

The whole stream of individual, minor objectives, all the imaginative thoughts, feelings, and actions of an actor, should converge to carry out the major objective / spine.

Spine phrase

Active (verb)

Specific

provocative to you!

The words are important!

Bring it down to the essential / core

from "An Actor Prepares"  
Stanislawski

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### The Unbroken Line

#### I

"YOUR INNER instrument is at concert pitch!" announced the Director at the beginning of the lesson.

"Imagine that we have decided to produce a play in which each of you is promised a splendid part. What would you do when you went home, after the first reading?"

"Act!" blurted out Vanya.

Leo said he would try to think himself into his part and Maria said she would go off somewhere into a corner and try to feel hers.

I decided I would start with the suppositions offered by the play and put myself into them. Paul said he would divide the play up into small units.

"In other words," explained the Director, "you would all use your inner forces to feel out the soul of the part.

"You will have to read the play over many times. Only on the rarest occasions can an actor seize the essentials of a new part instantly and be so carried away by it that he can create its whole spirit in one burst of feeling. More often his mind first grasps the text in part, then his emotions are slightly touched and they stir vague desires.

"In the beginning his understanding of the inner significance of a play is necessarily too general. Usually he will not get to the bottom of it until he has thoroughly studied it by following the steps the author took when he wrote it.

"When the first reading of the text leaves no impression, either intellectual or emotional—what is the actor to do?"

"He must accept the conclusions of others and make a

stronger effort to penetrate the meaning of the text. With persistence he will evolve some vague conception of the part which he must then develop. Finally, his inner motive forces will be drawn into action.

"Until his goal is clear the direction of his activities will remain unformed. He will feel only individual moments in his role.

"It is not surprising that in this period the flow of his thoughts, desires and emotions appears and disappears. If we were to chart its course the pattern would be disjointed and broken. It is only when he comes to a deeper understanding of his part and a realization of its fundamental objective that a line gradually emerges as a continuous whole. Then we have the right to speak of the beginning of creative work."

"Why just then?"

Instead of an answer the Director began to make certain unrelated movements with his arms, head, and body. Then he asked:

"Can you say that I was dancing?"

We answered in the negative. Whereupon, still seated, he went through a series of motions that flowed harmoniously from one into another in unbroken sequence.

"Could a dance be made out of that?" he asked.

We agreed unanimously that it could. Then he sang several notes, with long pauses between.

"Is that a song?"

"No," we replied.

"Is this?" Whereupon he poured out a lovely, resonant melody.

"Yes!"

Next he drew some accidental and unrelated lines on a piece of paper and asked if that were a design. When we denied that it was he drew a few, long, graceful, curving patterns which we readily admitted could be called a design.

"Do you see that in every art we must have an *unbroken*

*line*? That is why, when the line emerges as a whole, I say that creative work has begun."

"But can there really be a line that is never broken either in real life or, much less, on the stage?" objected Grisha.

"Possibly that line can exist," explained the Director, "but not in a normal person. In healthy people there must be some interruptions. At least, so it seems. Yet during those breaks, a person continues to exist. He does not die. Therefore some sort of a line continues.

"Let us agree that *the normal, continuing line is one in which there are some necessary interruptions.*"

Toward the end of the lesson the Director explained that we need not one but many lines to represent the direction of our various inner activities.

"On the stage, if the inner line is broken an actor no longer understands what is being said or done and he ceases to have any desires or emotions. The actor and the part, humanly speaking, live by these unbroken lines. That is what gives life and movement to what is being enacted. Let those lines be interrupted and life stops. Let it be revived, and life goes on. But this spasmodic dying away and reviving is not normal. A role must have continuous being and its unbroken line."

## 2

"At our last lesson we found that in our art, as in any other, we must have a whole, unbroken line. Would you like me to show you how it is made?"

"Of course!" we exclaimed.

"Then tell me," said he, turning to Vanya, "what you did today, from the moment you got up until you came here?"

Our lively comrade made strenuous efforts to concentrate on the question, but he found it difficult to turn his attention backwards. To help him the Director gave him the following advice:

"In recalling the past, do not try to go forward toward the present. Go backwards from the present to the point in the

past which you wish to reach. It is easier to go backwards, especially when you are dealing with the recent past."

As Vanya did not immediately grasp the idea, the Director prompted him:

"Now you are here talking with us. What did you do before that?"

"I changed my clothes."

"Changing your clothes is a short, independent process. It contains all sorts of elements. It constitutes what we may call a *short line*. There are many of them in any role. For example:

"What were you doing before you changed?"

"I was fencing and doing gymnastics."

"And before that?"

"I smoked a cigarette."

"And still earlier?"

"I was at my singing lesson."

He pushed Vanya farther and farther into the past until he reached the moment when he first woke up.

"We now have collected a series of short lines, episodes in your life since early morning, bringing us down to the present moment. All of them have been retained in your memory. In order to fix them I suggest that you go over the sequence several times in the same order."

After this was done the Director was satisfied that Vanya not only felt those few hours of the immediate past but that he had fixed them in his memory.

"Now do the same thing in the reverse order, starting with the moment when you first opened your eyes this morning."

Vanya did that, too, several times.

"Now tell me whether this exercise has left an intellectual or emotional imprint on you which you could consider a rather extended *line of your life* today? Is it an integrated whole made up of *individual acts* and feelings, thoughts and sensations?"

He went on: "I am convinced that you understand how to recreate the line of the past. Now, Kostya, let me see you do the same thing in the future, taking the latter half of today."

"How do I know what is going to happen to me in the immediate future?" I asked.

"Don't you know that after this lesson you have other occupations, that you will go home, and have dinner? Have you nothing in prospect for this evening, no calls to make, no play, movie, or lecture? You do not know that your intentions will be carried out but you can suppose that they will be. Then you must have some idea about the rest of the day. Don't you feel that solid line as it stretches out into the future, fraught with cares, responsibilities, joys and griefs?"

"In looking ahead there is a certain movement, and where there is movement a line begins.

"If you join this line with the one that has gone before you will create *one whole unbroken line that flows from the past, through the present, into the future, from the moment you wake in the morning until you close your eyes at night*. That is how little individual lines flow together and form one large current that represents the *life of a whole day*."

"Now suppose you are in a provincial stock company and that you have been given the role of Othello to prepare in a week's time. Can you feel that all your life for those days will be poured into one main direction, to solve your problem honourably? There would be one dominating idea that would absorb everything leading up to the moment of that terrifying performance."

"Of course," I admitted.

"Can you feel the larger line that goes through that whole week of preparation for the part of Othello?" the Director pushed me still farther.

"And if there exist lines that run through days and weeks, can't we assume that they also exist in terms of months, years, or even a lifetime?"

"All these large lines represent the welding together of smaller ones. That is what happens in every play and with every part. In reality life builds the line but on the stage it is the

artistic imagination of the author that creates it in the likeness of truth. However, he gives it to us only in bits, and with breaks in it."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"We have already talked about the fact that the playwright gives us only a few minutes out of the whole life of his characters. He omits much of what happens off the stage. He often says nothing at all about what has happened to his characters while they have been in the wings, and what makes them act as they do when they return to the stage. We have to fill out what he leaves unsaid. Otherwise we would have only scraps and bits to offer out of the life of the persons we portray. You cannot live that way so we must create for our parts comparatively unbroken lines."