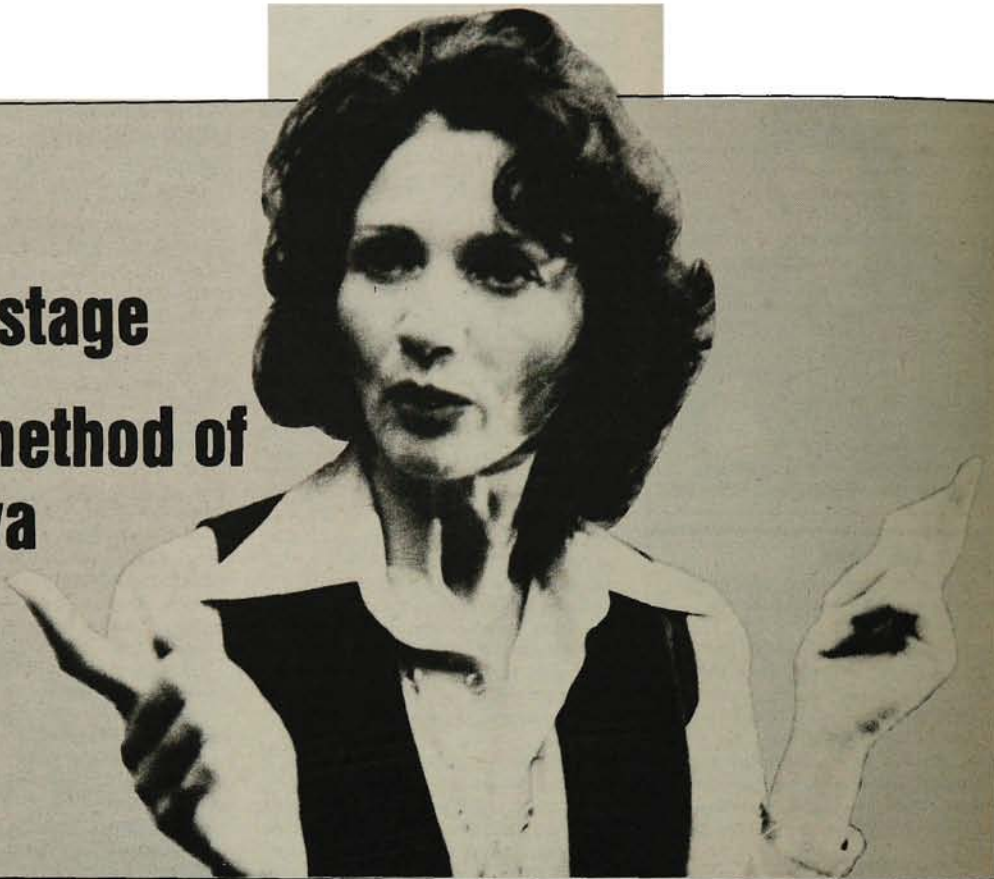


All the world's a stage

The passionate method of Maruska Stankova

by Steve Lucas



The lights have been shut off, the camera-woman is sitting down, and Maruska Stankova is doing her damndest to sell twelve predominantly young actors on the virtues of letting go.

"I know that you have it - but you are afraid to give it! Don't be afraid! You are not competitors. *There is nobody here who can harm you.*"

We are huddled this fall evening - the actors, Kathy Robertson, the camera-woman, the four directors, and I - in the sweltering wood-panelled confines of a boardroom on the sixth floor of the Ontario Studio of the NFB - a place seldom given to the letting go of anything other than money, and that only rarely, after programming sessions, in decidedly modest amounts. But Stankova, a Czechoslovakian-born actress with three thousand stage performances, a dozen film and television roles, and five years worth of workshops behind her, is not about to be daunted by her surroundings.

"My Gott, I am an animal," she declares, her eyes ablaze, her hands uplifted, her tone exotic and imploring, "I react like an animal and I feel I can com-

Principals on the production team that was responsible for the Academy Award-nominated NFB film, After the Axe, Steve Lucas and Sturla Gunnarsson are currently in Latin America researching a feature-length political thriller for the NFB.

municate with everyone in this room. I am risking the same way you are. We actors are all of us risking, all of the time - but we must be generous! *You must be generous... to yourself.*"

With this, Stankova falls silent, pausing to look one by one into the alternately deadpan and abashed expressions of those with whom she is destined to spend the next eleven weeks in this, her first workshop since coming to Toronto. Finally she announces that it's time for a break.

"I never had to do this before," she later confides to some of the non-actors over coffee in a neighbouring bar. "They are so tight and closed. Why? What is it?"

"It's Toronto," one of the directors shrugs, "the whole town's tight."

"Is it?" Stankova asks, then she nods - "I suppose it is. I just didn't want to say it."

"It's my baby and it would be difficult for me to kill it"

It's not just the town or the actors that are tight, of course: it's the times, the economic situation and, regrettably, the Canadian film industry itself. I have no way of knowing what your experiences of it have been over the past year or so; I only know that, give or take a few bright moments here and there, I doubt I have had a single working day go by without hearing someone complain about the lack of direction in our embattled institutions, the lack of funding for this or

that worthy project, the lack of commitment or competence among many of those working in the industry, or the lack of hope that things are going to get any better. Maybe I keep bad company - but I doubt it. It's tough to make a decent living when you work in film at the best of times, but lately nobody seems to be having that much fun doing it, either. There is little or no sense of community; there is plenty of ennui, fatigue, grimness, and fearfulness at play.

Enter Maruska Stankova, a bona fide Madame Butterfly of the world's theatre, with an antidote that is simplicity itself: put actors and directors together in a non-threatening situation, coax them along and see what they come up with. For me, this added up to the best professional experience I had last year. For Maruska Stankova, this came as no big surprise: "I have become passionate about it. It has really become quite good. It helps actors and directors as well."

While she now admits that the workshop "is my baby and it would be very difficult for me to kill it", giving filmmakers extended access to a group of stage actors who are struggling to make the transition to film was not always one of Maruska Stankova's goals in life.

"I said I don't know how, he said just try it."

Prior to the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Stankova was a leading light in the *Laterna Majika*

Theatre, taking direction for the better part of a decade from the luminous likes of Milos Forman, Jan Kadar, Ivan Passer and Alfred Ruddock, and giving command performances to European heads of state (some of them crowned), in the native languages of eight countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

"I was a star and I was given star treatment. It was a shock to come to Canada and not be known by anybody."

She came to Montreal in 1967 for precisely the same reason she came to Toronto fifteen years later: she was following her husband, Zavis, a civil engineer who had come to take on a new job. (After the invasion, neither could return safely to Prague.)

Stankova proceeded to work in Quebec film, television, and theatre, in both official languages. By 1976, she had attracted the attention of Roman Kroitor, head of NFB drama at the time and a pioneering filmmaker in several respects.

"He asked me to do (the workshop). I was horrified. I never taught anybody before. I said I don't know how. He said just try it."

Her first workshop lasted several months, the second, held the following year, was equally long, but by 1980, Stankova had evolved a formula: 12 actors and four directors for two to three months. While she maintains that "every workshop is different - there is always something new", the pattern is now more or less set.

A used-car salesman, a stripper, and an opera singer

Stankova selects the four directors on the basis of her instincts, their interest, the quality of the films they submit, and certain other considerations: as Rogers Cable 10 and the Ontario NFB Studio combined to provide the physical resources - video camera, studio, rehearsal space - needed for our particular workshop, two directors from Rogers - Ian Knox and Michael McNamara - and two ostensibly from the NFB, though both are freelancers - Gayle Singer and Sturla Gunnarsson - were chosen, and I came along for the ride as a sort of writer-in-residence. (The subsequent workshop, however, included directors affiliated with neither Rogers nor the NFB.)

Next, Stankova places ads for actors in local newspapers and on the bulletin boards, screening the respondents over the phone down to twenty or twenty-five, or as many as can be comfortably auditioned in a single day.

Both Stankova and the directors attend these auditions, selecting actors best suited for the scenes, generally taken from theatre plays and intended for three players, which they will by this time have in mind.

Shot and edited at the end of the workshop, the scenes represent the sum of what the actors, and the directors, have learned throughout; it is hoped that the cassettes produced will help the actors find work. (In our case, they did in fact help at least three actors: Renée de Villiers landed the same part in *Cold Comfort* she had played in the workshop; Michael O'Hara turned up on SCTV; and Angie Pietarinen had a part in a half-hour drama produced by Atlantis Films.)

The actors chosen for the workshop may vary in terms of their day job - our group included a used-car salesman, a stripper, and an opera singer - but they have at least three things in common: 1) they are stage actors with little or no experience in front of the camera; 2) they know where they can get their hands on the \$380.00 required (the workshop is now eligible for a Canada Council grant for those wishing to apply) and 3) they are about to encounter an approach to film acting that is extremely down to earth.

"A film actor needs to have alive his face and his heart"

"All this discussion about schools, between schools, seems to me silly", Stankova admits. "Why not pick the best from them all and use what works for you?"

What works for Stankova, and what she encourages nascent film actors to do at all times, is use their imaginations: "You have to have images, you must create them, make them concrete, otherwise we (the audience) will not be able to see them, or know how you feel about them." This belief gives rise to a host of exercises in which actors are asked to see flowers, old friends, and enemies where there aren't any, much as they might be asked to do so on an actual film set, where there likely won't be any either.

Stankova also believes that a film actor must learn to combine both presentational and representational modes of acting: presentational being the mode in which the actor is constantly becoming the character in such a way that performances and emotions may vary, and representational being the mode in which an actor repeats only

those results achieved during rehearsals. In her words, a film actor "needs to have alive his face and his heart" and "to remember his gestures, his movements, and his position" so he can repeat them; he must hit his marks emotionally and technically.

"Directors, for an actor, are like Gotts"

During the eleven-week period, Stankova leads actors and directors alike (for directors are expected to do the exercises as well) step-by-step along a path designed to help them hit these marks. There are exercises, as a matter of fact, for hitting nothing *other* than marks on the floor; for head movements and eye movements in precise tandem and repeated, one after the other; for maintaining a constant flow of inner thoughts, so that no matter how abbreviated a given reaction shot may be, it will always have something about it that intrigues.

Scenes from famous and not-so-famous films for one, two, and an ensemble of actors are re-enacted, shot on video, and examined.

A director gets a chance to learn about the consequences of his being late: "Directors, for an actor, are like Gotts. They are guiding lights. They must be professional. They cannot be late."

Actors learn that even 'Gotts' can be gotten round: "If a director gives you a subtext and it doesn't work, use a substitute."

Dierdre Bowen, a prominent Toronto casting director, pays a visit and offers some hardnosed advice: "You come in to see me. It's a job interview. I'm looking at your physical appearance. I'm looking for a professional attitude. I'm making notes to myself, such as 'Doesn't have a clue'. So be sensible. Don't push me. Introduce yourself. Give a number where you can be reached. Have a picture that looks like you. A one-page resume that lists your most recent work. And remember, the minute you walk in the door to my office or a casting session, you're on."

"I'm extremely happy now"

At the end of the workshop, there is a party to which casting directors and producers about town are invited to view the finished tapes. There may even be some kudos, from Stankova herself: "At the beginning, you were horrible. I never met a group so horrible. But no group ever made better progress. I am extremely happy now. The scenes are good. You are good. We have something to show."

We also, it seems to me, have something to be thankful for. While our counterparts in the theatre may work together informally and formally a great deal of the time, actors, writers, and directors in Canadian film seem to do so all too infrequently, waiting in many cases until they are on the set together, by which time it's often too late.

If all Maruska Stankova did was bring together young people from the creative side of the business - the side that falls on its face with such numbing regularity - we would owe her a small debt. But because she gives them the benefit of her vast experience in the dramatic arts as well as the opportunity to learn from one another, respect one another, and move forward after making a few mistakes, we owe her a very great debt indeed.

I wish there was more training of this kind available in Canada. I think we need it. I know it helps.



● Getting a part on SCTV was Michael O'Hara's reward

photo: Roger Mattiussi



● Melissa Bell takes it hard from Peter Stevens in a workshop scene

photo: Sturla Gunnarsson



● Acting adulterous, Angie Pietarinen and Micheal O'Devine

photo: Roger Mattiussi