

**Working the System**  
**An Actor's Guide Into the Methodology of Stanislavsky**

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## An Introduction

The art of acting has been described by our most revered philosophers as being a mimetic or imitative art. Theater, whether it be comedy or tragedy, is characterized by its ability to accurately imitate real or mythical situations. The imitative is not actual. It is not Truth. To Plato, this meant that theatrical arts were a discardable aspect of society. In The Republic (Book X) he states, "The creator of the phantom, the imitator, we say, knows nothing of the reality but only of the appearance" (601c). Plato goes on to proclaim that the imitative art is exploitive. He equates it with witchcraft and concludes the thought by saying, "mimetic art, then, is an inferior cohabitating with an inferior and engendering inferior offspring"(603b).

It is easy to relate to Plato's criticism of theater. One may quickly bring to mind images of this or that actor strutting to and fro in a melodramatic huff acting as if they were jealous or mad or enraged or distressed. The clowns of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream may come to mind- a collage of bumbling actors vainly trying to enact a the tragedy of two lovers. Or, less comedically, the actors who perform the play within a play in Shakespeare's Hamlet who come all too close to revealing the true life treachery of the king. We know that the actors are just pretending to be in those situations. As Plato states, the actors probably had very little knowledge of the situations that they were imitating. They are not alive as the character. They are merely alive and playing a character.

This whole imitative conception of theater changed dramatically with the emergence of the philosophies of actor/director Konstantin Stanislavsky. His conception was that when one imitates a role one has failed at the art of acting. He speaks of "living the part." Living the part is a complicated philosophy to grasp. One must act from nature. One must experience every moment