

# **Strasberg at the Actors Studio: Tape Recorded Sessions**

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### **Chapter III**

#### **Training: Relaxation**

The first thing Strasberg does, both in his private classes and at the Studio, is to check the actor for tension. Very few of us are fully relaxed in live, but we are not usually aware of tension until it becomes extreme and shows itself through pain. Tension can be so habitual that when relaxation is induced we feel actually as if a great weight has been removed, as if the pull of gravity were somehow lessened. Strasberg's highly developed powers of observation enable him to point out the manifestations of tension in actors' bodies, voices, even in the expression of their faces.

Long ago Strasberg enunciated his belief that "when there is tension, one cannot think or feel." But he also constantly emphasized the opposite and positive sense of this idea: the human being is naturally expressive. When he is relaxed and really thinking about or paying attention to something, or even when random thoughts move through his consciousness, impulses pass without interruption into pure expression. The voice changes. Distortions in the way the body or the head or the arms and shoulders are held disappear. The expression of the face changes. The person actually takes on a new appearance.

Strasberg knows that calling the actor's attention to his tensions is merely the first step in dealing with them. In the long run the actor must be reconditioned to function in a state of relaxation. This is accomplished by making him aware of the particular causes of tension in himself. Relaxing the tensions acquired in a lifetime and in years of wrong acting may take further long years of conscious hard work in which deliberate relaxation plays a part in all stages of activity. Relaxation is worked at as a separate activity, but it is also made a conscious part of all acting work. And as he comes to understand what causes his particular tensions and the extent to which he can naturally respond when relaxed and concentrated, the actor's belief grows, and belief in turn encourages further relaxation. But it cannot be emphasized too strongly that tension cannot be eradicated by paying lip service to an idea.

Tension is the occupational disease of the actor. Relaxation is the foundation on which almost all actors' work is based. Stanislavski posited that relaxation is an actual professional activity for the actor. When you see good performers, one of the things that makes them good is a certain amount of relaxation. We may not always be aware of exactly what they're doing. We may refer to their sense of ease or authority, but in fact it is relaxation that we are noticing.

The ordinary actor sometimes achieves relaxation by himself as a result of working on the stage, but that takes about twenty years- literally. If you watch the development of an actor, you see that as he starts off he is young and energetic- and tense. After about ten years he begins to overcome some of the tension but nothing really takes its place. After about twenty years a wonderful thing begins to happen.

It has almost nothing to do with whether he is good or bad. He simply feels that when he comes on the stage he is there to stay. And he gains the wonderful ease that is part of the medal you earn by being in the theatre a certain amount of time.

Stanislavski stressed relaxation as the essential first stage in almost all acting work. Without relaxation a lot of things an actor may rightly want to do will be deformed as they enter his instrument, because the instrument itself sets up resistance through tension. When that happens, the actor cannot achieve a real relation between what he is thinking and the expression which should be part of that thought or experience. The expression becomes contaminated.

Stanislavski said that a lot of actors think they are doing what he recommends but that actually because of tension they continue acting as they did before. The actor may think the opposite and even speak of himself as changed, but the impulse coming into the body merely takes on the same aspect as before and can't really quite get through as a fresh impulse and response.

Recently, having read Stanislavski's emphasis on relaxation and being reminded of the extent to which he begs the actor to make the effort to relax. I have tried in my private classes to stress relaxation with certain people who were having difficulty. Their work was coming along, but slowly. The results they obtained were somehow not commensurate with what they seemed entitled to achieve. To these people I said, "Now, wait a minute. Let us take a longer time to relax. We have told you to relax, but obviously you are not yet relaxed. So take all the time allotted to the exercise if necessary, just to relax. If you never get to the exercise, I don't care."

I have been amazed to find that in certain cases the tension has been so strong that nothing, no matter how real and vivid, could come through. Sometimes when the actors just start to relax, the release of impulse is so strong that we could swear that the actor is deliberately expressing. Yet at the end when you ask him, "Well, what did you try to do?" he confounds you by saying, "nothing. I just tried to relax." Simple relaxation permits a lot of things locked in the instrument to come out.

Tension is both physical and mental. Physical tension is exactly that. Stanislavski urges the actors to use a highly particularized way of dealing with physical tension. He says that the actor has to learn to control each muscle separately. The actor picks out one muscle at a time and leans to control it. Well, I think he is right, but we would never get to acting if we really went into it on so detailed a level.

I have found a more convenient form of training in relaxation. It takes quite a lot of time but not much as Stanislavski recommends. Wherever the actor is, sitting or standing, he finds a position for the body in which he could go to sleep. For example, if you take an overnight ride in a car or on a train, it is not easy to fall asleep, and yet somehow you fiddle around until you get in a position in which the pressures are taken off the body so that it can begin to relax physically. Only then can you begin to fall asleep.

We ask the actor in training to try to find such a position. We don't want him actually to go to sleep, but we want him to get to the point where he begins to be convinced, "Yes, I've got it. If I kept this up, I could, if I wanted, go to sleep." This is difficult to do, but it tests the actor's physical relaxation very well.

We then proceed to the second phase dealing with tension. Whatever relaxation is not thus accomplished on the physical plane, we try to accomplish on the mental plane. To me mental tension is an even worse enemy than purely physical tension. Physical tension is more or less easily observable. Mental tension is not so easy to observe. I have found that three areas are indicators of mental tension. This discovery does not stem from theory or scientific observation but purely from practice.

The first of these is at the temples, where you find the so-called blue nerves. When people are tense, you find them pressing the finger tips to these areas without knowing they are doing it. Headaches come here. Here a lot of nerves and blood vessels feed into the brain. We simply ask the actor to become aware of this area and to permit these nerves to relax. You will be surprised how a real weight will lift if in life you will simply say, "Wait, let me see if I'm tense or not," and begin relaxation in this area. However, we do not encourage the actor to do anything with this hands, because he cannot in the middle of playing Hamlet rub his temples in order to get relaxed. He has to be able to control the relaxation through inner concentration.

The second is from the bridge of the nose into the eyelids. Only recently have I realized that this area is involved in life with a great deal of automatic response. It is so responsive that is somebody's hand suddenly comes close to my eyes, the eyelids will close. I don't know that that hand has any bad intentions, but the eyes protect themselves so automatically that they close before the mind can even examine the potential danger. On the street as soon as a particle of dust touches an eyelash, the eyes close. This defensive mechanism is so active and so automotive that a great deal of tension builds up. The tension is relaxed simply by permitting the eyelids to droop. As the lids come down, here again you can feel the weight actually leaving. Sometimes when you relax this area, you get a strange feeling that you are losing control. You have gotten so used to tension as your personal state of equilibrium that when you relax, the muscles momentarily cannot find their own level.

The third is around the mouth. Early in life one of the most important of the human being's automatic processes begins to manifest itself here. Thought is immediately reduced to words. Before the child knows what his next word is going to be, it has always been said. Imagine how active these muscles are. They are so active and automatic that again a lot of tension builds up, because as you grow older there are a lot of things you feel like saying but don't say. The price you pay for that is tension. You have to relax the mouth area by releasing the energy there just as when you are drunk and don't worry about how you are speaking.

Thus, to the actor here at the Studio, who really wants to find out what relaxation can do, I say, "let's do the exercise for pure relaxation." We take half an hour or forty minutes. We do nothing. The actors does everything. First, he relaxes physically in the way I have described. After he is physically relaxed, he then goes through the three areas. He tries to relax the temple area. Then he tries to relax the eyes. Finally he tries to relax the whole mouth area so that the tension is as much as possible reduced. That is an exercise in itself, and we have found extraordinary results from it.

Sometimes the talent of the actor reveals itself for the first time so fully and so unexpectedly as to be startling. The actor becomes completely responsive. His instrument gives forth a new depth of resonance. Emotion that has habitually held back suddenly rushes forth. The actor becomes real- not merely simple or natural. He becomes fully concentrated. He unveils totally unsuspected aspects and elements of himself, but with such a degree of each and authority that he seems literally to have taken off a mask, to have emerged from a disguise that previously had mothered and concealed his true personality. Yet all he did was relax.