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Character and Scene 1

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### Honors Project

Stanislavski stresses in his book *An Actor's Work* that an actor must be driven by an objective at all times. Objectives are achieved by actions; each action must be specific for it to inspire the actor to subconsciously behave in a normal manner. The purpose of having an objective is so that the actor might live in the moment of his or her character by being fully immersed in the given circumstances of the play. Similarly, in *Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi states that a person must have complex goals to challenge him or her in a way that allows for optimal experience. Optimal experience is a technique that allows a goal to be completed in the most efficient way by utilizing the subconscious. This is important because it makes the present moment more enjoyable. What both men are trying to prove is that a person performs in the most ideal way when they are focused on a complex and specific goal or objective. Therefore, you can examine Stanislavski's ideas on concentration and imagination, and connect it to the psychological study of Csikszentmihalyi's indicators of flow.

Stanislavski talks about the importance of concentration in *Year One: Experiencing of An Actor's Work*. In the text, it states that the minute you let the outside world creep into your work on stage, you are no longer giving an honest performance (Stanislavski). Acting requires complete and total concentration on what is happening on stage at that specific moment in time. If an actor is thinking about something outside the

circumstances of the play, his or her character will immediately be detached from the scene. This causes a disruption of the inspiration that stems from total immersion.

For example, in *An Actor's Work*, the fictional teacher Tortsov asks his students which of them is missing a heel. While they are occupied with their shoes, his secretary walks in and out of the auditorium unnoticed. Stanislavski uses this experiment to prove that if you are completely engrossed in a specific activity, then you will not notice what is going around you if it does not have to do with the task at hand. Stanislavski argues that when the curtain is open and the actor is in view of the audience, his or her concentration is pulled away from his or her life on stage. As soon as he is aware of the audience, he loses sight of his objective and is invaded with thoughts that have nothing to do with his character. Stanislavski explains that if concentration can be maintained and you can stay fully focused on the task or objective at hand, said task or objective could be achieved with no interference from wayward thoughts. The more interesting the objectives and given circumstances are to the actor, the easier it is to remain fully immersed in the character.

One indicator of flow is the total immersion in a goal-oriented task. This complete concentration is necessary for optimal experience. If a person lets their mind wander away from what is happening at that moment, they will no longer be working towards efficiency because their mind will be divided. Csikszentmihalyi calls this *psychic entropy*, which occurs when the consciousness is impaired by information that is not helpful in achieving its goal. The key to optimal experience is having your entire mind and body concentrated on a singular job so that it can be done efficiently and with dispatch. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the consciousness is constantly bombarded by

information that has the potential to either disrupt or reinforce the goal at stake.

Therefore, to achieve flow, a person must be able to identify and concentrate on the reinforcing information and block out any disruption. The minute that you lose concentration, you are letting go of the natural flow of life by clouding your mind with other issues that are not related to what you have set out to accomplish.

In both Stanislavski and Csikszentmihalyi's works, the key to maintaining concentration is through the use of the imagination. Imagination allows for a glimpse into the subconscious and the more detailed your imagination is, the easier it is to become immersed in a creative state. Stanislavski stresses the importance of the imagination when he talks about given circumstances. As an actor, a person is responsible for creating a life for his or her character beyond what is written on the page. His job as an artist is to fill in the blank areas of a character's life with explicit detail to fuel the imagination and make a two-dimensional character into a three dimensional human being.

Csikszentmihalyi uses imagination as a tool to add complexity and specificity to a task, which sparks a sense of enjoyment when an objective is achieved.

In *Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi discusses the eight elements that lead to enjoyment. One of the first elements is partaking in a difficult activity that requires skills. He directly points out that skills need not be physically demanding but also include "the ability to translate words into images, to empathize with fictional characters...and so on" (Csikszentmihalyi 50). This idea supports that the imagination is a skill that can be honed and challenged accordingly to jumpstart a person into a state of enjoyment and therefore, optimal experience. The more complex your imagination, the more satisfying it will be if the goal is achieved. For example, if a person is competing in a sports event but uses his

imagination and makes the stakes more complex to where he feels like he is playing a championship game, the enjoyment he will feel from accomplishing the goal will be more satisfying than if it were just any casual sporting event.

Imagination is also used in flow to bring about specific behaviors or experiences that help get a person through every day life. It has been shown, to achieve experiences of enjoyment and flow, people will do anything to alter the consciousness. For example, a girl playing with her doll and her brother playing cowboy experience the same state of flow as our ancestors wearing the masks of the gods, because they are becoming something different and more complex, than what is expected of us day to day (Csikszentmihalyi 78). If the complexity of a person's imagination continues to expand and feed his objective, feelings and emotions will be affected positively and enjoyment, followed by flow, will ensue.

Stanislavski also so points out the importance of imagination when building a character using given circumstances and urgency. The more detailed an actor makes his given circumstances the more fully he can step into a character's "mask". When an actor is charged with the task of imagining something, all of the senses must come in to play. He must smell as well as see as well as feel with his imagination so that the result is truthful for him as well as the audience. This allows the actor to have complete control over the scene at hand because he has sketched out every detail in his imagination. This is important because it leaves no room for vague, non-specific images and as a result there will be no vague actions or objectives. Once an actor has made sure his imagination has created a specific environment, all the given circumstances and actions must be complex enough to keep him interested in the scene. This is where urgency comes into

play. Similarly with flow, an actor will be bored if there is no inciting incident to push the objective forward. Therefore, he must use his imagination to create a situation that will drive all actions, objectives, and given circumstances towards a characters super objective, or overall purpose in life.

The key to both Stanislavski's psychotechnique and Csikszentmihalyi's Flow theory is that in order to achieve optimal experience, you must have an attainable goal. Goals must be challenging enough to maintain a persons concentration and inspire the imagination. This will trigger the creativity of the subconscious and inspire your actions to obtain the goal you have set in the most ideal way. The subconscious cannot be directly tapped into, but by using the different indicators of flow or any of Stanislavski's techniques from his book *An Actor's Work*, you can poke at the subconscious indirectly to gain the most out of your experiencing.