MUSIC AND LYRICS: HARMONIZING TWO FUNDAMENTAL PARADIGMS OF ACTION IN THE THEATRE

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Music and Action

Theatre and music share a common bond – drama. Both move the audience through an array of emotional experiences that have a fascinating way of reaching the human psyche that is, as the saying goes, “greater than the sum of its parts.” The expressions created through manipulations of mere sound waves or simple human movement penetrate deep into the listener’s inner being more than mere words alone ever could hope to achieve. Acclaimed film director Frank Capra spoke about this effect on the audience, “I made mistakes in drama. I thought drama was when actors cried. But drama is when the audience cries.” This certainly applies to music as well.

In popular culture, music has become more and more ubiquitous. Indeed, it would be quite difficult for the average person to avoid hearing some form of music throughout the day. It is accessible through radio, television, the internet, cell phones, shopping malls, doctor’s offices and the list goes on and on. With all this sonic bombardment, recording artists are finding it more and more difficult for their voices to be heard above the rest. There are “formulas” for a hit song, but one element that is usually left off the list is instrumental music. It is heard everywhere, but most perceive it as merely background noise or “elevator music.” In fact, Billboard Music Chart has not recorded a number one instrumental song since Miami Vice Theme in 1985 and nothing in that genre
has reached the top twenty since 1999. It is clear that songwriters today need both music and lyrics in order to be heard.

Could one say that the same is true in the theatre? A theatre artist must be able to incorporate the “music” of physical action and the “lyrics” of language in order to reach an audience. However, upon viewing the current cultural landscape, this synthesis of action and language proves to be quite challenging.

Contemporary society has been enormously influenced by the rise of television, the internet and modern technology such as cell phones and other wirelessly connected devices. This technological revolution has led to a less sophisticated society that has difficulty understanding performance art. Marva Dawn, in her book *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, shares research from Jane Healy’s *Endangered Minds*.

…Healy wondered why teachers kept asking if they were less capable or if kids were actually dumber than they had been in the past. Their question led to her massive research, which uncovered several shocking facts... Considering multiple factors in home and society, she cites overwhelming evidence to convince us that, indeed, many children in contemporary society actually are less intelligent and less capable of learning than their forebears. (Dawn 5-6)

Healy’s research included an examination of a standard reading test for fourth grade students in 1964 compared to one in 1982. It also includes a ninth grade “advanced” reading test from 1988. The reader is shocked to discover that the “advanced” ninth grade reading exam is far easier to complete than the fourth grade reading exam from 1964. This led Dawn to conclude that “We don’t notice that…they [children] are less able to think and cannot verbalize as well as their predecessors, because the educational system has simply ‘dumbed down’ the tests.” (Dawn 7)
Neil Postman’s research in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* echoes Healy’s findings on the disintegration of comprehension due to modern conveniences. In it, he shares Aldous Huxley’s vision in *Brave New World* and how it is currently being fulfilled. “…no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.” (Postman vii)

This discussion is certainly prescient. People the world over are glued to their phones at all hours of the day. The rise of social media has given everyone ample opportunity to respond with an opinion, but facts and disciplined research are seen as boring or elitist. The user is encouraged to emote, not think. Postman goes on to describe the:

…the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendency of the Age of Television. This change-over has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse, since two media so vastly different cannot accommodate the same ideas. As the influences of print wanes, the content of politics, religion, education, and anything else that comprises public business must change and be recast in terms that are most suitable to television. (Postman 8)

The “dumbing down” of today’s tech savvy society has made it more difficult for theatre artists to make a genuine impact. Indeed, the goal of many artists is to enlighten and in some cases, inspire the audience to make a change. However, getting a message across is becoming problematic – it “goes in one ear and out the other.” Dawn goes on to say, “television has habituated its watchers…to ‘learning’ good ideas…and then doing nothing about them.” (Dawn 21) Postman continues this thought: “most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action.” (Postman 68)
In many cases, it may simply be “information overload” that prevents audience members from fully grasping what they see on stage. It is challenging to form cohesive thoughts in all the clutter. Marva Dawn’s research extends to how television and technology have decreased our learning abilities.

We were left with a world loaded with “information” that is meaningless because it has no context, can lead to no response, and has no connection to everything else in our arsenal of “facts.” A turn toward becoming a people consumed by entertainment was almost inevitable…what do you do with all of that information? (Dawn 22)

It has even come to the point that many who attend theatre view each performance through the lens of a camera instead of the naked eye. They are simply used to experiencing drama produced on the screen and have very little, if any, experience with live theatre. Perhaps the lack of close ups and camera angles in contrast to the wide panorama of the stage leads to confusion for the audience – no one is telling them where to look. This forces a modern theatre artist to consider multiple techniques and methodologies in order to maintain an audience’s attention.

Given all of these obstacles, what methods are available for a theatre artist to employ to make an impact on today’s audience? There are many to consider, but, in my opinion, the single most important one to study is action.

**Theories of Action**

What is action as it relates to the theatre? At first, this riddle seems easy to solve. After all, action has been a part of theatre’s lexicon since the days of Aristotle. Upon further reflection and research, however, the mystery that is action becomes more and more convoluted. As my study of action progressed, I found the importance of music and
lyrics and their relation to action taking on more importance. Action is a multifaceted concept that requires both the “music” of physical action and the “lyrics” of verbal action in order to harness its true power. To better understand this analogy, one must study the work of two theatre pioneers whose work, on the surface, seems at odds with each other – Constantin Stanislavski (the “music” of action) and David Mamet (the “lyrics” of action).

**Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938)**

Constantin Sergeyevich Alexeyev (1863-1938), who took the surname Stanislavski, was born in Russia and achieved a lasting reputation as one of the premier innovators of modern theatre. With Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943), he founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1897. This theatre became one of the most influential theatres in all of Europe. Today he is recognized as the originator of a method of acting that many theatre artists refer to as “the system.”

Since inventing “the system,” Stanislavski has become a worldwide phenomenon with countless books and acting approaches centering on his work. Due in part to the timing of the release of his books and the varied interpretations of his students, “the system” has taken many forms over the years. The majority of methods derived from Stanislavski’s work focus on his internal based methods such as Emotion Memory, Inner Monologue, and The Magic If, but many fail to acknowledge his work during the final years of his life. It is during this time that Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action was born.
As his life was drawing to a close, Stanislavski began to see the flaws in his early work – particularly in Emotion Memory. Jean Benedetti writes in *Stanislavski, an Introduction*:

In reading a play an actor is called on to fill it out with his own memories and experiences, to give it human depth by his own personal involvement, through Emotion Memory. All too often, however, the evocation of past experiences produced negative results – tension, exhaustion, sometimes hysteria. At other times the mind seized up, refusing to yield up its secrets. (Benedetti 90)

These complications led Stanislavski to the creation of The Method of Physical Action. In this innovation to his system, Stanislavski calls for the actor to begin work on a play by digging into the external aspects of his role, rather than the internal. The text is held back for a time while the actor explores the “physical score” of the piece. The internal work was not abandoned, but Stanislavski theorized that it is through physical action that the actor can find the truth in the moment. As noted above, it can be very difficult for one to have any degree of regular control over emotional response. However, the actor does possess a degree of control of the physical and when learning to harness it correctly, physical action can allow the actor to construct a more intense and engaging performance. The actor may not be able to conjure up an emotion such as sadness on command, but by committing to sincere physical action related to sadness, the audience believes the character to be sad. This can also result in genuine emotional responses from the actor as the body reacts to physical stimuli, though “the feeling” of emotion by the actor is not necessary for the performance to be effective.

Unfortunately, Stanislavski did not finish his work on physical action before passing away in 1938, but his legacy lives on through the work of those that followed his
teachings. Some of these students focused on his earlier work and helped shape American acting for decades, such as Richard Boleslavsky (1889-1937). Others, like Vasili Toporkov (1889-1970), expanded the study of his later work with the Method of Physical Action. Stanislavski’s labors have withstood the test of time and continue to make an impact on countless audience members and theatre artists to this day. It is his work with physical action that allows the actor to discover the “music” of action.

David Mamet (1947-Present)

The other important figure in the study of action in the theatre is David Mamet (1947-Present). Born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, he is a prolific playwright, author and director who has made a profound mark on the theatre community through his writing, directing and actor training. Plays such as Glengarry Glen Ross and American Buffalo were widely praised for their intricate use of language, often referred to as “Mametspeak.” Mamet’s writing style highlights the up-tempo staccato rhythms of the dialogue. As the fragmented banter progresses throughout the performance, the audience begins to fill in the gaps with subtext almost unconsciously, producing a powerful emotional response.

For example, Oleanna, Mamet’s highly controversial play about sexual harassment features only two actors, a female college student and her professor. The play tracks a series of meetings in the professor’s office. The professor is accused by the student of sexual harassment, threatening his career. The student, a master of manipulation, takes circumstances out of context in order to make them appear as something else. The professor loses everything, including his family and career. He is so
humiliated and infuriated that a physical confrontation ensues during the final pages of the script and the professor actually becomes the perpetrator the student has fabricated.

Mamet uses his aggressively sharp dialogue between the two characters to build extreme tension in the audience. Many spectators side with the professor in the end and may even feel his physical abuse of the student is justified because of the way the student’s behavior exasperates the audience. Other spectators side with the student and recognize the fact that though she has damaged the professor’s reputation with her claims, she never physically harms him and, therefore, does not deserve the abuse. In either case, audience members are left with passionate views about the outcome – some have even resorted to physical confrontation. In his book, How Good is David Mamet Anyway?, John Heilpern speaks of “occasional hand-to-hand combat that broke out among warring factions in the audience….” (Heilpern 220) The consequences of this production did not come about by accident. Heilpern further recounts his experience with the play.

Perhaps, as I did, some of you found yourselves wishing to kill the sexually harassed victim in Oleanna. “There you are!” Mr. Mamet’s admirers said at the time. “You’re no better than the average male chauvinist pig.” The playwright had therefore made his subversive dramatic point: if you sided with the male hero – the professor who happened to be innocent – you were no better than an abuser (or were smugly indifferent about important issues). But Mr. Mamet had so loaded the dice against the vicious – and deranged – victim of Oleanna that nausea was the only response to her…. (Heilpern 220-221)

The effect on the audience, though controversial, was to create a physical and emotional response in the audience much more complex than that of a passive observer. In this modern age with all of its distractions and dwindling theatre attendance, David
Mamet is able to get the audience talking about current issues. This is no small feat and theatre artists the world over have taken notice.

Above all, it is Mamet’s desire for truthfulness to reign in the actor’s world of make believe that sets him above the rest. In his introduction to *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* he says:

> Most acting teachers, unfortunately, are frauds, and they rely on your complicity to survive. This not only deprives you of positive training but stifles your greatest gift as an artist: your sense of truth. It is this sense of truth, a simplicity, and feelings of wonder and reverence – all of which you possess – that will revitalize the Theatre…Stanislavsky [*sic*] once wrote that you should “play well or badly, but play truly.” (Bruder 2-3)

Benedetti quotes Stanislavski’s acknowledgment of the importance of truth in acting: “Of course, the truest path is the one that leads nearest to truth and life. To find that path you have to know what truth and life are. This is my one task: to know both all over again.” (Benedetti 33)

The way that Mamet demonstrates truth through dialogue is distinctive. As the originator of “Mametspeak,” he is a pioneer of what author Anne Dean calls “language as dramatic action.” Her book entitled *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action*, analyzes several of his plays to demonstrate his masterful use of language as it applies to action. The individual rhythms of each character harmonize into a symphony emanating from the stage, creating an elevated orchestra pit with the actors functioning as musicians of dialogue. Like a musical or film score, each character’s interchange functions as their own individual theme or “leitmotif” and, as Anne Dean suggests, contains the very substance of action itself.

Perhaps more than those of any other American playwright, David Mamet’s works constitute a theatre of language: the lines spoken by his characters
do not merely contain words that express a particular idea or emotion; they are the idea or emotion itself. (Dean 15)

Mamet, then, brings the reader to the final piece of the song of action – the lyrics. The conductor of the song of action stands ready at the podium. However, though the legacies of these two men work in agreement, it is possible to view them in light of their apparent differences instead of similarities.

**Dissonance**

Many contemporary theatre artists may be tempted to believe that Mamet’s style is more modern and relevant in today’s world than Stanislavski’s. Others may believe that Stanislavski’s work is so foundational in today’s theatre that Mamet has strayed too far from the source. The work of Stanislavski and Mamet may appear to be completely separate, but further study shows that neither man relied on one theory alone in his endeavors. Benedetti speaks of the importance of both physical and verbal action to Stanislavski:

> By holding back the text until a later stage of rehearsals Stanislavski was by no means devaluing it, or suggesting it was of secondary importance to physical, or non-verbal expression. On the contrary he regarded verbal action as the most artistically satisfying and expressive of all. He was greatly concerned to keep the text fresh. Words mechanically repeated during rehearsals without meaning or justification became merely lodged in the muscles of the tongue and no more. (Benedetti 93)

Anne Dean recognizes the influence of Stanislavski in forming Mamet’s verbal action technique in her text:

Mamet believes that the teachings of Stanislavski helped him to understand certain crucial aspects of language and that his exposure to them deeply influenced his writing style. Acknowledging his debt to Stanislavski, Mamet states:
My main emphasis…is on the rhythm of language – the way action and rhythm are identical. Our rhythms describe our actions – no, our rhythms *prescribe* our actions. I am fascinated by the way, the way the language we use, its rhythms, actually determines the way we behave, rather than the other way around. (Dean 16)

One may conclude that though Stanislavski and Mamet use different approaches, their work is more effective when applied by actors *together* in live performance rather than separately.

**Harmony**

It is in live performance that the work of Mamet and Stanislavski is truly complete – not merely trapped in the inner workings of their great minds or held in the confines of the printed page. Live performance allows the viewer to experience action in its truest form – as both music and lyrics. In this internet age when people are less and less theatre literate, Mamet’s audiences generally leave with very strong emotional responses stimulated by the pacing and fragmentation of the dialogue. Audiences experiencing Stanislavski’s work on physical action are left mesmerized at the clarity of movement and the way the story speaks to them even without words. Combining these two techniques creates an experience unlike any other in the theatre.

The next chapters will examine Stanislavski’s call for physical action and David Mamet’s practice of verbal action. Neither theory in and of itself is considered complete by its creator and therefore depends on the other to become more fully formed. Benedetti quotes Stanislavski in *Stanislavski and the Actor: The Method of Physical Action* as saying, “What does it signify, to write down what is past and done. The system lives in
me but it has no shape or form. The system is created in the very act of writing it down. That is why I have to keep changing what I have already written.” (Benedetti xxi)

Once these two paradigms, Stanislavski’s System and Mamet’s language, are analyzed and examined side-by-side, one will discover the ways they work together to achieve the same goal – the song of action.
CHAPTER II
STANISLAVSKI’S MUSIC

Inspiration

Stanislavski developed the melody of action through a long career devoted to his craft and an unquenchable desire for truth in the actor’s technique. His life was filled with challenges that led him to become one of the most influential figures in the history of theatre.

Stanislavski was born into the dawn of a new age in Russia. His birth year of 1863 was only two years following the abolishment of serfdom in the motherland. In addition, he had the good fortune to be born into a family of wealth and influence in the community – granting him license to explore his passions with limitless curiosity.

Initially, his family was not known to be artistic except for a grandmother who was an actress from France. However, being the cultured family that they were, Stanislavski’s family began to produce small theatrical events in their home when the children were young. His mother encouraged them to obtain a diverse understanding of performance of all kinds, including opera and even the circus. It was the circus that appealed to Stanislavski initially – he would mount circus shows in his home with his siblings.
As Stanislavski’s interest in circus waned, his passion turned to puppetry. This meticulous performance art allowed Stanislavski’s affection for minute details to blossom. He would host small productions in his home that attracted several paying audience members. His desire for realism reached the point of using actual flames when called for in the script. The performances were so popular that he moved them to a larger space on his father’s property. However, this proved to be problematic as audience members had difficulty seeing the puppets clearly due to greater distance from the action. Stanislavski learned at a young age that, as Mel Gordon aptly points out in *The Stanislavsky [sic] Technique: Russia*, “greed can sometimes ruin art.” (Gordon 5)

Once puppetry lost its luster, Stanislavski’s interests shifted to the stage. His father transformed a small building on their land into a theatre and Stanislavski made his acting debut in a series of one act plays. He helped form a group called the Alexeyev Circle with family and friends. In 1877, as his acting career blossomed, he began writing journals of his experiences and observations. This practice continued throughout his life and would prove invaluable not only to him, but for generations of theatre artists that followed. He also frequented local theatres and observed a variety of actors and acting techniques. After watching a performance, Stanislavski imitated the acting styles when he returned home. However, his acting did not achieve the results he desired – his presentations were stale and lifeless. He began to analyze this discrepancy in his journals and test out his conclusions in real life situations.

Stanislavski’s curiosity about acting led him to join a school of drama in 1885, but he quickly dropped out in disgust. The teachers were not interested in technique, only in results. No one seemed to have an answer as to why the great actors he admired were
so successful. Most teachers and actors of the time believed it was through sheer talent alone that great acting could be achieved – Stanislavski sought to prove them wrong. He suggested that the natural qualities talented actors possessed could be taught through a clearly outlined system – allowing less talented actors to be just as effective as their brilliant colleagues.

Stanislavski’s ideas were sound, but the road ahead was difficult as he began to develop the system. The state of the theatre in Russia was poor – quality was sacrificed upon the altar of commerce. In addition, the acting style did not lend itself to intimate experiences for the audience. Directors were essentially “traffic cops” and performers virtually did as they pleased to woo the audience – always fighting for center stage. Stereotypes were rampant on stage and little of real life was represented. Stanislavski turned to the Maly Theatre for guidance – particularly to the work of an acting virtuoso from a previous generation – Mikhail Shchepkin (1788-1863).

Shchepkin quickly became one of Stanislavski’s idols due to his groundbreaking work in Realism at the Maly. Stanislavski was schooled in Shchepkin’s methods by Alexander Fedotov (1841-1895), an accomplished director, and his wife Glikeria Fedotova (1846-1925). Shchepkin discovered that the histrionics of the day were a breeding ground for dishonest acting that did not connect with the audience beyond the surface level. When he began to speak in a more natural tone with less elaboration of movement, audiences felt they were peering into the inner life of his characters. His reputation spread throughout Europe and his new style of acting began to challenge conceptions held for generations. He felt it was important to be the character through and through – not merely represent the character outwardly. As a result of Shchepkin’s
influence, Stanislavski discovered that it was vital to expound upon the idea of Realism in order for theatre to reach audiences on a human level.

Proponents of Realism utilized the most dramatically significant aspects of life on stage to give the allusion of reality while retaining the essential elements of story. It is important to note that to perform in a realistic style did not imply that every detail from daily life was to be copied and placed upon the stage. The unedited recreation of life on stage was referred to as Naturalism. Benedetti briefly distinguishes the difference between the two in Stanislavski: An Introduction:

Naturalism, for him [Stanislavski], implied the indiscriminate reproduction of the surface of life. Realism, on the other hand, while taking its material from the real world and from direct observation, selected only those elements which revealed the relationships and tendencies lying under the surface. The rest was discarded. (Benedetti 17)

Though Stanislavski was a stickler for minutiae, he felt that superfluous details needed to be stripped away to reveal the rich layers of emotional complexity underneath.

Another of Stanislavski’s influences during his formative years was the Saxe-Meiningen Troupe, a German touring company known for their elaborate sets, props and costumes. Their devotion to discipline, attention to detail and use of spectacle resonated with him at his core. He was reminded of his early experimentations with circus and puppetry as a boy. He studied the Saxe-Meiningen Troupe’s methods intently and continued to be influenced by them throughout the remainder of his life.

In 1888, Stanislavski’s father helped him launch the Society for Art and Literature, a semi-professional theatre company. The society lasted for ten years and gave Stanislavski a forum to test the techniques he was developing. As his reputation spread, he gained the admiration of many, including playwright Vladimir Nemirovich-
Danchenko, who requested a meeting with him in 1897. Their eighteen hour summit resulted in the development of the fundamental doctrines of what came to be known as the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), a company that shaped the landscape of theatrical performance around the world for years to come.

The MAT is one of Stanislavski’s most enduring legacies. The theatre was founded on discipline and education. Everyone in the troupe was given the opportunity to perform every type of role. The motto was, “Today Hamlet, tomorrow an extra.” Each member was treated like an artist, not a cog in a machine. Productions were known for their artistic integrity and many were recognized as a catalyst for change in society. Old clichés of acting were abolished and replaced with new disciplined methods, eventually pioneered by Stanislavski himself. He led the performance aspect of productions and Nemirovich-Danchenko handled the written works. The theatre eventually proved so popular that local residents would camp out all night just to get their hands on tickets. Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), the famous Russian writer, became one of the premier playwrights of the company. In fact, the troupe came to be known as “The House of Chekhov.” The MAT’s productions of *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya* (directed by and featuring Stanislavski) were famous throughout Europe and eventually propelled the company to worldwide acclaim.

What followed the launch of the new theatre was a whirlwind of activity – eight years of virtually nonstop productions directed by Stanislavski. The company was very successful and far reaching, but he was at a point of crisis. After all his accomplishments, he felt there was no longer any life in his acting and he could not maintain a grasp of the creative state that gave him an edge over his fellow players. His performances became
erratic and he was confused about the future direction of the MAT. His relationship with Nemirovich-Danchenko was strained and when Chekhov died in 1904 – Stanislavski’s world seemed to be falling apart.

Stanislavski turned his malaise into action. After an extended vacation to rest and regroup, he formed a Studio within the MAT exclusively for acting experimentation. His chief aim in developing the system was to find a way for actors to maintain a sense of inspiration in their work. Time and time again Stanislavski found that even he returned to stereotypes and mechanical gesturing when he was feeling uninspired. He was particularly troubled by the inconsistency of his performances. Some nights he would feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment – others would find him utterly depressed over a jumbled presentation. He needed to bridge the gap between the creative state and the role with a methodology that could prevent all of the ups and downs. He eventually discovered that the bridge he sought was built on truth. Benedetti quotes Stanislavski as saying:

Genius is inspired by truth, by beauty, while ungifted people need a screen to hide the poverty of their talent and imagination, and so they invent tradition. They have now invented so many traditions, so many different rules, that the ordinary public can no longer understand Shakespeare and Molière has ceased to be funny....

…it is the task of our generation to banish from art outmoded tradition and routine and to give more scope to fantasy and creation. That is the only way to save art. (Benedetti 30-31)

In his desire to encourage imagination inspired by truth, Stanislavski strove to eliminate cliché from his new system. He believed this flaw in his acting stemmed from a lack of training and an emphasis on imitation. Benedetti goes on to quote him saying:

The actor who is not capable of the creative in art naturally is anxious to establish, once for all, the manners of theatrical interpretation – clichés. An actor played a
certain role excellently; a second actor saw the performance and did not understand the genuine process of its creation but remembered the form of it. A third takes the form as an example. A fourth takes the form to be a theatrical tradition and copies it as law. With these cliché-chains one cannot reach the depth of the human soul. These chains prevent us from being guided by the most important director of the theatre – life. (Benedetti 31)

To infuse life into performance, Stanislavski began to combat the “cliché-chains” through intense research on human behavior. This effort proved challenging as there was little written on the subject at the time. Most of his study relied upon direct observation and intuitive thinking. However, there was one author whose psychological research was very influential – Théodule-Armand Ribot (1839-1916). Ribot’s groundbreaking work was of great importance in the development of Stanislavski’s system – specifically for what came to be called Emotion Memory.

Emotion Memory was a technique Stanislavski developed that called for the actor to use past experiences to help form the basis of the emotions required for the scene. These past experiences could be triggered by an external stimulus – smell, taste, touch – or by an emotional memory such as the death of a loved one or the birth of a child. Stanislavski’s early attempts to mimic the great performances of the fine actors of his day proved fruitless and frustrating. He felt that if an actor could achieve the mental attitude required of the moment, he could link the actor’s and the character’s feelings together. This technique came to be the cornerstone of his work for several years. Many of Stanislavski’s students dedicated themselves to this practice of Emotion Memory and formed studios all over Europe and even in the United States.

Along with Emotion Memory, came the idea of The Magic If. Stanislavski instructed actors to use “if” statements to arrive at the appropriate frame of mind for their
character while utilizing imagination. The actor would say to himself, “What would I do if...”, and then insert the conditions of the production. Benedetti calls it an “alternate reality, which is the world of the play.” (Benedetti 50)

To tie all of the internal elements together, Stanislavski taught his actors to understand the structure of the play. They began by discovering the overall theme called the “Supertask.” Once it was revealed, each scene was broken down into “Bits,” or small units of action. From there, the actor discovered larger units of action called “Tasks.” These led to an overall series of actions called the “Throughaction,” which ultimately illuminated the “Supertask.” This work was the glue that bound all of the emotional elements they discovered through Emotion Memory and The Magic If into a unified whole – allowing the characters to be three-dimensional and action oriented. Once all of this work was established, Stanislavski began to supplement these inner methods with outer physical skills including Hatha Yoga and others to encourage body control.

Stanislavski’s official work on his new system began with an experimental production of *A Month in the Country* by Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883). The exercises he developed during this time were designed to direct the students into a creative state that allowed them to act on natural impulses in a scene – thereby adding a sense of truth to the action. Several MAT players joined the cast to sharpen their acting skills and help “the master” test out his ideas. The rehearsal period was grueling. Some participants crumbled under the pressure and dropped out of the program, but the majority endured and provided Stanislavski the canvas on which to paint his masterpiece. There were many setbacks as he worked out the “kinks” in his system, but his resolve remained firm. Unfortunately, his enthusiasm was not shared by everyone. His business partner
Nemirovich-Danchenko, for instance, was concerned that Stanislavski might be losing his mind. However, after much trial and error, positive results began to emerge and some critics, including Nemirovich-Danchenko, were beginning to see the usefulness of the system.

Though he was breaking new ground, it took many years for Stanislavski’s system to gain attention outside of the MAT. He kept it a secret among the players – banning anyone from speaking publically about it. However, small amounts of his method began to leak out. Various techniques were taken out of context and as a result, there were many varying interpretations of his work all over Europe and even the United States. Stanislavski was greatly disturbed by these discrepancies and realized it was time to set the record straight so that his followers would not venture too far from his original intentions. He began by writing an autobiography, My Life in Art, and went on to compose several texts on the system which in their first English translation were called An Actor Prepares, Building a Character and Creating a Role. These books helped countless actors hone their craft, but sadly, Stanislavski left some of his written works incomplete at his passing. The result was that his publishers, working without specific instructions from the author, arbitrarily combined some of the texts together and released them out of order. In addition, there were several inconsistencies in language translation across cultures. To help combat this, Benedetti released new English translations of Stanislavski’s texts in 2008 and 2009 called An Actor’s Work: A Student’s Diary and An Actor’s Work on a Role. Though these new editions attempt to bring greater clarity to Stanislavski’s work, some of the terminology and phrasing is different than the original translations. As a result, discrepancies between his original vision and the way his
techniques are interpreted and applied to current theatre training continue to the present day.

As his work reached the general public, Stanislavski began to take his theories outside the MAT. In 1918, he was invited to the Bolshoi Theatre to speak to opera singers. These performers were known to focus exclusively on their singing with little emphasis on characterization. Gordon recounts a story of Stanislavski’s work with one of those performers and the system’s effect upon his acting.

When one baritone began to sing Valentine’s aria from Faust, Stanislavsky [sic] interrupted him, declaring that the piece was unintelligible. The student balked. Was his diction poor? Stanislavsky [sic] told him no. In fact, it was quite good. The problem was in the meaning of the aria. “To whom are you singing?” Stanislavsky [sic] asked. The baffled student replied, to him, his teacher, the great Stanislavsky [sic]. The “Professor” reminded the student that he was singing to God; in the aria, Valentine is praying to God. The student was asked if he had ever prayed as a child. If so, to forget all about the class, his fellow singers, and kneel and pray. Remembering the times of his childhood when he bowed before an icon, the baritone turned his back and kneeled. Beginning the song again, his rendition of Valentine’s aria grew out of a deep emotional contact. To Stanislavsky [sic] and his class, the booming operatic tones gave musical sound of a man appealing for divine inspiration. Stanislavsky [sic] proved that, like the actor, the opera singer, too, can make a deeper and more profound connection with his audience by delving beneath the stylistic, presentational conventions of that genre. (Gordon 50)

As word of his system spread, Stanislavski continued to refine his theories. One of the actors in his company, Vasili Toporkov (1889-1970), wrote a seminal text on Stanislavski’s working methods called Stanislavski in Rehearsal. In it, he reveals the constant evolution of Stanislavski’s technique. These changes were due to the importance he placed upon the system and its benefit to actors everywhere. Benedetti declares in the introduction of Toporkov’s account: “He [Stanislavski] believed the ‘system’ was the best way to achieve performances that were both aesthetic and relevant. His
determination to develop, apply and teach the ‘system’ increasingly, therefore, took on a moral and ethical character.” (Toporkov viii) Stanislavski’s work was becoming ever more significant to the theatre community as companies began to implement his technique. The master took this responsibility seriously.

The system was taking shape, but was not without its problems. Stanislavski discovered that Emotion Memory, though effective, was not a “one way ticket” to the creative state. In fact, he found that one emotional memory was only effective about six times before it began to outlive its usefulness. He attempted to solve the problem, but it was always just out of reach. In addition, ailing health and a hostile political climate in revolutionist Russia were factors that put him under constant pressure. As he struggled to find the solution, he stumbled upon a key observation – the physical was being neglected in favor of the psychological.

Stanislavski discovered the discrepancy between the physical and psychological through his love of music. He developed a technique called “tempo-rhythm.” Tempo-rhythm is a practice that defines the relationship between internal and external responses to the given circumstances within a play and the speed and intensity at which they are performed. Benedetti explains:

> Within the action of the play events, emotions have a particular pulse and pattern to them. Tempo, as in music, denotes the speed of an action or a feeling – fast, slow, medium. Rhythm, internally, indicates the intensity with which an emotion is experienced: externally it indicates the pattern of gestures, moves and actions which express the emotion. (Benedetti 68)

Once Stanislavski discovered the connection between tempo-rhythm and action, he began to work out a series of physical exercises to help actors sharpen their skills, much like a musician’s warmup scales. The link he discovered between the system and
music continued to influence his work throughout his life – leading him to develop the Method of Physical Action. Benedetti quotes Stanislavski praising the connection between music and action:

Stage action, like speech, must be musical. Movement must follow a continuous line, like a note from a stringed instrument, or, when necessary, stop short like the staccato of a coloratura soprano… Movements have their legato, staccato, andante, allegro, piano and forte and so on. The tempo and the rhythm of the action must correspond to the music. (Benedetti 68)

The Melody

The musical influence in Stanislavski’s work invigorated his fervor for physical action as never before. He theorized that if the actor were to compose a series of movements based on the given circumstances of the play, he could obtain more control over the outcome than by searching inward from the start. This concept became the trigger for the creative state in the actor.

As his work with physical action began to trickle into the main stream, many believed that Stanislavski was abandoning his earlier study of the internal. This turned out to be a false assumption based upon incomplete facts. The Method of Physical Action was the culmination of everything he had achieved up to that point. Toporkov declares of Stanislavski’s earlier work: “He never overlooked the elements of physical behaviour [sic] in creating a character.” He goes on to describe how Stanislavski always clarified the importance of “control, clarity and polish even in the most insignificant physical action.” Once Stanislavski reached the sunset of his career, he merely shifted his emphasis to the importance of physical action in creating a role. However, Toporkov explains it would “be mistaken to see physical action as no more than expressive
movement representing action.” He asserts that it is “genuine, properly goal directed, justified action, which, at the moment it is being performed, becomes psychophysical.”

(Toporkov 110)

This “psychophysical” action was a coordination of both the inner psychology Stanislavski championed in the early days and the outer interpretation stimulated by those impulses. Benedetti explains:

In the method of Physical Action, or, more accurately, the Method of Analysis through Physical Action, the actor starts by creating, in his own person, very often in precise detail, a logical sequence of actions, based on the question, ‘What would I do ‘if’...', the ‘if’ being his intentions within the given circumstances of the play. At this stage he is using his own words, not the author’s. The actor’s total being is therefore engaged from the start. The circumstances and the actions they prompt become, in the process of exploration, a personal reality. (Benedetti 90)

The “personal reality” that Benedetti cited was more than physical activity. The physical was an important aspect of action, but Stanislavski felt it must be accompanied with intention. This simple assertion effectively combined his many years of work on the system into a more holistic approach to the actor’s craft. He was no longer a slave of his emotions; he could now obtain a well-formed character through his own resolve, not by conjuring up unpredictable feelings. Benedetti continues:

How, Stanislavski asks, can you act ‘love’? Certainly not by attempting to evoke the feeling direct. The solution is to imagine a series of happenings, or moments, which add up to the emotion. The emotion becomes a story in which each moment is represented by a single action. In other words, true to earlier discoveries, emotion becomes a process and not a question of imitation. If the sequence of actions is sufficiently well worked out the actor can take off, like an aeroplane [sic]. (Benedetti 92)

By exploiting the power of the will, the actor could map out his movements in such a way as to convey the underlying feelings of the character – bringing truth to the
moment. Toporkov further validates the importance of the will in forming a cohesive understanding of physical action by quoting the master:

> When an actor is afraid to demonstrate his will, when he has no desire to create, he starts talking. He is like a horse, pawing the ground because it hasn’t the strength the move the cart. If you want to act boldly, it’s no good pawing the ground, you have to create an overwhelming desire for action. I really want to do something, so I do it boldly. Action comes from the will, from intuition, reasoning comes from the brain, the head. My system only exists to open up an actor’s natural power to create. It exists for moments when nothing seems to work. (Toporkov 109)

Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action became his swan song. Toporkov recounts this during an experimental production of *Tartuffe*:

> We know that throughout his career Stanislavski investigated different key points in his system – rhythm, ideas, tasks, etc. By now his system was entirely based on physical action and he tried to eliminate anything that prevented actors from understanding that clearly. (Toporkov 108)

After many years of study and observation, Stanislavski understood intuitively that physical action was the key to his earlier problems with the creative state and Emotion Memory.

Because of the supreme importance he placed upon his final project, Stanislavski no longer had any room for falsehood in his work. The Method of Physical Action was designed to help the actor discover truthful action in a world of make believe. Toporkov agrees:

> The most vital and convincing feature of our kind of acting is its sincerity. What is said and done sincerely never raises doubts. Since laughter is catching, false, pretended laughter is offensive. Real tears will always touch you, but you will never believe acted grief and false tears. Sincerity is what gives human beings their appeal and charm…

> What is the one quality all our great actors have in common? The sincerity of their behaviour on stage. (Toporkov 108)
Sincerity of behavior was exactly what the Method of Physical Action allowed the actor to achieve. It was developed from 1916 until Stanislavski’s death in 1938, but many of these steps were worked out in Tartuffe, his final production. Unfortunately, he did not live to see the play performed, but the seeds of his new method were firmly planted. The actors advanced his vision by presenting it to great acclaim two years after his death.

Gordon outlines the step-by-step process of how Stanislavski believed the Method of Physical Action should be implemented during a production.

1. In the simplest terms, explain the plot of the play to the actors. But do not let them read the play until later.
2. Using the basic Given Circumstances to inspire the actors personally, let them act out the Actions.
3. Let the actors improvise the past and future of the characters.
4. Explain the play’s plotline with more details, furnishing more Circumstances and inspiring more “Magic Ifs.”
5. Roughly outline the play’s Super-Objective [Supertask].
6. Have the actors create a personalized Through-Action.
7. Break down the play into large physical Units [Bits] and Actions [Tasks].
8. Have the Actors perform the Physical Actions with a “Magic If.”
9. Still without props, the actors – if necessary – should break the Physical Actions into smaller Units, keeping the logic and continuity of the larger blocks.
10. Through repetition, firmly shape the Physical Actions so they have a logic and believability for the actors.
11. Fix the logic and believability so the actors feel as if the events could actually happen now, at this very minute.
12. Create an active state of “I am” (“It is happening to me”) in the improvisation.
13. Each actor now should have absorbed his character’s psychology into his own subconscious mind.
14. Let the actors read the play for the first time.
15. As each actor studies the text, have him justify his Actions within the Given Circumstances of the play.
16. Let the actors perform the play, but in place of the dialogue have them practice with the nonsense words “Tra-la-la.”
17. The actors should now fix the spoken text within their justified Actions. While they continue to speak “Tra-la-la,” ask them to verbalize in their words the characters’ thoughts. Each actor should inform his partners of his internal monologue. The actors must also visualize the scenic environment.
18. Seated around the table, the actors should now read the playscript to each other. At the same time, but without moving, they should attempt to convey their Physical Actions.

19. This time, moving only their heads and hands to demonstrate their activities, the actors read the play again at the table.

20. Using only rough blocking, have the actors read their parts on the stage.

21. Let the actors discuss their ideas for the mise-en-scène [visual theme].

22. Explain the actual stage setting. Then let the actors find the appropriate places for their actions.

23. Using any of the four walls as the proscenium arch, test out different stage plans.

24. Discuss the social, political, and artistic meanings of the play.

25. Give the actors any external information – such as habitual gestures and mannerisms – that they have not discovered on their own for their characters.

(Gordon 209-211)

Stanislavski expanded his system in an entirely new direction. Instead of inside/out acting from his earlier developments, the new method reinforced outside/in acting. Stanislavski discovered that the only consistency from role to role was the actor himself. Therefore, neglecting the actor’s resource of self was detrimental to his character’s believability with audiences.

Stanislavski’s Legacy

Stanislavski’s methods produced an enduring tune to which countless actors hummed along – bringing a sense of humanity to their craft and stunning audiences everywhere. However, Stanislavski’s system was never intended as Gospel – quite the opposite, in fact. Stanislavski was merely expounding upon tools that the actor must acquire in the pursuit of a role. The work of creating a character was an ongoing process.

Toporkov declares:

One must not think…that he thought of physical action and other directorial techniques as ends in themselves, as has often been the case with some of his less talented followers. Every technical device Stanislavski used as a director was only secondary to achieving his principal object – the fullest possible
*physical presentation of the concept of a character.* And the choice of physical action and the hypothetical circumstances, etc., were always a means to an end. (Toporkov 110)

The “end” that Toporkov was referring to was the truth of the moment. Above all, Stanislavski desired truthfulness in the actor’s technique. That aspiration is broadened in the work of David Mamet. He has discovered that though the actor must arrive at action through physical movement as Stanislavski suggested, he must not neglect the power of the dialogue. Stanislavski and others had declared the power of the text and the actor’s mastery over it, but Mamet takes it to a new level. For him, action is not just the movement, the words *are* the action. If the actor will merely “say the words,” especially in plays that he has composed, the actions will arrive almost by default due to the innate rhythms and emotional content. Mamet’s expansion of Stanislavski’s work brings the actor to a more well-rounded view of action that takes all of the internal and external elements into account.

The music of action is now in full swing – Stanislavski’s introduction finished strongly, but the lyrics are required to reach modern theatregoers effectively.
CHAPTER III
MAMET’S LYRICS

Inspiration

David Mamet’s life exudes a passion for action. His wholehearted belief in the power of *doing* has set him apart from other mainstream theatre artists. Born in 1947, he grew up in the gritty South Side of Chicago. Looking back on his youth, he cited an economy to the way people spoke on the streets – everything was direct and to the point. In order to survive, the ability to command respect through bold rhetoric was paramount. Mamet recognized this necessity immediately and incorporated it into his own personality. Unfortunately, Chicago street-life was not the only reason rhetorical skill became a predominant trait – his parents also played a role through persistent verbal, and sometimes physical, abuse. As he later recalled, he learned early to use language as a weapon.

Mamet’s home life was far from ideal. His father was tough. As a successful labor lawyer he worked hard to protect the rights of labor unions and even won a case in the Supreme Court. He was a skilled wordsmith and an excellent negotiator. He maintained an overwhelming desire to win at all costs and instilled this assertiveness in young David and his sister, Lynn. Mamet later recalled that at the dinner table, his father would often give the children challenging verbal assessments to teach them to harness the power of speech. If they failed to answer according to his impossibly high standards, they were
severely criticized. That disparagement carried over into every area of their lives. Unfortunately, Mamet’s mother did not treat her children any better. She was known to speak of her “love” for the children as an obligation and told them without hesitation that she did not like them. The abuse only worsened from there. Mamet’s parents divorced when he was eleven years old and his mother married one of her ex-husband’s law associates only three days later. The new stepfather was brutal. Mamet later spoke of persistent physical abuse, especially for his sister, Lynn. This abusive atmosphere created a tremendous sense of insecurity in the children, but it also gave them “thick skin” and an intensity that would drive them throughout life. As a result of the strains at home, fights with classmates were common for young Mamet. Many of these skirmishes had to do with his Jewish heritage, but almost anything his classmates said or did would set him off. He refused to show weakness when confronted with a challenge and, like his father, fought to win no matter the cost.

Despite his harsh exterior, Mamet exhibited a desire to pursue the arts. He was a frequent attendee at local theatres and movie houses and even signed up for piano lessons at the age of four. He continued playing piano into adulthood and gained a reputation as an adept amateur jazz pianist. Mamet later acknowledged that learning to play the instrument gave him a strong sense of musicality in his writing and directing.

As Mamet transitioned into his teens, he moved from the South Side to the North Side – a more sophisticated area of Chicago. His growing up in two vastly different worlds gave him the ability to move seamlessly between the two. As a result, he could blurt out obscenities in one breath and insightful oratory in the next. Throughout his adolescence, Mamet would often leave the more “cultured” North Side to engage in
juvenile mischief with his friends from the “earthy” South Side. He felt more at home on the streets of Chicago than in the hustle and bustle of the more gentrified world. The influence of both communities gave Mamet a rare mixture of street sense and book smarts.

Once he was established on the North Side, Mamet and his sister began to get involved in the performing arts. Mamet later admitted that if he had not found the theatre, he would have likely ended up a criminal. His acting career began when his uncle, who worked in broadcasting, gave to him and his sister the opportunity to perform in local radio sketches. Mamet then fixed his eyes upon the stage – longing to emerge from inside the recording booth. Once he ventured into live performance, he found that there was a strong sense of regionalism in his city. Chicago audiences wanted homegrown theatres so touring companies became a rarity. As a result, a stark and gritty style began to prevail in local theatre productions. Among the famous playhouses that thrived there during this time was the Hull House Theatre – an “edgy” company that favored the avant-garde. Mamet began working backstage there in 1963 and his on-the-job training included plays by Harold Pinter (1930-2008), Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994) and many others.

Mamet was not interested in formal education in the early days because he felt it was more important to learn by doing. As a result, his grades suffered. His interest in education changed, however, when, at age fifteen, he was enrolled in Francis Parker School, an institution that shared his philosophy of education. The school believed in using “hands on” teaching methods and proved to be exactly what the developing teenager needed to excel. As a result of his new learning environment, Mamet became an
avid reader. His reading included plays by Pinter and Beckett, as well as a variety of novels and other texts. In *David Mamet: A Life in the Theatre*, Ira Nadel recounts that Mamet devoured the writings of Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951), Elliott Merrick (1905-1997), Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), Willa Cather (1873-1947), Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) and B. Traven (1882-1969). In particular, he was heavily influenced by Dreiser and Cather. Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* was extremely important to him because of the distinctive Midwestern qualities attached to it and because of its candor about the kind of violence in America he had witnessed firsthand on the streets of Chicago. He also appreciated the musical quality and innate “Chicago-ness” of Cather’s *Lucy Gayheart*. Because of his deep cultural ties to the city he loved, Mamet did not particularly enjoy writers from the Eastern United States. Nadel holds that the Chicagoan found them too “effete, preferring Sinclair Lewis to F. Scott Fitzgerald….” He goes on to quote Mamet saying: “I am not interested in Art, nor in Fitzgerald’s wish to be liked and accepted…The novel of the East is, to me, too pretty…I prefer to read about survival….” (Nadel 22)

Mamet later mentioned that his growing up in Chicago formed his “theatre aesthetic” of direct action. Writers from his region were asking different questions than their New York counterparts and the inquiry resulted in a different kind of writing. As Nadel points out, Chicago writers were asking, “What’s going on here?” – revealing an innate craving for the truth. New York writers, on the other hand, were asking “What do you do?” – revealing a craving for the byproduct of that truth. Chicago writers created an outcast mentality – giving them a gritty edge over their east coast counterparts. Nadel
goes on to speak of the way these Midwestern writers combined this gritty quality with an innate sensibility during Mamet’s formative years:

The Chicago style mixes a survivor’s cynicism and a streak of sentimentality without obliterating honest feelings. A writer in Chicago is not in the center of a national literary culture but is on its margins “not by absorbing the national tradition but by pretending to know nothing of it.” Mamet, as he repeatedly states, feels like an outsider, the result of being a Jew, a writer, and a Chicago author…. (Nadel 25)

In addition to his involvement with the Hull House theatre, Mamet also enjoyed working with The Second City theatre from 1963 to 1965. This company was known for its innovative work with improvisation and comedy. He absorbed as much as he possibly could – in fact, the first play he composed was rooted in the eight-minute scene format he had experienced there. As his piano skills increased, he often accompanied children’s performances on weekends. Mamet was impressed by the tight-knit working community at the theatre and this became a blueprint for the companies he founded later. He believed that everyone from cast to crew should work together to communicate the theme of the production – much like the model Stanislavski pioneered at the Moscow Art Theatre in the early 1900s.

Upon graduation from Francis Parker School in 1965, Mamet left the sprawling city for rural Vermont to attend Goddard College – a virtual extension of his progressive high school in Chicago. While attending, he was given many opportunities to expand his writing abilities and performing experience. As his acting skills grew, he began to discover of the power of listening. He felt that listening allowed him to respond genuinely to what was happening in the moment and thereby drive the action of the play.
forward. This discovery was right in line with his “Chicago mentality” and led him to seek out more intense acting training along this line of thinking.

Mamet’s search for in-depth acting instruction led him to the Neighborhood Playhouse Acting School in New York. He spent his junior year of college in residence at the Neighborhood Playhouse and it proved to be a transformational experience. Sanford Meisner (1905-1997), a famous acting theorist and instructor, was one of his teachers during this time. Meisner had been a member of the Group Theatre, which had its roots in Stanislavski’s system – particularly the Method of Physical Action. Meisner believed that Stanislavski’s earlier theories of internal acting directed the actor’s attention away from what was happening in the moment and instead focused excessively on the imaginary world he created. As a result, Meisner skewed his own acting teaching toward Stanislavski’s later work with physical action and emphasized the value of listening and being present in the moment.

The Meisner method began with actors learning how to work off each other in order to establish the honesty that makes the lines convincing and believable. “The text is your greatest enemy” Meisner would tell his students. He did not want them to react to it but to respond to each other… Be yourself, Meisner reiterated. “The foundation of acting is the reality of doing” he would announce in the first moment of the first acting class – and then work with the small group of students to clarify their focus…. (Nadel 37)

Meisner harnessed focus in his actors through a variety of exercises designed to help them become more aware of their surroundings. He is also famous for his repetition drills – saying the same phrase over and over to strip away any falsehood from the delivery. This process later formed the basis of Mamet’s signature writing style.

Repetition exercises followed to get the actors used to hearing the same lines over and over. “Are you repeating what you hear” and are you repeating it “from your point of view?” Meisner would ask… This word repetition game would be
instrumental in defining Mamet’s early style in which fractured cadences and overlapping dialogue would become his trademark. (Nadel 38)

Meisner’s acting method also includes his theory of “As If.” In order for the actor to perform honestly, Meisner reasons, he must find a way “play truthfully under the given circumstances” – to behave “as if” he were living in the same situation and to ask, “What would I do in this situation?” This harkens back to Stanislavski’s Magic If and extends into Mamet’s theories of acting later noted in A Practical Handbook for the Actor – penned by several of his students in the mid-1980s.

Another of Mamet’s inspirations during this period was Richard Boleslavsky (1889-1937), one of Stanislavski’s students. Mamet particularly appreciated Boleslavsky’s book, Acting, The First Six Lessons. The lessons Boleslavsky discusses become his summation of Stanislavski’s technique: concentration, memory of emotion, dramatic action, characterization, observation and rhythm. These are all filtered into three parts of the actor: education of his body, intellect and soul. Boleslavsky’s book emphasizes action. Mamet immediately identified with this approach and he was known to carry this book with him everywhere in the early days of his career.

Mamet’s theory of acting was beginning to take shape. In a later summary of his technique titled True and False, he begins by writing “…the actor needs a strong voice, superb diction, a supple, well-proportioned body, and a rudimentary understanding of the play…” (Mamet 9) This forms the physical preparation of the actor. He then goes on to say, “The work of characterization has…been done by the author. It’s not your job, and it’s not your look out.” (Mamet 114) Once the actor has mastered the physical, he can dive into the script and, instead of starting from scratch in character development, he can
use the wealth of information already at his fingertips in the text. Reliance upon the text frees the actor from having to come up with a completely new set of actions to “get into” a role. Mamet believes that the actor’s three primary goals are to be truthful, brave and hardworking. The combination of all these qualities forms the basis of his technique. “When the actual courage of the actor is coupled with the lines of the playwright, the illusion of character is created…” (Mamet 21) Mamet sees acting as an exercise in audience deception. When the characterization is complete, Mamet does not allow his actors to attempt to “become” the characters themselves. He believes to do so is madness. Instead, it is the actor’s job to create the “illusion of character” by bringing the truth of himself to the role and working within the conditions the playwright has laid down, revealing a deep connection to Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action. Mamet continues by saying, “The skill of acting is finally a physical skill; it is not a mental exercise….” (Mamet 19) This perspective takes any stressful psychological exertion out of the equation and allows the actor to react to what is happening in the moment with greater clarity. Don B. Wilmeth emphasizes Mamet’s desire for actors to free their minds during performance in Editor C. W. E. Bigsby’s *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet:*

…he finds these systems too complex and confusing, asking the actors to carry too much baggage with them on stage: “You can’t act out all that stuff…when one shows up on stage, that all goes out the window. One can only take on stage, ‘What do I want from the other person?’ That’s it – period; that’s all one can take on stage.” (Bigsby 143)

Mamet desperately wanted to make it as an actor, but that dream was never realized. He was not asked back for the second year of the program at The Neighborhood Playhouse. He worked to obtain acting jobs, but roles were scarce. While he was
pursuing this career path, he worked as an usher at several playhouses in New York and was able to observe many world class performances. He eventually became head usher for *The Fantasticks* in 1969, worked his way up to assistant stage manager and, finally, to house manager. During one particular performance of the play, Mamet had an unforgettable experience that would shape his career. Nadel describes it best:

> While watching the play one night from just inside the door to the lobby, Mamet heard a sigh behind him. Tom Jones, who wrote the book and the lyrics for the play, was looking at the stage and shaking his head. “If only they would just Say the Words…” he said… Mamet never forgot this remark and turned it into an acting principle. (Nadel 41)

> “Just say the words” became a mantra for Mamet throughout the years. He carried this with him as he began work on his senior writing project at Goddard – a new play that came to be known as *The Camel Document*. David Mamet’s lyrics of action were beginning to take shape.

**The Lyrics**

After graduating college in 1969, Mamet played a few acting roles including Lenny in Pinter’s *The Homecoming* during a brief stint in Montreal, but as his finances became depleted he decided to move back to Chicago to find work. Upon returning to his beloved city, he suffered a period of depression as he went from job to job trying to make ends meet. Many of these experiences ended up in his later plays, including one, *Lakeboat*, inspired by his time working in a maritime environment. He eventually contacted friends at Marlboro College in Vermont and was able to secure a temporary teaching opportunity there in 1970. He was also able to mount a well-received workshop production of *Lakeboat*. 
Once his commitment to Marlboro College was completed, Mamet briefly moved back to Chicago and began working on a new play called *The Duck Variations* and sent a draft to Goddard College. They liked what they read and asked him to come and teach acting for a term and even do some directing in 1971. When he began the position, he proved to be a strict disciplinarian. He stressed the importance of punctuality with his students and instilled a sense of order both in the classroom and on the stage. Around the same time, he started an acting troupe on campus called the St. Nicholas Company. William H. Macy (1950-Present), the now famous stage and screen actor, was one of the original members – beginning a life-long friendship and partnership with Mamet. The company produced Mamet’s original works mainly because they did not have the money to acquire the rights for established plays. This turned out to be advantageous as it gave Mamet the opportunity to hone his writing and directing skills. *The Duck Variations* was the company’s first production in 1972.

Actors in Mamet’s new plays found that though the dialogue was imposing at first, if they would simply “say the words” as they were written, action began to emerge almost effortlessly. In this way, he demonstrated a mastery of language with little need for stage directions or ornamentation of dialogue. Bigsby in *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* speaks of the innate sense of action in Mamet’s writing:

There is, indeed, a distinctive rhythm to his work but he is interested neither simply in documenting contemporary speech patterns nor in anything as self-conscious as poetic drama, despite the fact that he claimed to have written *American Buffalo, The Woods, The Cryogram,* and *Oleanna* in free verse. The rhythm both itself contains a meaning and, like everything else, serves the plot, as does the language which may seem to shape itself into poetry, sculpted arias, but is, in fact, fully functional in terms of forwarding action and thereby revealing character or vice versa. As opposed to the cinema, the theatre, for Mamet, is a place where language dominates, where it becomes clear that “what you say
influences the way you think, the way you act, not the other way around.” That was the essence of his work…. (Bigsby 1-2)

Though there is realism in what Mamet writes, it goes beyond day-to-day reality – it represents life, but does not mirror it. It is poetic, yet displays true human nature without haughtiness. It has political themes, but is not overtly political – he uses his plays to raise questions and promote discussion among the audience members. His is a new breed of poetry for the theatre. It is free verse – utterly dependent upon rhythm and meter, but his writing goes beyond words – it speaks for itself without the need for actors to intervene. In creating this brand of dialogue among his characters, Mamet reveals an innate understanding of human relationships and the subtext buried beneath seemingly ordinary conversations. He then formulates those conversations for maximum dramatic effect – revealing the intrinsic richness of action and thereby mesmerizing audiences all over the world. It is no longer the actor’s job to unearth the action – that work is already done for him. Dean speaks further on Mamet’s ability to turn language into action and how it inherently reflects the theme of the play:

…Mamet’s poetic and rhythmic gifts enable the language to become much more than dialogue – it becomes the shape of the play itself. For example, the disjointed and monochromatic language in Edmond is reflected in the actual form of the play; the discontinuity of experience felt by its protagonist is echoed in the short blackout scenes in which the drama is written. Thus, the very structure of the play reflects its linguistic strategy. Similarly, the brevity of the scenes in Sexual Perversity in Chicago reflects the characters’ inability to sustain an interest in anything beyond the present moment. Because of the fear of incipient boredom, their sentences are short and pithy, and so too are the scenes Mamet creates to accommodate them. (Dean 15)

As his catalogue of plays began to grow, distinctive patterns emerged in Mamet’s dialogue. Critics caught on to this and created a phrase for it: “Mametspeak.”

Nadel explains that:
“Mametspeak” is the name some journalists have coined to describe his dialogue. The rhythm, cadences, and syntax are of the street, as is the vocabulary, often corruptions in aid of clarity. The obscenities and vulgarities in his plays are not there to shock but to communicate reality, reworked through Mamet’s “filter.” “Dead hard sound” is his characterization of Chicago speech, he once explained: “It’s a very harsh song. Chicago has always been a writer’s town and perhaps because there was no room for euphemism.” Mamet embodies Sherwood Anderson’s remark that “for a long time I have believed that crudity is an inevitable quality in the production of a really significant present-day American literature.” (Nadel 4-5)

In addition to his Chicago roots, Mamet’s style is profoundly affected by music – borrowing yet another page out of Stanislavski’s book. The distinctive rhythms and tone of speech he uses reveal the inner workings of each character and the overall theme of the play. Nadel describes this as “a staccato, allegro style bordering on the presto, an accelerating style with explosive repetitions, incomplete statements, and abrupt, broken phrasing.” (Nadel 5)

The influence of music upon Mamet’s writing crosses over into another of his trademarks: the art of omission. As he was learning the piano, he was taught that he need not play all the notes in a traditional chord. Because music has become so ubiquitous, the listener fills in the gaps without realizing it – much like a reader unconsciously fills in a missing word while reading a sentence. Nadel explains that “Good writers get better ‘only by learning to cut…omission is a form of creation.’” (Nadel 2) Mamet began to experiment with this technique in his writing and the results were astounding – prompting him to utilize it throughout his career.

Mamet was at Goddard for two years – first as a teacher, then as a writer-in-residence. His work with the St. Nicholas Company during that time included a motto that stated that acting is “living truthfully and fully under imaginary circumstances.” He
eventually moved back to Chicago and reestablished the St. Nicholas Company there. He began to have success with plays such as *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *American Buffalo*. As his career gained momentum in the years that followed, he won a Pulitzer Prize for his play *Glengarry Glen Ross* in 1984 and helped form the Atlantic Theatre Company with Macy in 1985 in New York City. His career continued to blossom and since that time he has attained much success in theatre as a writer and director around the world. He settled in the Northeastern United States – moving back and forth between New York and Vermont. He eventually branched out into screenwriting with well-known movies such as *The Untouchables* (1987) and *Wag the Dog* (1997) among others. He even had the opportunity to work with one of his idols, Harold Pinter, during the 1993 production of Mamet’s *Oleanna* in London.

All of the skills that Mamet acquired led him to one goal – driving the action of the story forward. Stanislavski had been a major influence in forming this aspect of his work, but Mamet later also acknowledged his debt to Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

… [Mamet] proclaimed, “I’m of the Aristotelian school: characters are nothing but habitual action. You don’t create a character, you describe what he does”… Three years later, he elaborated on the importance of Aristotle, declaring an understanding of “the theory of true action…is the essential understanding of drama”…. (Nadel 42)

**Mamet’s Legacy**

The Aristotelian refrain that characters emerge from action began to appear early on in Mamet’s writing. His ability to infuse action into the dialogue left an indelible mark upon the theatre community and was clearly visible even without in-depth analysis. An example of this can be found in *The Duck Variations*, first performed in 1971. Two
characters, Emil and George, sit on a park bench and discuss various topics while ducks pass by. The scenes that follow are variations based upon their first exchange. Below is an example of a heated discussion between the two men:

EMIL: Speak for yourself.
GEORGE: I am speaking for myself.
EMIL: Then speak to yourself.
GEORGE: Who asked you to listen?
EMIL: Who asked you to talk?
GEORGE: Why are you getting upset?
EMIL: You upset me.
GEORGE: Yeah? (Mamet 96)

When actors read selections like this aloud, the innate rhythms and action emerge intuitively without any additional effort. In just eight lines, one can easily see Emil as the instigator – pushing George’s “buttons” and raising the level of conflict between them. George is constantly on the defensive to the point of being leveled to a pithy “Yeah?” in lack of a better response to George’s hounding. This short scene selection reveals the “intricate simplicity” of speech used to bring the actors to the action of the moment. Once the actor reads the words with no intentional inflection, the intensity begins to rise naturally.

Mamet’s dialogue also appears fragmented and incomplete – reflecting his earlier repetition work with Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York. This quality is revealed plainly in the famous opening scene of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, premiering in London in 1983. What at first appears confusing on the page becomes clear when heard aloud. The lights come up on two realtors sitting in a Chinese restaurant while engaged in intense conversation:

what he is. He’s fine. All I’m saying, you look at the board, he’s throwing…wait, wait, wait, he’s throwing them away, he’s throwing the leads away. All that I’m saying, that you’re wasting leads. I don’t want to tell you your job. All that I’m saying, things get set I know they do, you get a certain mindset…. A guy gets a reputation. We know how this…all I’m saying, put a closer on the job. There’s more than one man for the…Put a…wait a second, put a proven man out…and you watch, now wait a second – and you watch your dollar volumes…. You start closing them for fifty ‘stead of twenty-five…you put a closer on the…

**Williamson:** Shelly, you blew the last…

**Levene:** No. John. No. Let’s wait, let’s back up here, I did…will you please? Wait a second. Please. I didn’t “blow” them. No. I didn’t “blow” them. No. One kicked out, one I closed…

**Williamson:** …you didn’t close…. (Mamet 1)

Though the dialogue is terse and disjointed, the audience understands who these characters are from the moment they open their mouths. Levene’s stumbling over his words reveals a deep insecurity over his job and, ultimately, his personal life. The audience quickly notices that he is desperate for a good sales lead – he is essentially in “survivor mode,” fighting for his life. In contrast, Williamson’s tone is cold and concise – revealing his confidence, authority and impatience with Levene. Mamet’s well-formed dialogue presses the action of the play forward in less than a page and though there is a plethora of ellipses, incomplete statements, and other fractured punctuation marks, the audience can fill in the gaps intuitively and jump right into the drama. If the actor lets the words fall as Mamet wrote them the result is that the theme of the play emerges in an unforgettable way. Nadel expounds upon this:

“Just say the words” is Mamet’s mantra. Unemotional acting is his goal. This in part may relate to a so-called Chicago acting style, described by Gregory Mosher, former artistic director of the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, as “simple and emotional and without being indulgent. It’s never about wearing emotion on your sleeve. It’s about getting on with the play.” Furthermore, it leaves a lot to the audience’s imagination: it’s not that one does a play on a bare stage but that “the audience fills it in. They actually do the work.” (Nadel 7)
The audience is the final piece of Mamet’s puzzle. So many playwrights before him had relegated the spectator’s presence to mindless drones merely recording the information, but not participating in the performance. Mamet, however, believes that the audience is an active part of the presentation. To behave otherwise, he reasons, is foolishness and betrays the very nature of theatre itself as a communal art form.

The lyrics of action are firmly in place. Now that the actor has the music of physical action from Stanislavski and the lyrics of verbal action from Mamet, he has nearly everything he needs to create meaningful performances that can pierce the callousness of modern theatre audiences. The only missing element is form. How is the song of action structured?
Sonata Form

As Mamet’s lyrics of verbal action meet Stanislavski’s music of physical action, the song of action begins. However, without a clear structure, the song falls apart. The starting point in discovering the arrangement is observing a common theme that resounds in both men’s theories – truth. Although Stanislavski and Mamet arrived at their respective views in vastly different ways, they both share a motivation to bring truth to the actor’s technique. In order to better appreciate how truth binds the two men together, an understanding of musical structure is beneficial – particularly Sonata Form.

Sonata Form is a three-part musical configuration that was first introduced in the 18th century. As its popularity gained momentum in the years that followed, it became the method of choice for many composers. Sonata Form is divided into three distinct sections: Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. The Exposition introduces the main musical themes, the Development expounds upon them and the Recapitulation restates the themes as a bookend. Sonata Form invites its listeners on a journey, much like a novel or a theatrical performance. The sonata allows the listener to experience a variety of conflicts, contrasts and variations that lead one to a new understanding and appreciation of what has been heard. What once seemed to be a simple musical idea becomes more layered and complex as the piece progresses. The remainder of this
chapter will draw on the three sections of Sonata Form to reveal how physical action and verbal action work together in harmony.

**Exposition**

The Exposition in Sonata Form typically opens with two contrasting musical themes. Though this is not a unique trait among previously used musical outlines, Sonata Form takes that contrast to a deeper level. Bernard Jacobson’s *Encyclopedia Britannica* article notes that:

> The emphasis on contrast, even conflict, is the element that distinguishes the exposition of a sonata-form movement from the first section of an earlier binary form. The first section of a binary movement in a Baroque suite or instrumental sonata, for example, might contain two clearly differentiated themes, but the stress is on continuity and on uniformity of musical texture rather than on contrast. In sonata form the emphasis is more dynamic; there is a stronger sense of contrast within the movement. (Jacobson 2)

This stark contrast is clearly distinguishable in the Exposition of the song of action. The opening theme begins with Stanislavski. He came to discover a system of acting that searched for inner emotional truths that would bring outer physical truths into plain view of the audience. However, after seeing his initial forays in the system break down in his own acting and in that of his students, Stanislavski knew that something had to change. He eventually shifted his focus and came to form the Method of Physical Action, his theme in the song of action.

Years after Stanislavski’s death, Mamet introduces the contrasting theme of the Exposition. As a result of his Chicagoan upbringing and trailblazer mentality, he discovered that words can take on the manner of action in and of themselves. His refrain for acting is “just say the words.” This mantra leads actors into a state of constant action.
toward an achievable goal with minimal flourish or fanfare. This practice of verbal action is his theme in the song of action.

The Exposition is now complete. The themes, Stanislavski’s physical action and Mamet’s verbal action, stand in stark contrast to each other.

Development

Once the Exposition ends in Sonata Form, the musical themes undergo a “trial by fire” in the Development. According to Jacobson, the Development of Sonata Form exists “to discuss and resolve the conflicts of tonality and theme that the exposition has raised.” (Jacobson 3) This is typically accomplished through variation, embellishment, modulation, counterpoint and several other composing techniques. Once these methods are applied, the listener begins to see the resemblances between the opposing themes.

As the Development of the song of action begins, similarities between the two contrasting themes start to emerge. The first of these similarities is a mutual desire to understand the actor’s craft. Both men had supporters that absorbed this notion – particularly one of Stanislavski’s followers named Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999). Grotowski was a highly influential theatre director and acting pioneer who implemented many aspects of Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action into his work. One of Grotowski’s students, Thomas Richards (1962-Present), quotes Stanislavski in At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions as saying, “Create your own method. Don’t depend slavishly on mine. Make up something that will work for you!” (Richards 4) Mamet shares this viewpoint as well. His wide range of influences varies from Aristotle to Pinter and beyond – creating his unique approach to acting, directing and writing.
Another similarity Stanislavski and Mamet share emerges during the Development as a mutual reliance upon a systematic approach to their work. Richards continues his study of Stanislavski in his text and focuses on the importance of having an established method to heighten creativity. Richards believes that the actor cannot depend solely on the inspiration of the moment to get through a scene – it is too fleeting. He discovered that Stanislavski felt the same way and quotes him as saying:

Sure, the whirlwind of inspiration can carry our “creative airplane” above the clouds […] without running down the runway. The trouble is that these flights do not depend on us and do not constitute the norm. It is within our possibilities to prepare the ground, to lay the rails, that is to say to create the physical actions reinforced by truth and conviction. (Richards 7)

Richards follows this quote from Stanislavski by expressing the importance of establishing a foundational acting technique. He believes the actor must never neglect his training or the results are detrimental to the performance.

An old Russian proverb says, If [sic] you go to your porch, look up at the sky, and jump to the stars, you will just land in the mud. Often the stairs are forgotten. The stairs must be constructed… One can easily get lost thinking about the profound metaphysical side…and forget completely the sacrifice and practical labor behind the results. (Richards 7)

Artists cannot rely upon creativity alone. They need a “fence” around their raw creative energy to harness its power and potential. That fence is technique. Richards further expounds upon this by saying:

…no matter how creative we feel ourselves to be, we have no channel for our creative force without technique. Technique means craftsmanship, a technical knowledge of our craft. The stronger your creativity is, the stronger your craft must be, in order to arrive at the needed equilibrium which will let your resources flow fully. If we lack this ground level, we surely land in the mud. (Richards 7)

Mamet also believes strongly in technique, though his approach is far less complex than Stanislavski’s. Mamet’s Chicago influence taught him to think of his skills
as more of a trade than an art. To him, acting is all about adept execution, much like a master craftsman. Mamet lays out his modest approach in his text *True and False* by saying the actor is merely to “…learn the lines, find a simple objective like that indicated by the author, speak the lines clearly in an attempt to achieve that objective….” (Mamet 57) Mamet further streamlined his acting technique by saying, “Each character in the play wants something. It is the actor’s job to reduce that something to its lowest common denominator and then act upon it.” (Mamet 74) As a result, the actor plays the action of the scene more naturally. The actor does not need to “jump through hoops” in order to arrive at a creative state for a moving performance. Nor does the actor have to rely upon raw talent to get through a scene. To Mamet it is simply a matter of will. Talent is fleeting and beyond the actor’s control. The will, however, can be harnessed and used as a tool to produce the best actions needed to carry a scene forward. Mamet and Stanislavski draw from the same well when it comes to the importance of technique.

Once Stanislavski and Mamet’s themes reveal parallels in their appreciation and understanding of the actor’s craft, the Development of the song of action ramps up in intensity and exposes similarities in ways they carry out their technique in physical action, verbal action and truthful action.

Physical action is the thread that begins to weave the themes of Stanislavski and Mamet together. Both men view this technique as the gateway to a stirring performance. Richards quotes Stanislavski as saying, “The method of physical actions is the result of my whole life’s work.” (Richards 4) Mamet’s students also describe his dependence upon this principle by stating his definition of action in *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*: “The physical pursuance of a specific goal.” (Bruder 87) Mamet has built much of his
artistic life on the ideas behind Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action. As he absorbed the principles behind this technique, he began to adapt them in his own context. He believes physical action is successful in connecting with audiences because it is rooted in the universal human experience. Leslie Kane quotes him in *David Mamet in Conversation* as saying:

…everyone always tries to do good, but no one succeeds. This is seen concretely for the first time in Stanislavski’s concept of the method of physical actions. He takes this notion that has always operated in the writing of great plays and refines it down to make it understandable for the actor to fit himself into the mode of the play. This is the schematic into which the actor can fit himself; you can be taught to act, but you can’t be made to act, and this is one way to fit yourself into the exigencies of the role and to understand the role. The way everyone is capable of perceiving how the play operates and how the actor operates in the play. (Kane 31)

Stanislavski and Mamet’s preference for physical action creates a disregard for emotionalism in the actor’s technique. They do not believe the actor needs to *feel* the emotions of the character in order to be effective. Mamet’s students express this assertion in *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* by saying, “Nothing is more interesting or dramatic than an actor working off the truth of the moment, so don’t take responsibility for the scene by charging it up emotionally.” (Bruder 72) According to Mamet’s acting philosophy, it is an actor’s ability to act upon natural impulses that achieves the best results. If one attempts to work solely from emotions: “…the truth of the moment will be completely lost because your attention will fall on yourself, and your impulses will go out the proverbial window.” (Bruder 71) Unbridled emotionalism forces the actor to play “in general” with no specificity. This leads to overacting to try and compensate for the lack of detail and allowing the emotions to dictate actions. Instead, “If you learn to act in spite of what you are feeling, you will bring yourself to life in the scene and develop a strong
will in the process.” (Bruder 71) Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action agrees with this notion. In it, the master calls for absolute clarity in everything that is performed by eliminating dependence upon emotion. Emotionalism takes the actor out of the action and into a constant state of improvisation – creating a different result during each performance. The great actors, in Stanislavski’s view, maintain the same routine night after night through a concise set of physical actions that do not change once the play has opened. The writers of *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* elaborate on the reason for this physical clarity and diminishment of emotionalism:

What you must remember is that a technique based on emotion is utterly undependable; because you cannot control what you feel, your emotions can desert you at any time. On the other hand, a technique based on physical action calls upon the will and can be used at any time and in any situation, regardless of how you are feeling. (Bruder 71)

The actor cannot bring more to the role than he has within himself. Benedetti shares Stanislavski’s thoughts on this principle succinctly in *Stanislavski and the Actor*:

The only feelings or thoughts or impulses I can have are my own. I cannot actually experience anyone else’s emotions any more than I can eat and digest anyone else’s meal. If I really believe I am someone else then I am, in Stanislavski’s words, a pathological case and need psychiatric help. (Benedetti 1)

In order to avoid the need for the “psychiatric help” that Benedetti describes, Mamet believes the actor must learn to work through the emotional backlash that may occur as a result of instinctive responses to physical actions. In *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*, his students explain that:

Once you’ve learned to commit fully to a physical action, your only task concerning emotions will be to learn to work through them, to let them exist as they will, for they are beyond your control and will come to you quite unbidden. Your emotions are the natural and inescapable by-product of your commitment to your action. Eventually you will learn to work through the torrents of emotion...
raging through you onstage. Again, your one and only job is to follow through on your action. (Bruder 72)

Mamet’s students continue their thoughts on action by explaining the importance of utilizing physical goals to overcome unwanted emotion during performance: “If the actor gives himself something physically doable that he has a personal investment in for every scene, he will always have something more important to put his attention on than the success or failure of his own performance.” (Bruder 5) They sum up the danger of emotional dependence by saying:

Your feelings are not within your control, so it is not within the bounds of common sense to say “I must feel this certain way” for any particular moment of the scene. Instead, you must be able to say, “This is what I am doing in the scene, and I will do it irrespective of how it makes me feel.” (Bruder 5)

Physical action leads actors to do, not to feel. Both Stanislavski and Mamet have found this principle more useful than the unpredictability of emotions.

Another mutual quality of Stanislavski and Mamet that comes to light during the Development is the importance of verbal action. Mamet is known for this technique, but what about Stanislavski? Benedetti shares the answer in Stanislavski and the Actor:

“Speech is action, no less than gesture and movement. Just as we study and analyse the nature of physical action, so we need to study and analyse the nature of verbal action.” (Benedetti 87) Stanislavski believes the “nature of verbal action” on stage is much more involved than ordinary conversation. It must go beyond the everyday and speak directly to the inner being of every audience member in order to be truly effective. Benedetti, a Stanislavski scholar, goes on to acknowledge the importance of Mamet’s work in demonstrating this principle in today’s world:
Dialogue is not everyday speech, however much it may look like it. The plays of Noël Coward, Harold Pinter and David Mamet may seem to be composed of ordinary expressions but the dialogue is, in fact, tightly organized, like music. They could not be mistaken for each other, however ‘everyday’ the vocabulary. They sound and feel different. (Benedetti 87-88)

The harmonious nature of Mamet and Stanislavski is becoming more and more perceptible as the Development of the song of action continues into the final parallel between themes: truthful action. Mamet shares Stanislavski’s thoughts on this principle in his book Three Uses of the Knife:

Stanislavsky [sic] says there are two kinds of plays. There are plays that you leave, and you say to yourself, “By God, I just, I never, gosh, I want to, now I understand! What a masterpiece! Let’s get a cup of coffee,” and by the time you get home, you can’t remember the name of the play, you can’t remember what the play was about.

And there are plays – and books and songs and poems and dances – that are perhaps upsetting or intricate or unusual, that you leave unsure, but which you think about perhaps the next day, and perhaps for a week, and perhaps for the rest of your life.

Because they aren’t clean, they aren’t neat, but there’s something in them that comes from the heart, and, so, goes to the heart. (Mamet 21)

Truthfulness impacts audiences in a profound way. As a result, Stanislavski and Mamet do not have any room for falsehood in their work. Mamet’s wholehearted belief in this principle is rooted in his hometown of Chicago. Nadel shares in David Mamet: A Life in the Theatre that “The Chicago style is harsh because it does not tolerate evasion. Chicago audiences are, in turn, difficult to fool; they want things to be on the level, to hear things straight…. ” (Nadel 5) Stanislavski arrived at his conclusion in a slightly different way. He reacted to the “over-the-top” dramatics he saw on stage. Actors were neglecting their true nature in favor of cliché – a mistake that took their humanity out of the equation. As a result, Stanislavski did all he could to remedy the histrionics. Benedetti quotes the master in Stanislavski: An Introduction as saying:
The actor above all must believe in everything going on around him, and most of all he must believe in what he is doing. And he can only believe what is true. And so he must genuinely feel that truth, look for it and for that he must develop his artistic awareness of truth. (Benedetti 48)

Stanislavski pursued truth throughout his career. Once he discovered its power, his life became devoted to unearthing it. He is quoted by Benedetti as saying, “Of course, the truest path is the one that leads nearest to truth and life. To find that path you have to know what truth and life are. This is my one task: to know both all over again.” (Benedetti 33) Both Stanislavski and Mamet know instinctively that the actor must cling to action rooted in truth in order to achieve a quality performance. They do not consider acting as merely entertainment – they believe it has the power to change lives. Truthful actions have to be deeply woven into the fabric of everything the actor does in order for a performance to be truly inspiring. This conviction gives rise to a more holistic view of action – one in which all of the training is filtered through truthful action and mined for every resource it can provide in order to achieve the ultimate performance. Though a seemingly herculean task, it is really quite simple. The actor already has truth at his disposal – Stanislavski and Mamet merely found ways for the actor to utilize it successfully. Benedetti quotes Stanislavski as saying:

An actor on the stage need only sense the smallest modicum of organic physical truth in his action or general state and instantly his emotions will respond to his inner faith in the genuineness of what his body is doing. In our case it is incomparably easier to call forth real truth and faith within the region of our physical than of our spiritual nature. An actor need only believe in himself and his soul will open up to receive all the inner objectives and emotions of his role…. (Benedetti 92)
An understanding of natural ability combined with a finely attuned body transforms the actor into a skilled technician of sorts. He can plow through the superfluous details and get to the truth.

Though Stanislavski and Mamet are different in their approach to their craft, the Development reveals the two methodologies harmonize perfectly. All of their similar practices in technique combine to create a deeper understanding and appreciation of action. The Development is now complete. Stanislavski and Mamet’s individual themes once stood in opposition to each other, but now appear side-by-side.

**Recapitulation**

Once the Exposition and Development is completed in Sonata Form, the Recapitulation is the final step to bring the song to a close. In it, the main themes are explored once again, but now the listener hears them differently after all that transpired in the previous two sections. Jacobson describes this in detail:

…the point at which development passes into recapitulation is one of the most important psychological moments in the entire sonata-form structure. It marks the end of the main argument and the beginning of the final synthesis for which that argument has prepared the listener’s mind…

The recapitulation presents the principal subject matter of the movement in a new state of equilibrium… As a result of the musical events in the development, the listener perceives the subjects in a new relationship – rather like a traveller [*sic*] who glimpses the constituent parts of a valley separately as he climbs a hill and then, when he reaches the summit, sees the entire landscape for the first time as a whole. The recapitulation can vary greatly in the literalness with which it repeats the elements of the exposition. (Jacobson 3)

The listener of Sonata Form completes his musical journey as the Recapitulation comes to a close. The song has allowed him to experience a full spectrum of emotional
responses until finally reaching a point of catharsis as the main themes are repeated and finalized.

The start of the Recapitulation of the song of action brings a new understanding of Stanislavski’s physical action and Mamet’s verbal action in light of what happened in the Exposition and Development. Instead of seeing the men as rivals, the complimentary nature of their individual theories begins to appear. This creates the “new state of equilibrium” that Jacobson describes. The actor discovers that the essential element of theatre is action. If he places his focus on this aspect of his training, all other techniques begin to fall into place. All of this is made possible by the actor allowing himself to release his inborn nature into a performance. The final chapter in A Practical Handbook for the Actor invites the reader to do that very thing.

The reason great actors are so compelling is that they have the courage to bring their personalities to bear on everything they do. Don’t ever play a part as someone else would play it. Remember that it is you onstage, not some mythical being called the character. For your purposes, the character exists on the printed page for analysis only. If you have done your analysis and memorized your lines, you have fulfilled your obligation to the script and the illusion of your character will emerge. You have the right and the responsibility to bring to the stage who you are. Your humanity is an absolutely vital contribution to any play you act in. Whenever you find yourself worrying about whether you are “doing the character” correctly, reflect for a moment on the words of Stanislavsky [sic]: “The person you are is a thousand times more interesting than the best actor you could ever hope to be.” (Bruder 74)

The Recapitulation is now complete. The themes of physical action and verbal action have undergone the rigorous process of contrast, comparison and rebirth. Sonata Form demonstrates the harmonious nature of Stanislavski and Mamet’s work on action in the theatre. This process of discovery started with both men’s desire for truth to resonate in the actor’s technique. After journeying through Sonata Form as it relates to physical
and verbal action, one comes to the realization that truth not only starts the process, it completes it. The only unchanging characteristic through every role is the truth of the actor’s sense of self, so why would he not tap into this incredible resource? It is through the truth of physical and verbal action that an actor can fully allow his actions to transcend the story and create something “greater than the sum of its parts.” Now that this principle has been identified, how does it impact modern audiences?
CHAPTER V
THE CODA

Analyzing the Song

The song of action is now coming to a close. The orchestra of Stanislavski’s physical action and chorus of Mamet’s verbal action perform in perfect harmony – allowing onlookers to be swept up in the music.

Due to the knowledge gained from the research presented in the preceding chapters, the decline of artistic awareness among many in the United States and around the world need not be all-encompassing. When theatre artists take a wider view of action as do Stanislavski and Mamet, clarity begins to emerge for audience members despite their inexperience with live performance. When Stanislavski’s melody of physical action and Mamet’s lyrics of verbal action are paired together in the greater song of action, there is little beyond the grasp of the audience’s understanding. This practice also frees the actor to tap into his inherent qualities in order to play honestly and naturally. Mamet’s students agreed with this notion in A Practical Handbook for the Actor:

There is nothing magical about the craft of acting. Learning to act means becoming physically able to execute the skills we have outlined for you. Acting is a set of skills that you can learn with the proper training. Variables such as talent are beyond your control, and, contrary to popular belief, do little to make you a good actor. The natural qualities composing talent that actors are told they must possess – e.g., sensitivity, vulnerability, and high awareness of their senses – are of little consequence for this reason: every human being already has them. What makes an actor a good one is his ability to act on the impulses his humanity creates in him. (Bruder 84)
Employing the actor’s natural impulses removes histrionics from performance and allows him to connect with audiences in a profound way. No longer is he a “stage ornament” presenting stereotypical poses and gestures, but a living, breathing human being whose personal story can relate to almost anyone witnessing the action.

Conclusion

According to the Billboard Music Chart, an instrumental song has not topped the charts since the 1980s. Therefore, if a songwriter is going to write a hit song in this current day and age, he needs both music and lyrics. The same is true of any theatre artist. Both the music of physical action and the lyrics of verbal action must be present to impact modern audiences. The current methods available to help the actor achieve this are extremely valuable, but are not the “be all, end all.” The most important aspect of the training is setting an actor’s inherent humanity free to do the work for him. In Benedetti’s Stanislavski: An Introduction, Stanislavski defines this idea best when describing his system as a useful tool, but not comprehensive:

The ‘System’ is a guide. Open it and read it. The ‘System’ is a reference book, not a philosophy. Where philosophy begins the ‘System’ ends. You cannot act the ‘System’: you can work with it at home but on stage you must put it on one side.

There is no ‘System’. There is only nature. My life’s object has been to get as near as I can to the so-called ‘System’, i.e., to the nature of creation.

The laws of art are the laws of nature. The birth of a child, the growth of a tree, the creation of a character are manifestations of the same order. The establishment of the ‘System’, i.e., the laws of the creative process, is essential because on the stage, by the fact of being public, the work of nature is violated and its laws infringed. The ‘System’ re-establishes these laws; it advances human nature as the norm. Turmoil, fear of the crowd, bad taste, false traditions deform nature.

The first aspect of the method is to get the unconscious to work. The second is, once it starts, to leave it alone. (Benedetti 99-100)
When the actor pursues a broad understanding of action, the song of action plays through the natural resources at his disposal and captures the imagination of audiences everywhere. Though the song of action is now complete, it is never truly finished. It continues to play out in the lives of actors around the world. It is constantly evolving as each generation interprets the essential element of theatre – action.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The evolving nature of the song of action can proceed in a number of ways. One of the main suggested paths of exploration is discovering practical methods of combining physical action and verbal action. Transforming this concept into a formal training regimen would allow it to become more accessible to the theatre community and enhance audience response.

Another suggested path of exploration is in-depth research into the men and women that influenced Stanislavski and Mamet. Every theatre artist uses elements of teaching that work best in his context. However, there are many concepts that are forgotten along the way. Determining the methods that were disregarded may provide further insight into the overall song of action.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Harmonization We can add colors underneath a melody to "harmonize" it. Harmonization is the process of adding these colors or notes. If a song already has chords, you can "re-harmonize" it, which means the melody stays the same, but the chords and colors beneath it are your own. Chord Melody A guitar allows us to play melodies and chords at the same time. Combine both, and you have a "chord melody." From now on, think about a chord in two parts: the lower chord + the top (melody) note. Here's TAB for the examples in the video above: Download TAB (PDF). These are just short examples to get you started. We'll go deeper into each technique in the following lessons. Next steps. Play through each example slowly. Use the same concepts in different keys (try G major.) Two broad approaches are employed in the study of music: Analysis: we learn to employ commonly accepted techniques and specialized language to describe musical organization. These Durational values are symbols that represent time and action in musical space: they delineate and mark off varying values of sound (and silence) in a composition. Additionally, they are proportional to one another as to how they may be divided from larger into smaller values. There have been many differing notational systems throughout the history of music. [Verse 1] It starts in the theatre, a night of encounters If I hadn't been there, if not for a cigarette. [Chorus] And you could see it change Look past the blinding light, look past the blinding light We'll just keep talking on Tell me your favourite things. [Verse 2] Difference in opinion was never an issue Collect all your questions, 'cause this time we've all night. [Chorus] And you could see it change Look past the blinding light, look past the blinding light We'll just keep talking on and on, oh, oh, oh Tell me your favourite things