

# CATHARSIS THROUGH REALISM: INTERROGATING STANISLAVSKY'S 'SYSTEM' AS A RELEVANT MODE IN CONTEMPORARY POST-TRUTH THEATRE PRACTICE

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## **Abstract**

*In keeping with systemic changes and paradigm shifts that drive social evolution, similar discursive practises have been necessitated in the domain of Theatre. While most modes of theatre might amuse, it does not follow that they amaze. For the last hundred years, Konstantin Stanislavsky's 'system' brought the audience their catharsis through a new approach, the 'art of experiencing' rather than the 'art of representation'. By a close study of human nature and psychology, his actors experience rather than represent. This immersive, experiential practise enabled actors to communicate using a language of feeling. When the Moscow Art Theatre toured the USA, they performed to full houses despite language barriers, moving audiences with this revolutionary form of Acting. Ironically this magic is achieved through Realism, one where the audience is transported to a moment of resolution rather than mere spectatorship by living through the character's tragedy.*

*In an era of worldwide political, psychological and ecological upheaval, as humanity grapples with truth and fact dichotomies, the stage becomes an increasingly relevant space to engage with socio political issues of universal significance. Within the mediated reality of a scripted Realism, an audience finds succour and regains hope through these purgatorial performances.*

*This paper is a study of the relevance of Stanislavsky's method of acting and its contemporary significance through literary and directorial reflections on a University production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*.*

**Keywords:** *Art of Experiencing, representation, Stanislavsky's system, Realism.*

Along with an increasing level of educated people, rises a demand on higher quality performances and understanding on what high-standard acting is. This tendency could be tracked through centuries; the amount of professional theatre troupes is getting higher annually. In our days any person has access to all possible educating resources to get familiar how psychology

works, what triggers emotions, why some performances feel artificial and have absence of scenic truth. One can't fool an intelligent spectator so easily; audience wants to be surprised and moved. But it's getting harder every year. Horror movies that scared people in 1980s are ridiculous to watch now. Dramas that made people cry in the past, keep people indifferent now.

Art has to progress, performers need to experiment. It happens, quite a number of new forms of theatre and approaching towards acting have appeared. As a matter of fact, these modes of theatre can amuse, but fail to amaze.

What's been constantly amazing the audience for the last hundred years, is realism in theatre. If other practices appear and die, it became a classic, evolving together with generations. Realism reflects reality, it can't become obsolete. Styles like theatre of cruelty, theatre of absurd and other practices can't become dominant because reach only small percentage of people of the world population and relevant while a particular problem exists.

The feeling of amuse passes fast, but the feeling of amaze stays for long, it's born because of experiencing an emotional catharsis about which Aristotle wrote.

Coupled with the evolution of people's mind and conscious, the way achieving of catharsis has evolved as well. Actors who were just representing their emotions and not living them couldn't satisfy the audience's emotional appetite anymore. That's why Konstantin Stanislavsky developed completely new approach towards acting, "the system" which replaced "the art of representation" with "the art of experiencing". Than physicality of an actor more importance was given to a psychology of an actor. Stanislavsky explained acting as a science, in way that any person, without any talent could become an actor if one follows "the system". The terms like given circumstances, objective, super objective, through line, subtext, method of physical actions, magic if were introduced. Actor experiencing genuine emotions on the stage could transfer them to the audience's hearts and heads, made spectators feel and be lead to the pure powerful catharsis.

Not a surprise that other practitioners started to follow "the system". Well know "method acting" is an adaptation of Stanislavski's teaching. Lee Strasberg watched a show of Moscow Art Theatre, headed by Konstantin Stanislavski, when MAT was touring the U.S. The performance of the actors created a great impact on the audience even the shows were on foreign language but the people could actually feel and received their catharsis in the way of that generation, not through the words but through the language of emotions.

With Lee Strasberg's "method acting", "the system" of theatrical realism was transferred to the screen in Hollywood and the world cinematography. Till now stays the most required acting style till now.

One of the first staged productions which incorporated the ideas of "the system" was "The Seagull", a play of the founder of psychological realism Anton Chekhov.

Initially "The Seagull" was staged in Alexandrinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg and it was a disaster the actors were booed and A. Chekhov thought he would never write plays again. But Vladimir

Nemirovich-Danchenko, a co-founder of Moscow Art Theatre liked the play a lot and insisted that it has to be staged in MAT. It happened on 17 December 1898. The audience was in ecstasy, thinking that standing ovations were not enough to appreciate the play; spectators were climbing up the chairs and couldn't stop clapping. "The Seagull" became the logo of Moscow Art Theatre and all further A. Chekhov's plays were premiered in MAT.

The reason why "The Seagull" failed in Alexandrinskytheatre is that the old approach to stage plays was used, where an event is the most important, rather than characters. The Stanislavski's "system" is focused on characterization and bringing the scenic truth which is essential when we talk about realism in playwriting.

"Realism" in playwriting cannot exist without "realism" in theatre. But "realism" in theatre can exist without "realism" in playwriting. A play written in any style could be staged using the "system". It's happening in cinematography as well, no matter what's genre of a script, but the acting is "real".

After the failure of "The Seagull" A. Chekhov wanted to stop writing plays, but because of Stanislavski's "system" he understood how great and revolutionary his plays were, they just needed a new method to stage and act them. And now he is the second most staged playwright in the world after Shakespeare.

Only with implying "the system", the audience could experience that desirable catharsis watching Chekhov's play. His plays aren't about kings and queens, not about fighting for a nation and saving a country, but about a life of common people which all of us can relate to, which is so comical and tragically sad at the same time.

The current production of "The Seagull" in Christ deemed to be university is focused on these common and complex human emotions, using "the system" I'm trying to help actors actually experience them. Even though it's challenging for the students adapt to mature way of thinking which is required for the play, they are trying to compensate it with observations and detailed characterization.

In attempt to bring the emotional catharsis it's essential to achieve "the scenic truth". The process is long and requires lots of research to be linked with "three circles of circumstances". It's important to know the political and socio-economic situations of the world when a play occurs. Knowing the customs, manners and etiquette of people of that time is crucial as well. The process of transforming twenty years old Indian student into a forty years Old Russian writer of thenineteenth century is tough but there's no other way if we use the system. All of that complements the scenic truth which we need for catharsis.

Catharsis is caused through pity and fear, in "The Seagull" every single character could be pitied, all of them is unhappy. To make audience believe in the unhappiness of the characters "the system" has to be used. The current spectators only feel deep if they believe and experience the magic moment of forgetting that in front of them is not a show but a real life.

Emotions are the same through ages, they can't be outdated and today's actor is a heightened emotional beast.

Chekhov defined “The Seagull” as a comedy but everyone thought was a tragedy, people could not find anything funny in it. But every character in the play loves the wrong person, talks to a wrong person, desires something that will never be able to get. The humor of the play is in harsh cruel irony. Isn't our life is a joke after all?

### **Realism in times of Post Truth Art**

Ushering in the era of Modern Art, Realism manifested some significant moments in art history. Coinciding with industrialization and mass media, the artist became himself part of the narrative of his art. The other significant shift is the gravitation towards everyday life in all its lack of glory, its non-eventfulness as the topic of artistic production.

The banality of evil comes to mind or as one would like to rephrase that, the evil of banality! Where sequential plot narratives once fulfilled the viewer / reader, the enchanting incoherence and lack of cohesion of the mundane was irresistible.

If Aristotlean catharsis was evoked by fear and pity, the modern day reader is moved to this sense of fear and pity not by events of spectacular magnitude but by the sheer ennui that shrouds one in modern living without one even making a conscious choice to embrace it. It rejects nineteenth century Romanticism with its emotional outpourings. This mode of suffering naturally undid the grand narrative of sacrifice and heroism and redemption. The sense of dread and menace that permeates the stage, the page and our collective imagination is that of the mundane and meaningless. In that sense, the banal acquires and evokes a sense of the sinister and evil. By definition the banal is that which is so lacking in originality that it is obvious and commonplace and unworthy of attention. That is an apt summation of modern existence in times of automation. It also is dreadful in that it requires enormous amounts of energy and vigour that is emotional, physical and intellectual to fight off this inescapable dystrophy.

With photography and film filling the need for accuracy and documentation, art was liberated from this burden and could occupy itself with deeper modes of representation, that of the causal and casual comedy that is life.

Realism resonates with that sense of comedy of the banality that induces pain by being far too real. There is no suspension of disbelief here, willing or otherwise, because one is constantly disturbed by the ‘reality’ not of the situation alone but the human condition as well. Plots unfold in a tragedy of the non-event, the non-romance, the non-heroic. This steady onslaught of the non-dramatic make it non-tragic and that in itself is a tragedy.

Realism paved the way for the post truth condition we find ourselves in now. From objective truths and grand absolutes the scrutiny shifted to the struggles or lack of romance in everyday ordinary lives. The true horror of the demotic lies in its lack of purpose or causality.

Thus empowered quotidian lives and struggles demand a logic of reception and acceptance, where one is guided by emotion over compassion and purpose over meaning. In such times realism becomes an appropriate artistic mode to create a dissonance within the world of the magical and mythical.

## **Fictional Reality**

Yuval Noah Harari mentions a fictional reality that overlays an objective reality. He refers to religion, money and corporations as these fictions that subsume the objective reality of Nature.

He refers to the difference between man and animals as the mysterious glue that enables human to cooperate effectively.

Post Truth is an era of opinion over fact. Absolute truths that crumbled as centres collapsed in the 1980's gave rise to the individual 'I' as a narrator preferred over the 'we' or 'them'.

This demotic dissonance is best processed and portrayed through Realism as it captures a sense of mystery in the sheer incoherence of daily life.

Henri Lefebvre in his Production of Space defines two kinds of space, Absolute and Abstract. While Nature is an Absolute Space, unmediated by human intervention, the abstract space is that inhabited by Man. This is the space that overlaid by various kinds of truth, facts and fictions that shift and collide with the protean currents of socio political and economic events. It is abstract in that is a fictional reality sculpted by the vagaries of power play.

Through the prism of Post Truth, art seems to have become the handmaid of power, reinforcing prejudices and altering perceptions of objective reality.

## **Realism in Post Truth Art: A significant mode of telling**

In a world where every utterance is received differently and with varying levels of credibility depending on the subjectivity of the audience, Realism as a mode of artistic production remains as the calm, reassuring voice of reason. Whether it is Chekhov, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry or the plethora of Indian writers in English who successfully employ this mode, the reader audience seeks solace and intellectual mooring in a narrative mode, which is neither gimmicky nor startling but depends on a quotidian blandness, even a mundane tone that captures the struggle of the person on the street.

It is fascinating that as our external worlds explodes with multiplicity and fragmented reality, our inner world demands an order and discipline that captures the sheer ordinary truth of the human condition across the world.

So while the world erects political barriers and boundaries fueled by race, religion and language and the politics thereof, it is reassuring that artistic processes can offer a space where the truth, while mediated for the medium, can still be accessed in a space where the politics of abstraction can be portrayed in a recognizable form.

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