

# Conservatory Summer 2018

## Stanislavski on Communication: Non-Verbal Acting Technique

This lesson plan was developed to be shared with the summer conservatory program at the Omaha Theater Company for Young People (The Rose). The conservatory is a four-week program that allows actors age 13-18 to spend mornings in rehearsal for their final performance and afternoons in workshops on advanced theatre topics.

Description	Students will explore non-verbal acting techniques in order to discover ways to convey honest performances not just when they are speaking. Beginning with non-verbal ensemble games to introduce the concept of communicating with body language, the teaching artist will introduce a selection from the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavski to provide context for the concept. The teaching artist will then lead the young actors in an activity to develop silent “moments,” beginning as solo performances and slowly evolving into duet and possibly trio scenes that flow seamlessly from one to the next. Finally, the teaching artist will lead the students in a discussion of the concept of non-verbal acting, specifically finding ways for it to fit into what they already know about performance techniques.
Age	13-18, 21 students
Date	June 28, 2018
Curriculum Topic	Advanced Theater Topics
Teaching Artists	John Perine
Time	1:00-2:15 PM
Resources	<i>An Actor’s Work</i> by Konstantin Stanislavski, translated by Jean Benedetti

### Student Learning

Objectives	Assessment Criteria
1. To strengthen ensemble connection through non-verbal communication	Students will take part in a variety of ensemble games that scaffold up to versions without speaking.
2. To understand Stanislavski’s concept of “Circle of Focus”	Students will be guided through a series of short answer call and responses of identifying the types of theatricality that require each of the circles of

	attention (small, medium, large).
3. To connect the teaching of Stanislavski to their own rehearsal/performance process	Students will identify moments in the plays they are working on in Conservatory that require each of the circles of attention.
4. To convey ideas and emotions without using words in a non-“play-acting” manner (non-charades)	Utilizing small circles of attention, students will participate in moment-work exercises with the intention of exploring emotion and ideas without the objective of having an audience guess.
5. To create a safe environment where everyone can learn and play	Students will support the choices made by their fellow actors by pointing out their classmates’ strengths following the moment-work exercises.

State Standards (Nebraska)

FA 12.5.1.a	Design, develop, and use an environment with available materials appropriate to a scripted or improvised performance
FA 12.5.2.b	Communicate character, relationship, and objective through the use of blocking and facial expression
FA 12.5.3.b	Analyze and critique in part, or in its entirety, a live performance or recording of a live performance.

1. Anticipatory set (about 15 minutes)
  - a. Question of the Afternoon: As an actor, how do you stay focused and *present* in a scene?
    - i. Students give name, preferred pronouns (he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/theirs), and their answer
  
2. Warm-Up (about 10 minutes)
  - a. Yes You
    - i. Students and teachers stand in a circle, holding one hand up. Leader points to a member of the circle with their hand still up and says, “You.” That individual responds, “Yes,” then points to someone else in the circle with their raised hand, leaving it extended to remind group members that they have been pointed to, and they are therefore in the sequence. This pattern occurs until everyone has been pointed to and everyone points to someone else (the last person points back to the leader.)
    - ii. Ask the circle to point to the person they point to. Arms down. Ask the circle to point to whomever points at them. Put arms down, and repeat the pattern of pointing to ensure clarity. Arms down.

- iii. Now, members of the circle will cross to take the spot in the circle of the individual they point to, still saying “You” and “Yes” for clarity.
- iv. Finally, remove the words so the ensemble can only indicate their intention with their eyes. Make sure ensemble members are not anticipating the pattern, and are only exchanging spots once direct eye contact has been made.
  - 1. Once the group is able to follow the pattern as second nature, continue to refrain from speaking, and only using eye contact change up the pattern

3. Discussion of Non-Verbal Communication (about 10 minutes)

- a. *Reflection Question:* As actors, we have many ways of communicating with our fellow actors. What are they?
  - i. The students will provide a variety of answers. Sample answers include:
    - 1. “With our voices!”
    - 2. “With our bodies!” (body language)
      - a. Encourage students to expand on the various types of ways we can use body language to convey ideas. Perhaps ask what the following poses convey:
        - i. Crossed arms, frown, turned away (anger, frustration)
        - ii. On knees, wide eyes, slightly open, down-turned mouth (begging, desperation)
        - iii. Open stance/arms, slightly squinted eyes, smile (joy)
- b. Stanislavski wrote, “Need I say that [seeing with “empty eyes”] is unnecessary and harmful. The eyes are the mirror to the soul. And empty eyes are the mirror of an empty soul...It is important that an actor’s eyes...reflect the size, the depth of his creative mind. So, he needs to have stored up considerable, profound inner content of mind, experiences that are similar to the ‘life of the human spirit’ of a role, which he will need to communicate with the other actors. He must share that content with his partner the whole time he is onstage” (231).
  - i. *Transition:* Stanislavski continues by explaining that if an actor should become distracted while communicating with actors onstage, either by being caught up in his own personal life or what is happening outside of the theater, the actor is immediately separated from the character and the performance becomes “mechanical.” Let’s talk about how to really strengthen that focus and make sure that we as actors are only ever communicating intentionally.

4. Overview of Circles of Attention (about 10 minutes)

- a. Konstantin Staislavski introduces the idea of “Circles of Attention” in *An Actor’s Work*. They are as follows:
  - i. Large Circle
    - 1. An actor who has a large circle of attention is aware of the entire room, often including the audience as well. Figures that utilize a large circle of attention are narrator figures, or anyone who breaks the fourth wall. With

a large enough ensemble, an actor employs a large circle of attention for scenes when the entire (or most of) cast is addressed.

a. *Reflection:* Encourage students to suggest moments from either the production they are working on or productions they have seen that employ the large circle of attention

i. Have the students strike a pose from the play they are working on that illustrate a large circle of attention. This should be a moment that integrates the whole ensemble

ii. Medium Circle

1. An actor who has a medium circle of attention is focused on a handful of other actors, but can be oblivious to other things in other parts of the space. Conversations between five characters conspiring against one or two other characters on the other side of the stage. It is important to note that employing a medium circle of attention breaks the connection between the actor and the audience.

a. *Reflection:* Encourage students to suggest moments from either the production they are working on or productions they have seen that employ the medium circle of attention

i. Have the students strike poses from the play they are working on that illustrate a medium circle of attention. These should be groups of roughly four to six actors

iii. Small Circle

1. An actor who has a small circle of attention is usually focused on one or two other actor(s) or object(s).

a. *Reflection:* Encourage students to suggest moments from either the production they are working on or productions they have seen that employ the small circle of attention

i. Have the students strike poses from the play they are working on that illustrate a small circle of attention. These should ideally be with one other person or by themselves

b. *Transition:* These moments are intimate and highly focused, and require an insane amount of honesty, and are therefore the moments we will be focusing on in our next activity.

5. Moments Work  
(minutes)

(about 30

a. Have the young actors congregate on one side of the playing space so that everyone can see majority of the room. This set of exercises works best with obstacles and objects to interact with (chairs are great). The leader explains the following:

i. For the first round of this exercise, we will be flying solo. We will work to create isolated moments. Moments are any piece of action that happens in a given time

frame. The way that we start a moment is by saying, “I begin,” and the way we end a moment is by saying, “I end.”

1. Have the actors practice saying these phrases.
- ii. For example: I would say “I begin...”
  1. Teaching artist enters the space, and he either interacts with an object or perhaps stares at something.
- iii. Then I would say, “I end.” Since we are focusing on exercising our small circles of attention, we want to experience these moments as if no one else is in the room. Focus only on the task at hand. The next moment cannot start until the previous one has ended and the actor has left the playing space.
  1. Depending on the willingness (or overly-willingness of the group, the teaching artist will either have to ask people to experience a moment, or call on raised hands, or in a perfect world the actors are able to feel the flow and play fairly.
  2. Do solo moments until everyone has a chance to do one.
- iv. *Transition:* For the second round of exercises, one person will begin a solo moment, but a second person can begin another moment while that actor is in the space. You and this other actor exist in the same moment. If you ignore the other actor, it must be an active decision, you cannot play these moments as to simultaneous solo moments.
  1. Remind the actors that we are utilizing small circles of attention, and that focus should be on the other actor and any prop they may utilize and to not play these moments for the observing students to guess at what the scene could be.
- v. There can only be two actors in the playing space at a time, and there is no speaking. Actors do not have to start/end their moments in the same order
  1. Ex. Not Necessary:
    - a. A: I begin
    - b. B: I begin
    - c. A: I end
    - d. B: I end

## 6. Closing Reflection

(about 10 minutes)

- a. Ask students:
  - i. What moments did we find interesting to watch?
  - ii. What was interesting about them?
  - iii. How could we as audience members see that actors' focuses were on each other