Mindfulness, Flow and Al Pacino: A Look into the Relationship between Cognitive Science and the Stanislavski System

Daniel Jubas-Malz

Abstract

This paper reconciles the relationship between mindfulness, flow, and the function and methodology of a branch of acting called, ‘The Stanislavski System’. This paper considers a few of the system’s more important techniques such as: the actor’s object of attention, the experience of the actor, and the actor’s investment in their role, examining them within the context of mindfulness and flow. The functionality of parts of Stanislavski’s system, such as the suggestion of how an actor experiences the totality of their performance, can be better understood if defined in conjunction with the principles of mindfulness and flow. Further investigation into the relationship between cognitive science and the performance arts would allow both disciplines to expand into new areas of thought and opportunity.

With the rise of actors such as Daniel Day-Lewis, Robert De Niro, and Dustin Hoffman we hear a great deal about the “method acting” techniques they use that make them so prolific in their field. Method acting is a style of performance art that draws on past experiences from the actors’ lives for their portrayal of a character and is derived from another set of techniques called the Stanislavski System (Stanislavski, 1936).1

Russian actor and director Constantin Stanislavski invented his eponymous system in the early 1900’s. The Stanislavski System, or just the System, aims to make an actor’s performance more realistic (Stanislavski, 1955). The System emphasizes ideas of the actor’s object of attention, or what the actor is directing their attention towards and how they are doing it (Stanislavski, 1955); the actor’s experience, which is the state of mind the actor should be in while performing (Carnicke, 2009); and how the actor should adopt an appropriate perspective while performing (Rapoport, 1955).

The central tenets of the System are akin to the processes of mindfulness and flow. Mindfulness is commonly defined as the process of applying complete, non-judgmental attention to the present moment (Bishop et al., 2004; Hirst, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). This is similar to how the actor orients and further expresses themselves in a role. Similarly flow, a subjective state one can enter when they are fully focused on an activity and their action and awareness are merged (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), is similar to how the actor maintains their performance. Through this paper, I will show how the actor uses sustained attention to direct themselves while on stage, how actors use feedback to create and maintain a cohesive performance via flow, the change in perspective the actor achieves through re-orientation, and how Stanislavski’s later revision to his system is unfeasible based on the inherit natures of both mindfulness and flow. Thus, the processes of mindfulness and flow help explicate the core concepts of the System and provide a useful framework for its development.
The Actor’s Object of Attention

According to Stanislavski, one of the actor’s most important skills is the ability to control and direct their attention on a specific object (Stanislavski, 1955). They must be fully attentive to the object, whether it is a prop or a fellow actor, and completely invest their psychic energy into this focus (Rapoport, 1955). Russian actor and director Iosif Rapoport comments that:

[In the System] [t]he first prerequisite of stage presence is the ability to control our own attention, to use our will-power to focus our attention on the object we have selected. (Rapoport, 1955, p. 35)

Furthermore, the actor must have the ability to expand and shift their attention from any one object to another or, in some cases, to many other objects (Stanislavski, 1955).

This idea of controlled attention parallels ‘sustained attention’ in mindfulness. According to Bishop et al. (2004), sustained attention, much like attention of the actor to the object as outlined in the System, involves the focusing of attention by being persistently vigilant of what the attention is currently directed towards (Bisop et al., 2004). However, unlike attention defined by the System, mindful people do not control in full the object of their attention in but simply allow attention to wander and accept whatever it is they become attentive to (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1994) as long as it exists in the present moment (Hirst, 2003). This suggests that we need to reconsider Stanislavski’s idea of the actor’s object of attention and understand it not as something that the actor controls in its entirety, but as something they adapt to and eventually control in part.

Actors would be able to gain the ability to redirect their attention by practicing techniques akin to mindfulness meditation which would have them switch their attention from one thought (or object) to another (Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007, Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Should thought begin to wander, the actors would acknowledge and accept whatever they are now focused on and then attempt to return to their initial thought. This ability to redistribute salience and attention would enhance actors’ ‘cognitive flexibility’, or their ability to make and break perspectives (DeYoung, Flanders, & Peterson, 2008). An actor who is more cognitively flexible would be better able to redirect their focus of attention and would therefore be better able to produce their desired actions effortlessly which would help them create a more cohesive performance.

We consider both sustained attention and cognitive flexibility when the actor goes through the process ofexpanding their focus of attention on a group of objects and then switches to an entirely different group. The actor must be able to maintain or adjust the focus they have initially created to keep their performance cohesive (Stanislavski, 1955). I will further address what I mean by a cohesive performance in the following section when I discuss the phenomenon of flow.

The Experience of the Actor

Perezhivanie or experience is another one of the System’s more important components according to Stanislavski. The actor’s experience is the point in the performance when they have been seized by and are completely invested in the role (Carnicke, 2009). When an actor enters their experience, they are living in the moment as the character and can no longer report their sensations but simply understand them as the entirety of the performance (Carnicke, 2009). During the state of experience, the actor cannot break down their performance into its individual components and only consider it as a totality which is similar to the concept of flow.

Akin to the actor’s experience, the flow state creates harmony between thoughts, feelings and actions (Lopez & Snyder, 2011). In other words, it creates a totality in character. Before that can occur—that
is, before an individual can enter the flow state—they must be fully focused on the activity, or in this case, the character (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). This relates back to Stanislavski's teachings of the actor's object of attention; however, instead of focusing on the object, the actor is concentrating on the character they are portraying. Thus, when the actor has put all of their psychic energy—or complete bodily investment—into the character, they should begin to engage in flow and then direct their attention accordingly and effortlessly. Once they have entered the flow state, the actor's attention will be guided naturally throughout their performance with the use of feedback from their environment (which I will further explain later on).

Learning how to focus attention on themselves would improve an actor's ability to enter a flow state and exercise the most appropriate amount of sustained attention and cognitive flexibility automatically. It would be much easier for an actor to enter a flow state if they were to be focused on to a single object—in this case, the character—by chunking every object of attention together. Instead of trying to think of the character as a series of motivations and isms, the character should be conceptualized as a gestalt, or meaningful whole, of which the actor can direct their focus onto and then, in turn enter a flow state. For example, instead of focusing on any specific personality trait—such as despondency or cynicism—the actor can create a framework of a 'stereotypical sad person' which would have the different individual traits amalgamate. Having such a framework at their disposal, the actor would not need to come up with ways to act in a certain manner and use the framework to guide their performance overall.

Although one of the criteria of flow is that the ratio of an individual's skill and the challenge of the task are of an almost equal proportion (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), I postulate that simply chunking the tasks together should not affect task difficulty; but that is based entirely on the assumption that the ability to enter a flow state is affected by the number of things being attended to. Further research on this topic should be conducted on the relationship between the number of tasks one is attentive to and achieving a flow state.

The automaticity of the actor's performance refers to the non-reportable nature of the experience of the actor as well as the idea of 'living in the moment', or flow. One of the most important parts of the actor's performance is if it is organic and genuine; meaning that the character's motives and personality are understood by the actor in such a way that they are completely immersed in their role (Rapoport, 1955). The character's lines cannot be memorized, but must be understood at both the textual and sub-textual level so that the actor can deliver a believable performance (Rapoport, 1955). The textual level can be understood as the information presented explicitly through their lines, such as their current emotional state (Carnicke, 2009). The sub-textual level on the other hand, reveals information embedded within the lines and can only be understood when the character has moved away from the abstract and into our existence (Clyde, 2003). This is the point where the character's depth and perspective are defined and made apparent to the actor portraying the character, which they could then use in their performance (Clyde, 2003). Despite having to go through all of this preparation for the role, the actor is intended to go through their performance moment by moment (Rapoport, 1955; Carnicke, 2009), only focusing on what is currently happening and using the current moment as feedback for their flow state.

Since the actor is constantly engaging with their environment and objects of attention, we can infer that they use whatever it is they are interacting with as feedback for their flow state that they then take into consideration when deciding what to do next in their performance. In other words, a huge part of the character relies on the actor's ability to enter a flow state and respond to a series of stimuli accordingly, by making judgments that will reflect the character's thoughts in a specific performance. To give a very simplified example: if actor A is having an argument with actor B, actor A would use actor B's angry tone as feedback for how he
Inkblot: The Undergraduate Journal of Psychology • Vol. 3 • September 2014

Self was thirsty because he is not considering his motives—in this case, his thirst—as objects of attention because it is irrelevant to his character. Since this is an act of perspective-taking, we can compare its functions to that of mindfulness.

When engaging in meditative mindfulness exercises, our mind wanders on its own volition and when we realize that our attention is not directed where we would like it to be, we attempt to regain control of it and then refocus on the initial thought (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Krompinger & Baime, 2007). In mindfulness practice, before we refocus attention, we must first be attentive to whatever object we are currently focused on by accepting it as it is, free of judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). After practicing this for a long period of time, an individual's cognitive flexibility would significantly improve, allowing them to better take alternative perspectives (DeYoung, Flanders and Peterson, 2008). This second component of mindfulness proposed by Bishop et al. (2004) is called the 'orientation to experience' and it can be best understood as the process of de-centering from our own perspectives.

It can be inferred that for an actor to be able to apply a proper justification for their character’s actions, they would first have to undergo this mindful de-centering of self. By removing themselves from their perspective, they would be able to open themselves up to a new one that would better fit their character. In other words, mindfulness processes would act as a precursor to justification in a role, where after having become separated from their perspective, the actor will now be free to take up the perspective of the character they are portraying and assign meaning to their objects of attention as the character would. The next question would be to consider how this would work in conjunction with the experience of the actor.

I have defined the experience of the actor as something very similar to the flow state where the actor is completely invested in the character. As mentioned earlier, when the actor is in this state, their performance becomes automatic and organic, and the character's
motives and personality are understood in depth. The character’s justification would, by definition, be considered a part of the character’s personality and/or motivations and would therefore be automatically understood and then applied to any object that the actor interacts with. The justification should be integrated into the character and then expressed accordingly when the actor enters the flow state as the character. The use of mindful techniques would therefore be used to help get into character before accessing the flow state. I posit that the actor would have to de-center themselves from their perspective and then invest their psychic energy, not into the character, but into the perspective of the character of which they can then enter a flow state and fully integrate themselves into the role.

**A Change in the Experience of the Actor**

Later on in Stanislavski’s career, he made a significant change to how we should consider the actor’s experience, saying that the totality of the actor’s performance must be considered within a duality. He asserts that for successful systematic acting, the actor must perform as both themselves and their character, referring to this as a ‘dual consciousness’ (Carnicke, 2009). The processes of the character in dual consciousness functions the same as described above with the additional factor of the actor maintaining their identity. The actor is expected to be mindful of the way in which the character is acting and comment or criticize on it accordingly (Carnicke, 2009). He adds that having this duality would allow the actor to create a more believable performance by using their character as a means of self-expression (Carnicke, 2009).

Looking at this from the perspective of mindfulness and flow, Stanislavski’s revision to the actor’s experience is questionable in application. In this theory, he advocates for both the complete investment in the character—flow—and for the actor to be aware of their own awareness and be able to self-narrate their perspectives and performance—which is akin to mindfulness. According to the definitions provided by Reid (2011), flow involves an individual’s complete awareness of their actions without being aware of their awareness while mindfulness is the process of an individual becoming aware of their awareness.

These two definitions are contradictory, but I would assert that it is wrong to generalize this to the entire relationship between mindfulness and flow. Saying this would completely isolate the two concepts when we have evidence that suggests that, at least in some situations, being more mindful can actually enhance one’s ability to enter and maintain a flow state (Kaufman, Glass & Arnkoff, 2009; Kee and Wang, 2008) and there is evidence that some forms of mindfulness are actually necessary for the flow state (Diaz, 2013). It is questionable, however, if both the mindful and flow state can exist simultaneously to the degree of which the actor’s level of mindfulness is required, where they would not only have to be aware of their perspective, but be able to self-narrate and criticize it. Simply put, it seems although mindfulness requires a high level of awareness that would allow us to look at our current perspective and affords us a perspective on the former, Flow, on the other hand, seems to only utilize a less intense awareness at most and would not give the actor an opportunity to self-narrate and criticize it. Simply put, it seems although mindfulness requires a high level of awareness that would allow us to look at our current perspective and affords us a perspective on the former.

**Conclusion**

While reading through this paper, we may question the purpose of attempting to reconcile two in-
credibly different disciplines: cognitive science and the performance arts. My response is that it expands our understanding of both disciplines, allowing us to draw connections from thought that seemed to be completely unrelated and consider things from different perspectives. With respect to cognitive science and the performance arts, I feel that by furthering our understanding of the affect one has on the other could provide us with wonderful insight on how the Stanislavski System—or any form of acting—worked in depth or of different methodologies of achieving flow via acting strategies. Considering acting techniques through a cognitive science perspective would allow for a qualitative change in the art, as performances would become more authentic and cohesive. Interdisciplinary research on cognitive science and the performance arts are scarce but I think that future research should be conducted to further our understanding of both disciplines and many others by extension.

References


Footnotes

1 It should be noted that Al Pacino can be considered as both a systematic and method actor as the two overlap.