

# THE ACTOR'S "SECOND NATURE" IN STANISLAVSKY'S SYSTEM

CLAUDIA ENE

I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film, Bucharest, Romania  
*claudia.ene@unatc.ro*

**Abstract:** *An Actor Prepares* is a work of its time, influenced by contemporary ideas about art and science, while also falling prey to the ideological context of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russia. Stanislavsky's enduring preoccupation with human nature compelled him to constantly seek means of expressing the inexpressible. The terms he employed in his work originated from his readings in psychology, yoga, as well as philosophy and theosophy. To decipher his system, it is necessary to revisit the sources that Stanislavsky accumulated throughout his life.

**Keywords:** Stanislavsky, acting, psychology, *An Actor Prepares*, acting method.

**How to cite:** Ene, C. (2026) "The Actor's «Second Nature» in Stanislavsky's System", *Concept* 1(32), pp. 261-271. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37130/7bg87875>.

The Romanian school of theatre aims, through its academic programs, to thoroughly prepare future Romanian actors, so that they may shape new, valuable generations with undeniable skills. This endeavor takes place within a society characterized by a distinctly inter- and transdisciplinary nature, in which fields and disciplines—once considered unrelated—are beginning to meet, communicate, and offer new perspectives.

Theatre itself is increasingly collaborating with other disciplines: for instance, specific games and exercises help doctors improve their relationship with patients; journalism students learn to communicate even more effectively; researchers conduct experiments alongside actors to understand how the transition from self to character operates.

Even we, within the acting laboratory, go (or should go) beyond the mere teaching of aspects such as a scene's objective, its themes and subthemes, its theatrical parameters, and so on. We move toward the student, toward their personal experience, encouraging them to know themselves and to discover both their identity and their alterities—their "possible" selves.

However, this entire process becomes impossible when we lack a proper command of the terms specific to our art. Words such as "concept," "spirit," "affective memory," and many others have lost their original meaning over time. Yet there can be no art of acting without a solid foundation - one in which we understand what we are speaking about, not only to convey the information to the student but also to ensure that the student truly understands it. And, beyond that, that they put into practice what they have learned.

With this in mind, I began my research, which—although primarily focused on understanding and developing the concept of a specific logical mechanism of thought—started with the contextualization of Stanislavsky's work and its placement within history, culture, and society.

### ***Research Methods***

The research is based on an interdisciplinary theoretical analysis, combining elements from Stanislavsky's work with insights from psychology, and emphasizing the intersection between theatre, psychology, philosophy, and the natural sciences, identifying common concepts. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, I employed a historical and contextual analysis, examining the cultural, social, and ideological influences of the period. Furthermore, through a comparative analysis, I highlighted the theoretical sources of Stanislavsky's system—comparing his ideas with works in philosophy and psychology. Finally, the terminological analysis allowed me to underline the importance of clarifying the meanings of key terms in the art of acting, such as “affective memory.”

Since the art of acting is deeply subjective, the research could not exclude the introspective method, reflected in the analysis of how both Stanislavsky and contemporary actors and students observe, become aware of, and analyze their own creative means. Introspection is used as a tool for understanding the actor's inner process, paving the way for the practical application of these concepts within their training process (through exercises and games).

### ***The Nature of Stanislavsky's Work***

Stanislavsky's Method or System (even though the theorist himself avoided this term, as it implies rigidity and closure) emerged because the pedagogue not only had the ability to observe, become aware of, and analyze his own techniques and those of other actors, but also possessed a strong intuition when it came to working with artists. Thanks to the vast knowledge he accumulated throughout his life—which can be discovered by closely reading *An Actor's Work*—he succeeded in reflecting the era he lived in and constructing a coherent poetics for the actor. However, this coherence is maintained only insofar as we understand the origins of the terms and techniques he employed.

It is well known that Stanislavsky was deeply concerned with human nature, and although the initial reason he wrote *An Actor's Work* was largely financial, he left behind a multitude of exercises and observations that remain relevant today in our work with students. Perhaps the most famous influence on his psychotechnique was that of Théodule Ribot,<sup>1</sup> whom Stanislavsky mentions

---

1 b. 1839 – d. 1916; Ribot is considered one of the founders of the French school of empirical psychology. He established the first French psychology laboratory at the Collège de France. He published numerous works on heredity, memory, will, thought, attention, and emotion. Regarding his influence on Stanislavsky, the pedagogue drew from Ribot's theories on empiricism and affective memory. Ribot's name can be found in the chapter on emotional memory in *An Actor's Work with Himself* (1956) p. 212.

explicitly in his book. Ribot was one of the founders of the French school of empirical psychology, and Stanislavsky “owned six of Ribot’s books, read them voraciously, and filled their margins with notes” (Carnicke, p. 155). Among them was *La Mémoire Affective* (*Affective Memory*), which inspired Stanislavsky in his work with actors. However, this was not the only external source that shaped what became one of the most widely used acting methods.

Stanislavsky can be said to have oscillated between two worlds: on one hand, he was a man of his times, influenced by contemporary ideas in art and science and forced to adapt to the ideological context of his later years; on the other, his enduring focus on the human being and what is profoundly human kept him ahead of his time. His intuitions regarding the mechanisms of inner creative processes were later confirmed or expanded by the sciences. He was profoundly influenced by psychology, the humanities, yoga, and even theosophy<sup>2</sup>, borrowing concepts, definitions, and exercises from reference works that today form part of his System. However, one must also understand the context in which he published his work. Following the Russian Empire’s efforts to modernize and stabilize economically, socially, and militarily, the Reform for the Abolition of Serfdom had been enacted only two years before Stanislavsky’s birth. The pressure from the reform’s beneficiaries remained, and the following decades led Russia into crisis—culminating in the Tsar’s abdication, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the establishment of a new Marxist regime.

As a result, at the time of publication and in the years that followed, numerous terms were altered to align with ideological demands, while others were viewed with suspicion. In 1928 and 1929, Stanislavsky’s close friend Lyubov Gurevich warned him about using “affective memory,” which contradicted the Soviet behaviorist psychology of the time. Later, in 1931, she again cautioned him against using terms such as “the life of the human spirit,” “soul,” and “the magic if” (suggesting instead “the creative if”), as these notions denoted immaterial ideas rejected by dialectical materialism. In 1936, the Soviet leadership labeled these terms as unclear and added “intuition” and “subconscious” to the list.

Stanislavsky’s method subtly reflects his worldview on the artist, method, theatre, and life—hence the need to analyze its philosophical foundation. His philosophy evolved from the ideas of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Georg Hegel, and Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling, who explored the relationship between nature, consciousness, and spirit. Specifically, “Nature is visible Spirit; Spirit is invisible

2 Etymologically, *theosophy* means “knowledge of divine things.” In essence, it is a philosophical and religious doctrine according to which the knowledge of God is revealed through nature, and man, enlightened by God, undergoes transformation and strives to unite with the divine.

Nature” (Ellenberger, p. 202). Stanislavsky’s writings abound in references to nature: psychotechnique must become the actor’s second nature. “The actor’s work lies in the power of the most skillful artist—our organic nature. No acting technique, however refined, compares to it, because our organic nature governs all” (Stanislavsky, p. 29). The subconscious creation Stanislavsky refers to throughout his work involves the direct participation of the spiritual nature. The unmediated manifestation of the “invisible” is essential and represents the actor’s ultimate goal: to create the spiritual life of the role and embody it—the invisible nature—in an artistic form (visible). In Stanislavsky’s vision, man represents the highest expression of nature’s power.

The second half of the 19th century also saw developments in analytic psychology and the study of religion. Wilhelm Wundt, Gustav Fechner, as well as Edouard von Hartmann and Harald Høffding published works exploring the philosophy and psychology of religion. The preoccupation with nature, consciousness, and spirit, along with studies on religion and myth, led theosophy and anthroposophy to become central points of interest for thinkers of the time—including Stanislavsky<sup>3</sup>. Society was deeply engaged in the search for this invisible spirit. Alongside philosophy and religious studies emerged associationist psychology, where the unconscious became a key topic. In defining it, Stanislavsky was significantly influenced by Edouard von Hartmann’s work<sup>4</sup>, as well as by yoga and psychology through William James. It is worth noting that, although “unconscious” and “subconscious” have different meanings in psychology, according to Crohn Schmitt, Stanislavsky used the two interchangeably (Crohn Schmitt, p. 346).

### ***The most famous principle borrowed from psychology: Affective memory***

The best-known concept Stanislavsky borrowed from psychology is that of affective memory<sup>5</sup>, found in Ribot’s work of the same name. “Affect” broadly referred to emotions, feelings, states, motivations, desires, and instincts. Ribot

3 An important work that discusses the occult movements in Russia at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century is Maria Carlson’s *No Religion Higher than Truth* (1993, Princeton University Press). Centered on the theosophical ideas promoted by Helena Blavatsky, the book examines the influence of occult movements in Russia, the criticisms directed at them, as well as the role of theosophy in shaping the philosophical dialogues of the time.

4 At the core of Edouard von Hartmann’s system lies the fundamental concept of the unconscious, which has a more metaphysical than psychological dimension – it does not recognize space, time, or human individuality. Von Hartmann’s concept of the unconscious is based on the Hegelian idea of rationality and the Schopenhauerian idea of irrational will. He is considered one of the precursors of psychoanalysis.

5 Replaced by Stanislavsky in *An Actor’s Work with Himself* with “emotional memory” due to political reasons.

believed that emotionally charged images—visual, auditory, tactile, verbal, or those arising from internal sensations, pleasure, and pain—could be recalled both spontaneously and voluntarily. Based on his experiments, Ribot concluded that emotional memory was rare in most people but necessarily frequent among artists.<sup>6</sup> Stanislavsky argued that this capacity could be consciously trained, and he developed exercises for emotional and sensory memory.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the artist could learn to control this capacity before an audience.

Although emotion is not clearly defined in Stanislavsky's work, it is evident that emotion is not merely the external expression of a feeling; on stage, it must be authentic—"as in life." Following Ribot (and indirectly Johann Friedrich Herbart), emotion vibrates through the entire body and arises from intelligence and the coexistence of conflicting ideas within the mind. Thus, emotions are governed by a higher faculty—thought—which organizes them coherently and manifests in acting through movement and action—the body itself. Stanislavsky adopted Ribot's position that emotions and feelings originate in movement. For the French psychologist, there can be no thought without expression, without its materialization in muscular activity.

The paradigm shift following the Revolution led Soviet scholars to associate Stanislavsky's work with that of Sechenov and Pavlov<sup>8</sup>, distancing it from Ribot. Both studied thought and emotion through their physiological manifestations, arguing that there is no thought without muscular activity. With the 19th-century discoveries on the nervous system, neurons, and reflex arcs, Sechenov viewed thought and emotion as reflexive, mechanical activities. Opposing idealists like Fichte and Schelling, he rejected Ribot's introspective method in favor of experimental laboratory research.

Stanislavsky highlighted Sechenov's idea that the brain is an organ of the spirit, not the other way around—"a mechanism that, once set in motion by a cause, produces external phenomena expressing physical activity" (Sechenov, p. 3). Generally, thought causes action; yet unlike Ribot, Sechenov believed every action begins with external stimulation. Without it, thought cannot exist. Stanislavsky, however, viewed behavior as driven by voluntary action. He

6 Ribot's experiment, described in *The Logic of the Sentiments*, consisted of a questionnaire given to 60 individuals, asking them to transcribe their own experiences regarding spontaneous memories related to pleasure, pain, sensations, emotions, memories associated with other events and thoughts they had, as well as voluntary recollections of emotional events and sensory experiences.

7 In Stanislavsky's work, sense memory is closely linked to emotional memory. He believes that recalling an emotion is equivalent to, or dependent on, the recollection of sensory experiences - such as the smell or taste of something. For this reason, he developed exercises to train the five senses - for example, students are asked to imagine the taste of caviar or the smell of salmon.

8 Physiologist P.V. Simonov stated in the 1960s that Stanislavsky's work reinforced and helped develop Pavlov's theory of conditioned reflexes.

retained from Sechenov those ideas aligning with Ribot and William James—the relationship between thought and movement, the inseparability of emotion and physical manifestation, and the notion that imaginatively recreating a past experience has the same effect as reliving it in the present.

Pavlov continued Sechenov's work, bringing the study of psychic phenomena into the laboratory through specific scientific methods. His goal was to study the physiology of human mental activity, grounding psychology in the natural sciences and removing its subjective character. Although Stanislavsky relied on introspection—a method Pavlov rejected—he acknowledged that Pavlov's research could shed light on the mystery of human actions.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The „second nature” of the actor/Actor’s „second nature”***

According to Stanislavsky, the actor's trained means of expression must become their second nature. Rose Whyman compared what Stanislavsky meant by “second nature” with psychologist William James's<sup>10</sup> view of the concept, as both were interested in memory and learning.

Stanislavsky proposed that training exercises should be performed daily and systematically so they would become ingrained in the actor's “physical nature,” transforming new skills into second nature. He often emphasized the need for consistent practice, comparing the actor to a musician who must care for their instrument. Eugenio Barba described what happened at the start of the 20th century as a “revolution of the invisible,” driven by discoveries in psychology, physics, and physiology, which led to a “century of exercises” in theatre (Barba, p. 128)—for it is only through specific exercises that one can access the “invisible,” the spirit of the role.

Since Stanislavsky, acting students have been encouraged to integrate specific training into their daily lives, not limiting it to the studio. Concepts such as “routine,” “habit,” and “second nature,” frequently discussed by Stanislavsky, are grounded in William James's psychological theories of learning, which describe habit as a second nature.

Without training what cultivates the actor's organic, living capacity for emotion, performance becomes mechanical and formal. “Second nature” refers

9 The Russian Theatre Organization aimed to establish a laboratory to study the actor's creativity, involving a psychologist, a physiologist, a psychiatrist, a neurologist, and a theatre practitioner, to which members of Pavlov's school and Pavlov himself would have been added.

10 It seems that James was not only passionate about psychology and psychoanalysis but also about occult disciplines. Alongside the philosopher Henri Bergson, he was a member of the London Society for Psychical Research. The topics of discussion included telepathy, occultism, communication with the dead, and ghostly apparitions.

to the assimilation of inner abilities developed through daily practice - such as observation. First-year students, for example, are encouraged to observe their surroundings in minute detail, from buildings to people. Initially a conscious, deliberate exercise, observation gradually becomes a reflex requiring no conscious control—a concept also found in James’s *Principles of Psychology*. Such habits make the actor’s work easier and more efficient: instead of consciously managing observation, emotional memory, or body movements, the artist can focus on action and experiencing the role. Otherwise, attention scatters in many directions—observation, voice, memory, emotion.

Thus, William James’s account of habit as “second nature” offers a foundational framework for understanding how embodied repetition shapes human behavior. In his view, repeated motor actions engrave stable pathways in the nervous system, allowing complex behaviors to occur with minimal conscious effort. This conception positions habit not as a mere convenience but as a constitutive force in character formation: one becomes what one repeatedly does. Closely linked to this is James’s “as if” principle, according to which individuals can cultivate inner states—confidence, resolve, emotional steadiness—by enacting their external manifestations. Action, therefore, is not an aftereffect of belief but its generator; it transforms intention into lived psychological reality.

Stanislavsky drew extensively on these principles when developing his actor-training system. The rigorous daily cultivation of technical skills such as breath control, vocal placement, physical alignment, reflects James’s argument that repeated practice produces automaticity. Once these skills no longer demand conscious attention, the actor gains access to a deeper layer of emotional and imaginative responsiveness. Stanislavsky’s rehearsal methods similarly operationalize the “as if” principle: by enacting the physical behavior of a character under fictional circumstances, the actor elicits authentic psychological responses. Across this process, character does not emerge as a constructed façade but as a trained coherence of action, sensation, and intention, shaped through disciplined repetition.

Theory can be applied in class using specific exercises. For example, students select a single psychological quality of the character (for example, assurance or hesitancy) and explore its physical correlates in posture, gait, and spatial relationship to others. They repeat and refine this physical pattern across multiple passes. The aim is to allow the chosen quality to migrate from conscious fabrication into embodied habit, demonstrating James’s principle that repeated action precedes and produces inner experience.

Another exercise implies physicality as well. Each student establishes a neutral physical cue, such as a specific hand placement. Upon performing the

cue, the student must transition immediately into a designated objective-driven physical state (e.g., urgency, concealment, persuasion). Through repetition, the transition becomes rapid and reliable, illustrating James's claim that new neural pathways form only through enacted behavior and supporting Stanislavski's insistence on dependable, "second-nature" responsiveness in performance.

Last, but not least, a third exercise requires students to construct a short, repeatable physical sequence in which a clear objective is pursued and an equally clear obstacle interferes with its completion. For example, the objective might be to reach a specific chair, while the obstacle is an imposed physical constraint, such as maintaining an unusual gait or carrying an object that limits movement. Students repeat the same sequence multiple times, refining the physical logic of their actions until the sequence can be executed smoothly, without conscious deliberation.

James maintained that habit is formed through the repetition of purposeful motor actions, which eventually establish stable neural pathways that render execution automatic. By rehearsing an objective-driven sequence repeatedly, students turn deliberate physical choices into reliable embodied habits. The focus on action in relation to a concrete aim mirrors James's argument that behavior acquires meaning and psychological force only when tied to intention.

On the other hand, Stanislavsky emphasized that a character's behavior emerges from the pursuit of objectives under given circumstances. This exercise supports that principle by training students to link physical action with intention, rather than treating movement as decorative or arbitrary. As students refine the sequence, the physical behavior begins to operate at the level of "second nature," freeing cognitive and emotional resources for more complex inner work. The repetition also reinforces Stanislavsky's insistence that emotional truth arises not from forced feeling but from consistent, purposeful action.

Therefore, this exercise provides a practical bridge between James's psychology of habit and Stanislavsky's actor-training methodology, demonstrating how embodied repetition allows goal-oriented behavior to take root as an automatic, expressive resource in performance.

Routine and automatism serve, as James puts it, to "liberate the mind." On stage, the actor does not experience a mere emotional state but a scenic one. They are not truly alone but experience the feeling of solitude before an audience. The actor's preparation aims to cultivate this state - essential to creation. A psychotechnique that becomes second nature allows the actor to withstand the abnormal creative conditions of public performance.

However, "second nature" must not be confused with the mechanical repetition of acting techniques, as in craft or representational art. Stanislavsky

referred to habits developed through exercises aimed at improving diction, phonation, and relaxation. All these support the actor in creating “the life of the human spirit,”<sup>11</sup> where “spirit” encompasses the actor’s entire being.

For this reason, it is essential to apply what Cojar proposed in his poetics: the despecialization of the student in order to specialize them as an artist. Exercises and games that train the senses, perception, and imagination should lead to a routine—or, more happily put, a certain attitude, a way of being. The acting studio cannot limit itself to forming key professional competencies; it must, above all, be a space for self-discovery, understanding the world, and exploring inner mechanisms. And this begins with a solid understanding of the terminology we use.

### Conclusions

The analysis of Stanislavsky’s work and its context reveals a deeply interdisciplinary vision - one that fuses theatre with psychology, philosophy, and the study of human nature. His System is not merely a “manual” for beginning students but a tool for (self)knowledge—of the self, of inner mechanisms, and of the relationship between thought, action, and emotion.

The clarity of the terms he employed proves essential for accurately transmitting fundamental concepts from teacher to student and for their internalization through self-exploration. By constantly drawing upon other disciplines, Stanislavsky created a living, open system, adaptable both to the contemporary context and to each student individually.

Thus, this research reaffirms the relevance, importance, and vitality of his method: an art of acting grounded in knowledge, introspection, and balance between body and spirit. Properly understood, the System can transform the acting studio into a place of self-discovery, reflection, and the cultivation of a “second nature” that makes authentic stage creation possible.

### References:

1. Banu, G., Tonitza-Iordache, M. (1975) *Arta Teatrului*. București: Editura Enciclopedică Română.
2. Barba, E. (1997) „An Amulet made of Memory: the Significance of Exercises in the Actor’s Dramaturgy”, TDR, XLI, No. 4 (Winter)
3. Bețiu, M. (2025) *On Analysing The Stage Process*, 2nd edn. Trans. by Andra Irina Porumbeanu, *Theatre Education Series*, Bucharest: UNATC Press & Universitaria Craiova Press.

11 It seems that Stanislavsky may have borrowed this expression from an essay by Chernyshevsky on Tolstoy’s talent for depicting human consciousness through his power of introspection. The essay in question is *Childhood and Youth: War Stories by Count L.N. Tolstoy*.

4. Brook, P. (2014) *Spațiul gol*. București: Nemira.
5. Carnicke, S.M. (2009) *Stanislavsky in Focus: An Acting Master for the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Routledge.
6. Cojar, I. (2025) *Poetics of the Actor's Art*. UNATC Classics Series. Translated by Maria Alexe, 2nd edn., Bucharest: UNATC Press & Paideia.
7. Crohn Schmitt, N. (1986) "Stanislavsky, Creativity and the Unconscious", *New Theatre Quarterly*, 2/issue 8, Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X00002359>.
8. Darie, B. (2025) *A Course on the Art of the Actor: Improvisation*. Translated by Ana Popovici. Theatre Education Series. Bucharest: UNATC Press & Universitaria Craiova Press.
9. Ellenberger, H.F. (1970) *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, New York: Basic Books.
10. Ene, C. (2025) *Insertii psihologice in cunoasterea si dezvoltarea mecanismului logic specific de gandire in arta actorului*. Colecția Educație teatrală. UNATC Press & Universitaria Craiova.
11. Sechenov, M. (1965) *Reflexes of the Brain*, Cambridge: Massachusetts.
12. Stanislavski, K.S. (1956) *Munca actorului cu sine însuși*, București : Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă.
13. Whyman, R. (2008) *The Stanislavsky System of Acting*, Cambridge UK, New York: Cambridge University Press.

**Claudia Ene** is an actress, coordinator of theatre workshops for children, and holds a PhD in Theatre and Performing Arts from the I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest. Her doctoral research explored methods of actor training through an interdisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from psychology and philosophy to identify new ways of enhancing the educational process for acting students. She served as a University Assistant in the Acting Department at the I.L. Caragiale UNATC, where she contributed to the development of a new generation of actors. She was part of marketing teams for cultural, education and literacy NGOs, as Creative Lead, Social Media Manager and Content Specialist. She is currently an independent actress, based in Bucharest.