, and to establish one’s own relationship to them.” Finally, he realized that some visits only hold his attention momentarily because he needs a reason for his visit to these characters (28-33).

If an actor lacks imagination, “he must develop it,” Stanislavski tells his students in An Actor Prepares so that he doesn’t become a director’s plaything or a puppet. Even though the imagination does not belong in the flow equation, perhaps the imagination can be put in the equation. Just as concentration can improve through hard work, so too can the imagination. So in terms of flow, improving the imagination can be a simple goal of the actor. The actor can work to stimulate his imagination just as he could to improve concentration. Stanislavski says of the imagination:

The kind that has initiative of its own can be developed without special effort, and will work steadily and-untiringly, whether you are awake or asleep. Then there is the kind that lacks initiative, but is easily aroused and continues to work as soon as anything is suggested to it. The kind that does not respond to suggestions presents a more difficult problem. Here the actor takes in suggestions in a merely external, formal way. With such an equipment, development is fraught with difficulty, and there is very little hope of success unless the actor makes a great effort. (54)

### Need for Further Study

As stated in the Introduction, I did not look at the harmful effects of flow in theatre performance. In Flow, Csikszentmihalyi says, “A self that is only differentiated-not integrated-may attain great individual accomplishments, but risks being mired in self-

centered egotism. By the same token, a person whose self is based exclusively on integration will be connected and secure, but lack autonomous individuality.” He continues saying that one needs to have an equal balance of psychic energy in both processes to avoid “selfishness” or “conformity” (42). To investigate the potential harmful effects of flow in terms of theater performance one can look into the teachings of Lee Strasberg since one argument against his method is that actors become too insular or selfish, not giving psychic energy to their partner and, in some cases, not giving it to the audience either. Stanislavski knew of the potential dangers actors faced when addicted to the euphoria acting can produce. In the Foreword of Sonia Moore’s The Stanislavski System Joshua Logan wrote, “But to enjoy one’s creativity to excess, to fall in love with one’s inspiration, was furthest from Stanislavski’s belief. When I left him that summer he wrote on the photograph he gave me, ‘Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art’”(16).

In this thesis I looked at flow in terms of theatre performance and rehearsal. I did not look at it in terms of auditioning and the possibility of a long, career made of peaks and valleys. How do actors cope with rejection and keep a healthy, happy and positive attitude as they struggle to move forward in a career marked with more failures than successes? This could be explored in terms of the steps needed to reach optimal experience and would prove beneficial to struggling artists.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions:

- The way to optimal experience begins with setting a clear and attainable goal.  
Can you translate that to acting? What could be a clear and attainable goal?
- The second step is that the person has to concentrate attention fully on their task at hand; talk about the role of concentration as it pertains to acting.
- How can an actor get to the zone night after night?
- What role (if any) does the audience play in giving feedback to the actor?
- What role (if any) does the director play in giving feedback to the actor?
- Can an actor gauge his own performance and give himself feedback? Do you do that?
- Have you ever been to the zone? If so, tell me about that.
- Can you teach someone the steps to acting? Are there steps?
- Can acting be taught?
- What role does imagination play in acting? What does it mean to you as a performer?
- Is looking at acting in terms of flow promising?
- Does everyone have the potential to reach flow (or the zone) in terms of acting?
- Are we cheating ourselves if we think there is a formula to getting to the zone?