Developing a Dramatic Analysis of Conflict Transformation:
In what way can Stanislavski's magic 'If' be a stimulus to peacebuilding?

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Abstract:
'Relationship, paradoxical curiosity, creativity and risk' are four elements identified John Paul Lederach as necessary for peacebuilding and conflict transformation. The ability to imagine a web of relationships, to be curious about people and their lives as well as being able to image the 'other' and take risks are all qualities actors learn through studying Stanislavski's methodology. Based on the first stage of a research project with LAMDA acting students in their second year of drama training this paper explores what Stanislavski's teachings of 'given circumstances' and the magic 'if' can contribute to the world of conflict transformation. Actors learn to transfer their skills and apply them to work outside the theatre context, which in turn help them reflect on their own development as actors.
This paper investigates the intersection of Stanislavski-based actor training and peacebuilding discovering actors' transferable skills and exploring areas such as the multiple perspectives and complex interrelated dynamics of conflict, our positionality, the potential to transform interdependent relationships, and the tools to analyse and transform narratives. It examines how the magic 'If' can stimulate deeper understanding and help make the imaginative creative leap necessary to find transcendent solutions to complex conflicts.

Keywords: Conflict transformation, Actor training, Stanislavski's Magic 'If', transferable skills, peacebuilding, relationship dynamics, narratives

Introduction

'The secret of "if", as a stimulus, lies in the fact that it doesn't speak about actual facts, of what is, but of what might be … "if"… This word is not a statement, it's a question to be answered.'[1]

'Relationship, paradoxical curiosity, creativity and risk' are four elements identified by the renowned peacebuilder John Paul Lederach as necessary for peacebuilding and conflict transformation.[12] The ability to imagine a web of relationships, to be curious about people and their lives as well as being able to image the 'other' and take risks are all qualities actors learn through studying Stanislavski's methodology.

Based on the first stage of a research project with London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA) acting students in their second year of drama training this paper explores what Stanislavski's teachings of 'given circumstances' and the magic 'if' can contribute to the world of conflict transformation. It will investigate some of the similarities and differences between the 'transformative acting' process identified by Vladimir Mirodan and the ability to engage in conflict transformation by using Lederach's four elements of peacebuilding as a frame, discovering actors' potential transferable skills along the way.[3] Acknowledging that therapeutic applications of drama and Stanislavski's methodology already exist in a variety of training and remedial processes (through role-play for example), we are attempting to further explore current transformative actor-training practices and their intersection with conflict transformation.

Process and Methodology

This essay is based on findings from the LAMDA research project carried out in the summer of 2018. It is in part a reflection on the process and in part a suggestion for further exploration – an imagining of how Stanislavski's magic 'if' could be further applied and developed within the arena of conflict and its transformation.

It is cross-disciplinary research, intersecting the worlds of Stanislavski-based actor training with elements of conflict transformation. We are not proposing a new fully-formulated dramatic theory and analysis of conflict, yet we do believe that applying Stanislavski's methods to conflict transformation can enhance and deepen the process.

Our methodology is empirical based on our own observations and on valuable feed-back from the students. As theatre practitioners, we both come from different backgrounds and experiences, bringing our unique but common interest in the thorny subject matter of conflict and its transformation to the table. We first became interested in

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[1] John Paul Lederach is widely known for his pioneering work in conflict transformation. Both academic and practitioner he is engaged in long-term bottom-up grassroots peacebuilding and reconciliation work internationally (Somalia, Northern Ireland, Columbia, Nicaragua and Nepal) and on community level.

this through the theory and practice of Johan Galtung, with whom we also collaborated.[2] Although we are not academics we hope to offer some thoughts on the interplay between these different disciplines, making actors and theatre practitioners aware of their transferable skills as well as their social agency both within the world of theatre and within a wider social arena.

CONCEPTS and FRAMEWORK

Conflict and Conflict Transformation

Conflict is at the crux of theatre as well as the human experience. We understand conflicts to be dynamic, constantly changing and evolving, based on a complex interplay of attitudes and behaviours. Conflicts contain the inherent danger of becoming violent and causing hurt and division, yet when understood and confronted in their early stages, they also have the potential to create positive change on personal, interpersonal and societal levels. When the complex and dynamic nature of conflicts is acknowledged and understood, rather than being 'destructive', they can become 'constructive' processes leading to creative resolutions and transformation.[4] By embracing conflict, relationships can be improved, and social change stimulated. Often the process of preventing or resolving conflict is termed 'conflict resolution' but in this article the term 'conflict transformation' will be used as it implies a deeper more dynamic and creative approach.[5] 'Conflict transformation' implies finding new possibilities and realities that transcend those presented by the conflict, and through deep analysis and in transformative processes for all those involved, to go beyond the mere practicality of resolving the problem. This transformative process can reshape narratives, create new possibilities and implies continuing development.

Conflict happens on intra- and interpersonal, on community and society, as well as on national and international levels. From a systems-thinking perspective these are all interrelated. For the purposes of this research the focus is on the intra- and interpersonal levels with an awareness of how these are influenced by, and in turn can influence, more systemic narratives.

Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis is a tool to help peacebuilders enrich their knowledge of the conflict dynamics by asking and listening to the answers to six simple questions: who, what, why, when, where, and how? It is a way of learning about the subjective truths of the different parties through active listening and can be a first step toward conflict transformation. According to Levinger, 'Narrative analysis is a method for illuminating the multiple

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[2] Johan Galtung is a principle founder of the discipline of peace and conflict studies. He has made significant contributions to peace research and practice working internationally world-wide, and he has developed the TRANSCEND methodology of conflict transformation to address underlying structures and cultures of violence.

dimensions of conflict' as it examines the stories the different parties tell themselves and each other.[6] However, its goal is 'not to grasp the objective truth of a conflict, but rather to gain insight into the subjective perspectives that shape the parties' decisions and actions.'[7] It asks who the stakeholders are, widening the inquiry beyond the presenting conflict, which is often simplified and polarised into two factions. It continues to explore the motivations of 'what' and 'why', differentiating between 'positions' – what the parties state they want - their 'interests' – the unstated motives behind the parties' positions – and their 'needs' – basic and universal needs, including the need for identity, which do not lend themselves to compromise.

TWO ASPECTS of STANISLAVSKI'S METHODOLOGY

Given Circumstances

'The questions – *who, when, where, why, for what reason, how* – which we asked so as to stir our imagination, helped us create a picture … with greater and greater definition.'[8]

Actor training at LAMDA uses the Stanislavski technique: a methodology that helps actors explore and analyse underlying patterns of human behaviour, gain an understanding of characters' objectives, subtext and the 'given circumstances,' or background and context, of their situation. This analytical process has much in common with the first steps of 'Narrative Conflict Analysis' and actors trained in Stanislavski's methodology can therefore easily transfer these important skills to the arena of conflict transformation.

In addition, the actor's lived experience of putting these questions into action when portraying a character can add to the empathic nature of the process making it more than a fact-finding exercise. The actor is trained to step into the shoes of 'the other' to see the world from their perspective, and to imagine themselves in their skin as part of a complex web of relationships. They analyse motivation and objectives and try to create a picture of a character and their context with as much detail and specificity as possible. Objectives can be ascertained through questions such as: 'what do they want?', motivations supposed through asking 'why do they want it?' and obstacles identified through 'why can't they get it?'. Enquiry into the nature of the obstacle is particularly interesting as it reveals the character's attitude to the problem, and therefore helps us discover the prism through which the character is perceiving the situation.

These are also all the questions to be asked in the first stages of identifying and analysing a conflict. The difference being of course the nature of the enquiry – actors work on plays, improvisations and fictional scenarios, whereas in conflict transformation the arena is real life and every question or inquiry is a potential intervention.

Here it might be interesting to note that the process of acting we are investigating is what Vladimir Mirodan terms 'transformative acting'.[9] He draws a distinction between the process of an actor finding similarities between themselves and the character in

contrast to the idea of 'transformative acting' whereby the actor attempts to take on another consciousness in order to get inside a character whose choices, impulses and behaviours are very distinct from their own. This process can add to the deep analysis of conflict transformation.

Magic 'If'

 'the "magic" or simple "if" triggers off creative work. It provides the first impetus for the further development of the creative process.'[10]

In addition to Stanislavski's questions regarding the given circumstances, exploring the powerful supposition 'if' can enhance the process of stimulating the actor's imagination. 'If' is a simple starting point to delve into the imagination, explore possibilities, alternatives and multiple realities. By asking, 'if' I were X in this situation how would I feel, what would I do?', our empathic imagination is stimulated allowing us to put ourselves in another's shoes without judgment. It is the tool to explore and analyse the attitudes, behaviours, motivations and underlying assumptions of both 'characters' and real people. And it is the creative method of both mapping and embodying multiple characters in a play as well as the complex relationships and their ever-changing dynamics.

Through asking 'if' we can begin to imagine alternative realities and new ways of thinking about conflicts or situations. We can think ourselves into all the different 'actors' roles and imagine the possible interventions that could change the conflict dynamics.

Stanislavski's Magic 'if', we believe, can be extended to real conflict situations in two major ways:
1. relationships: in developing empathetic understanding of the people and parties involved in the conflict dynamics including exploring their deeply-held beliefs
2. transformation: in developing the imagination and creativity needed to transform conflict, to find transcendent new realities and to re-imagine existing narratives

This essay will continue to investigate this idea in relation to the four elements of peacebuilding discussed earlier: Relationship, Paradoxical Curiosity, Creativity and Risk. Before doing so we would, however, like to reflect on the difference between the creative process of an actor and that of a peacebuilder and acknowledge that the magic 'if' is always a supposition, an attempt at understanding someone else's point of view and lived experience. It is a powerful tool to transcend difference and open up new doors of understanding. However, the danger is to make assumptions, to think we have understood, and to believe we have the solutions. Therefore, continual self-reflection, questioning and collaboration are essential.

Positionality

At this point it seems important to reflect on the concept of positionality, the fact that we bring ourselves to any research, teaching, or work we do. As research and workshop leaders we were very aware of our responsibility throughout the process to be transparent at all times, to ask permission and the consent of the participants, and in particular to 'Do No Harm', a concept coined by Mary Anderson in relation to conflict to draw attention to the fact that any intervention has an effect on conflict dynamics.[11] We were aware of the potential dangers and vulnerability of working on the young people's real-life stories and their own experiences and established a guideline of a conflict being at a 'safe distance' several years in the past as taught in Drama Centre training.[3]

As artists we can sometimes take the idea of positionality for granted as we all believe that we understand that we have our own individual, subjective approach when directing, acting or making art. However, when working on conflict or research processes it is valuable to make our position more explicit. Rather than believing we are a *tabula rasa* as actors and peacebuilders it is useful to recognise that we all bring our own histories, gender, character traits, etc. that will influence and colour our work, our interactions and our understanding of the world. It is arguable that there is no one reality but that we look at events and relationships, past and present, through different prisms. This in itself can lead to conflict, and in conflict situations it can often be difficult to even agree on the facts, never mind on the perceptions and interpretations of what has happened or is happening.

Self-reflection is embedded in actor training as is the idea of not judging a character, and both are important transferable skills. Part of an actor's training is becoming aware that characters and we ourselves all have different filters through which we perceive the world. Another aspect of self-reflection built into the acting process is the idea of the third eye: to try something out and then step back to evaluate it. The importance of constant self-reflection cannot be overemphasised in tandem with a non-judgmental attitude, something Stanislavski referred to: 'One of the most dangerous obstacles to the receiving of a pure and fresh impression is any kind of prejudice.'[12]

An extension of this is an understanding that when we get involved in a conflict, by asking questions, analysing it, and maybe trying to help transform it, we are making an intervention or a series of interventions, which can affect the future outcome of the conflict situation. Sometimes even bringing our attention to a situation can influence it, and therefore the 'Do No Harm' axiom is an important one to keep in mind. The students applied their understanding that we all look through a particular prism at reality, that we all have our own perspective from which we hear things and that ours is only one version of reality which may differ from that of others. This heightened awareness was reflected in one student's observation that: 'it may be my interpretation of what he said'. [4] However, the potential for positive change is also always present. The students experienced first-hand the power of active listening, the attention given to another person

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[3] By Doreen Cannon, then Head of Acting and trained by Uta Hagen.
[4] All quoted material emanates from workshop participants in research at LAMDA, held in June 2018.

when they tell their story, as well as the empowering effect of having one's own story heard. They also experienced the impact that asking open questions could have in giving someone new insight into their story or conflict. The students' increased understanding of their potential agency as change-makers was one of the outcomes of the project, as well as their enhanced learning and awareness in Lederach's four elements needed for peacebuilding and conflict transformation.

RELATIONSHIP

Scientists note that 'nothing in the universe exists as an isolated or independent entity. Everything takes the form of relationship.'[13] We live in a complex and continually changing web of relationships, to ourselves, to other people, to ideas, etc. Relationships can be seen to be at the heart of conflict as well as the interactions that can change thinking, behaviour and attitudes, providing the potential to transform conflict. Building trust and empathy are an essential part of the process in both drama and conflict transformation, and they contribute to deepening human connections and the social fabric. In our research we investigated how the simple act of telling and deeply listening to each other's stories could create trust. In the process we reflected on several different levels of relationship, with an emphasis on interpersonal relationships, as well as our relationship to ourselves.

Relationship to self

An actor's effectiveness relies amongst other things on an increased awareness and sensitivity. Taking personal responsibility for our own impact and our own contributions to conflict in the past and present helps us become aware of our own hooks and triggers, which can often inadvertently contribute to conflicts. Being able to acknowledge and understand this, gives us an increased ability to empathise and understand the triggers in others. Stanislavski training is all about the discovery of the self through continual inquiry. Questions such as 'What if' allow the actor to explore often difficult areas of human experience as well as their own memories and experiences in a safe way. 'What If' can also contribute to a variety of alternative potential scenarios, opening up the possibility of different behaviour in the future. Our internal imagination can help us understand that there is never only one way, one outcome in any given situation, but rather that we have choices. The idea that we make choices within a plethora of possibilities is embedded in actor training of this kind. We can therefore also understand that we can at every moment either contribute to conflict and division through our thoughts, words, motivations and behaviour, or in contrast we can choose to seek connection and transform conflict. What happens, though, when we inadvertently find ourselves part of a conflict, or realise we have been the cause of misunderstanding despite our best intentions? It is only through the interaction with others that we can actually affect change in ourselves and others and take conflict out of the realm of theory into the lived experience.

Relationship to the other

Building and deepening relationships through the telling of personal stories is a foundational activity and was the starting point of our project. To be truly heard is a powerful experience and we can give others the gift of our full attention through 'deep' or active listening. Taking it in turns to tell one's own and listen to another's story can be a vulnerable but also a therapeutic and cathartic experience. Teresa Phelps suggests that 'Storytelling is an essentially human act that enables all of us to make sense of our lives and to feel integrated as members of a community' and goes on to explore the different functions of stories including seeking balance, ways of finding the truth, as communication, translation and sacrament.[14] In the words of the participants stories were ways of 'finding connections', 'he was there experiencing it alongside me', they 'made me more comfortable' and the story showed we 'have something in common', thereby building trust strengthening relationship and creating empathy. In addition, exploring ways of feeding back someone else's story accurately in their own language heightened the experience of being heard and understood, and contributed to creating common ground.

The students were aware that their training in Stanislavski's methodology had given them the tools to empathise:

> Having had the tools to empathise with people and their circumstances, as accentuated by training in Stanislavski's methodology, helped me to not rush over small details and understand that those small factors actually contribute to the wider whole.

Here the participant is aware of applying Stanislavski's questions into the given circumstances of a character to a real-life situation and recognises the attention to detail in the listening process. They have been trained to listen and appreciate the specificity of each person's story understanding how it contributes to a wider context. They are also aware of the empathetic nature of that listening process, which implies trying not to judge or have assumptions about the other, but instead to keep questioning, a process one participant referred to as 'the empathetic and non-judgmental obsession with "why"'.

Another acting student elaborated on the reciprocal process of 'real-life' conflict transformation work with Stanislavski's methodology, reflecting back on their training:

> Our work on conflict transformation has massively furthered my understanding of my own Stanislavski study. It has given me new perspective on approaching conflict in both real-life and dramatic contexts. It certainly opened my eyes to the importance of looking at the bigger picture, and attempting to figuratively "put yourself in their shoes", and consider yourself from their point of view; which of course, is what we are always doing as actors.

Being able to 'put yourself in their shoes' shows an empathic imagination stimulated by 'what if?' Furthermore, to be able to consider yourself from their point of view reflects a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of relationships and people's different

perspectives, something that taken a step further might allow us to be able to imagine oneself in a web of relationship even with one's enemies. As Lakoff and Johnson put it:

> Imitating makes use of an ability to project, to conceptualise oneself as inhabiting the body of another. Empathy is the extension of this ability to the realm of emotions – not just to move as someone else moves, but to feel as someone else feels.[15]

Relationship to the world

Several participants had the insight that 'We define ourselves through our stories'. Stories constitute a great part of how we create identity, both personal and collective, and the participants became aware of the vulnerability that can be associated with the process of having one's story reflected back, and the responsibility that goes hand in hand with the retelling of someone's story. Similarly, they experienced the transformative power of telling their conflict story, of hearing it reflected back and being asked Stanislavski's open questions in a non-judgmental way. The potential for transformation came from re-framing and re-imagining the story and from enquiring into some of the other factors (the connectors and dividers of conflict) that had contributed to the conflict. In one case it became clear that what seemed to have been a participant's teenage spat in fact also reflected hidden dividers based on cultural identity and economic background, expressed by Stanislavski as 'given circumstances'.

Another reflection was on 'the way different people tell the same story and the way different characters pick up on different things'. Being aware of the choices we and other people make when telling our stories, what is embellished and what is being left out, provides clues to motivation, behaviour and assumptions as noted by Stanislavski regarding subtext. Benedetti describes subtext as a combination of the thoughts that go through our minds when we are listening combined with our mental images.[16] These choices can be personal but also based on group and social dynamics as reflected in one actor's comment about how we censor ourselves. The choices we make are part of how we build relationships through creating personal and group identities. The stories we tell link the process of creating individual identity to the idea of 'social story-telling' and an awareness of meta-narratives. This is an area for potential research in the future. However, within the limits of our present research we found that the process of 're-imagining' stories through 'interested inquiry' by applying the magic 'if' helped the participants to situate themselves within the complexity of ever-evolving narratives and a dynamic web of relationships.

PARADOXICAL CURIOSITY

The term paradoxical curiosity was coined by John Paul Lederach to describe the process of combining curiosity, or careful inquiry into what lies beyond or beneath what is initially perceived, with an ability to acknowledge multiple and often contradictory truths: 'The gift of paradox provides an intriguing capacity: It holds together seemingly

contradictory truths in order to locate a greater truth.'[17] How do we continue to be curious and stay open to finding out more about the other when we fundamentally disagree?

<u>Listening and Inquiry</u>
One of the skills the actors developed is that of listening, attempting not to judge in order to go beyond their assumptions. Deep, active listening without interrupting and giving one's full attention is very challenging. It requires attention to detail and the ability to reduce one's own inner dialogue.

Another skill already developed through the actors' Stanislavski-based training was the inquiry into the given circumstances and motivations, expressed by one actor as the 'curiosity and creative imagination to build on back-story – the empathetic and non-judgmental obsession with "why''. Deepening this practice of questioning by using 'open' questions that do not limit the response to 'yes' and 'no' answers enhances the inquiry into real-life situations.

Here, we would like to pick up on the two qualities, 'non-judgmental' and 'empathetic' mentioned above. Non-judgmental inquiry into the motivation of people and conflict parties helps the ability to rise above dualistic polarities or taking sides. Another participant said after the project: 'I feel I have more ability to read plays without judgement, realizing that, more often than not, there is always two sides to a conflict, and many supporting factors to why the conflict arises – never just one reason alone.' And, 'It has made me more conscious of reserving my bias towards a new character. The work on conflict reminds me to look at all the circumstances from every viewpoint.'

The quality of 'empathy' was also reflected upon. One participant thought Stanislavski 'helps further the ability to empathise with each person's circumstances and internal logic, be they real or fictional', and another realised that the project had helped them in 'empathising and analysing the big picture and prisms of others'. One further student said the project 'has made me more curious to the stories of strangers: wondering where they have been and where they are going, and also it's helped me to stop my initial bias to people I meet everyday.'

These are examples of the reciprocal process the group was involved in and a fortuitous by-product of the workshops. Their Stanislavski-based actor training helped the participants in their search for 'paradoxical curiosity' and a deeper understanding of conflict dynamics allowed them to reflect on their training.

<u>Language</u>

Stanislavski emphasises the specificity in an actor's inquiry and their close scrutiny of a character's use of language. Actors are trained to extrapolate characteristics and thoughts through textual examination, looking for metaphors and linguistic detail that reflect embedded attitudes. This is a skill that serves the process of conflict transformation well. Dissecting language is vital in the analysis of conflict, providing clues to subtext, given circumstance and motivation. Participants enhanced their awareness of the specificity of

the language used, the metaphors employed and the background 'triggers' that were alluded to.

Several participants appreciated that their skills in language analysis acquired through Stanislavski training was further developed by applying it in real-life situations. Participants observed that they have since been 'looking into a character's language deeper' and that 'It has made me want to analyse the smaller detail and reflect upon the information I discover'.

Inquiring into the specific meanings different people attach to the same word is also a very fruitful process as it can transcend assumptions, clarify misunderstandings and open up fresh dialogue. One actor had a profound insight:

> I would also add that the discussions had about text further helped me with my dyslexia. Understanding that words people use each have a different image for every person, (ie – Hinterland) and that affects their choice of words, and is therefore an insight into their internal logic and back-history. I've been exposed to this idea often in training, however it didn't 'click' until the realization that my image for Hinterlands was different to other's in the group's. I now find it easier to understand that words are just ideas, and not just symbols on a page. And those ideas vary for each person.

Attention to linguistic detail can also be very useful in building rapport and trust. Participants experienced first-hand how important it is for the listener to reflect stories and thoughts back to the narrator in their own language. Exploring each other's use of language and metaphor they realised that we choose what we want to see or hear and screen out things we don't understand as well as making assumptions about the meaning of what we are hearing. This enhanced awareness helped them understand their own and others' framing ethics and perspectives.

Complexity

Conflict transformation as well as other real-life situations depend on the understanding of their complex dynamically evolving nature. It is a fallacy to believe that conflict is based on two sides or parties in opposition to each other. In reality, conflict is multi-faceted, multi-levelled (personal, social, national, etc) and there are many stakeholders who can influence the cause and outcome of a conflict.

Developing this understanding was part of the research process and lead to observations such as: 'I got to think about conflicts I've had in the past and gain a different viewpoint from the previous one I'd had and definitely I found that it opened up the complexity of situations which is something I will take with me outside of the academy … It also is a way of accessing the situation from many viewpoints.'

Developing an understanding and respect for complexity gives rise to finding new opportunities. This can be applied both in a theatre context and in the arena of conflict

transformation. Being aware of different viewpoints, prisms and multiple perspectives can open new avenues to exploring the complexity of situations when seemingly deadlocked. Recognising the existence of multiple stakeholders can lead to developing new relationships thereby influencing the conflict dynamics.

The awareness of continual dynamic interactions allows for an exploration of the moment-to-moment shifts in dynamics, and the changing relations and attitudes, through dialogue and interaction. The awareness of conflict being a constantly shifting field and our choice of responses to these shifts opens up creative and exploratory space.

CREATIVITY

'Without imagination there can be no creativeness.'[18]

It is arguable that there are vital aspects of conflict transformation, which rely on creativity. Having inquired into the given circumstances of characters or conflict parties through paradoxical curiosity and by building relationships, both actors and peacebuilders draw on empathetic imagination to put themselves in the other's shoes. They both then apply creative acts of imagination as part of a transformative process, albeit for slightly different purposes. In theatre it is the actor's work to bring a story and character alive, to embody them in a genuine and believable way, to synthesise and integrate a character 'into an overall psychophysical entity.' This transformative process can be stimulated by Stanislavski's magic 'if'. Asking 'if' questions (eg. 'If I were in this situation, what would I do', etc.) is a vital aid to character exploration, and can stimulate an actor's imagination to explore the hidden possibilities in each moment of the drama as well as open doors to many different layers of reality. Stanislavski suggests that creative stimuli can be found in the most unexpected places: 'When you look for something you have lost, more often than not you find it in an unexpected place. The same is true with creativeness. You must send your scouting mind off in all directions. You must search everywhere for creative stimuli…'[19]

This same process can be applied to conflict transformation, although the difference of course is that the peacebuilder is not trying to bring characters to life, but is trying to help all participants find new ways of perceiving the circumstances, to reframe or retell the stories that are being told, and to help find transformative solutions to the problems. Based first on a rigorous process of inquiry, the empathetic and transformative process of imagining 'if' I were in somebody else's situation and had different needs and objectives, can in itself soften conflict and open up different perspectives. Furthermore, imagining 'if' can activate personal and collective creativity to be able to imagine possibilities and futures beyond the existing status quo and conflict. Creativity can help move towards something new and unexpected. Examining Stanislavski's magic 'if' can help discover some of the possibilities for positive transformation latent in every conflict dynamic - to imagine what is possible.

During the research project this creative process was explored through a seemingly simple process of 'imaging' one of the student's family/conflict situations in a

tableau inspired by Augusto Boal's practice of Image Theatre and used in family constellation practice.[20] The student placed the other participants in a tableau embodying the members of the student's family. It was then surprising to find out how accurately the participants expressed their feelings as the 'characters' within the situation and their relationship to the others. This in itself was a revealing and helpful process in analysing the conflict dynamics with students being aware that 'our bodies tell us things'.

The next stage of the process, however, mined the possibilities of 'if' even more profoundly. We asked, 'if there were an ideal family situation, what would it be?', and the student created a new tableau with the participants. Again, the participants reflected their embodied thoughts and feelings, which sometimes did not agree with the originator's idea, so a new 'ideal' image was created based on all participants' input. Then the participants were asked, 'if we could take steps towards the newly created 'ideal' situation what would they be?' And step by step participants proposed possibilities by making one small move into a new position based on their relationship and given circumstances. With each move the dynamic of the whole was affected and everyone had the possibility to react or move as a consequence. The potential of this exercise in asking 'if I change my relationship to that person or the space just a little, what will happen?', became abundantly clear and calls for further investigation. It also became clear that these moves could not be imposed but had to be motivated by the 'actors' within the conflict. 'If' can be seen to be a potential, safe way for conflict parties to imagine new possibilities without having to commit to the reality of change immediately. Asking 'what if 'can stimulate change processes and alter the dynamics of conflict in order to imagine and create new realities. These can be enhanced by physical embodiment, an essential part of actor training, which has a huge impact on changes of perception as discussed in relation to neuroscience by Mirodan.[21]

These acts of creativity lead to what Johan Galtung would call 'the creative leap': the idea that non-violent conflict can potentially stimulate a creative process which might lead to solutions that transcend the polarisation and intractability of conflicts. When we become aware that a conflict does not have to be solved through win or lose, stalemate or compromise, but that it can lead to Win/Win situations as well as to transformational processes, it can transcend the previous realities and lead to potential transformative solutions and relationships. Being able to imagine what might be possible is a first step and one that can be triggered by excavating the motivations and needs of the conflict parties, as well as constantly questioning assumptions. Our creativity can be stimulated through 'What if'. Imaginative 'play' can explore new connections and understanding, helping to move beyond the restrictions of the perceived reality toward exploring some of the possible solutions latent within a situation. Changing even one element within the complex web of conflict dynamics can lead to positive social transformation. 'If' can be a stimulus for transcendent imagination, a creative exploration that can lead to transformational processes. Hallmark refers to the freeing of the 'fantasy muscle' which allows us to think in an expanded way whilst being in control.[22]

RISK

When working with creative processes in collaborative relationships both actors and peacebuilders take risks in several ways: emotional, psychological and sometimes even physical. Student actors commented that to hear someone else's full story involved elements of emotional risk, that 'it's scary to be with someone' and that 'it's exposing'. This applies not only to the telling of one's own story but also to listening and sharing someone else's story with empathy. When we do this, we step into the unknown not knowing where it will take us. Similarly, when building relationships and trust through shared experience we expose ourselves, we take a risk in imagining ourselves in someone else's place, experiencing their story with them. Using Stanislavski's 'if' can provide a safe and gradualist approach in this empathetic endeavour. As an actor playing a difficult part it is a way of comparing and matching elements of the character with oneself and also a way of distancing oneself emotionally if necessary. 'If' can help transport peacebuilders beyond judgment and assumptions.

Conflict usually has cycles consisting of 'cold', 'warm' and 'hot' phases, but is fundamentally volatile and unpredictable, which means it can easily oscillate between these phases potentially erupting in verbally or physically violent behaviour. It is the reason many people stay clear of conflict, believing it to be a 'bad' thing. There is always a slight possibility of physical risk involved in conflict work, however, we are not suggesting becoming involved with 'hot' phases of conflict, or that conflict transformation would be the appropriate way of dealing with them. The interventions suggested in this article are mainly useful in the phases before and after violence, by way of prevention and reconciliation, averting any physical risk

To embrace conflict as a creative act also takes courage and contains elements of risk. To imagine new realities and help others mine the possibilities that transformation can offer takes us out of our comfort zones as often the familiar reality is seemingly safer than exploring something new. Most of us attach emotional and psychological risk to dealing with conflict and to intervening in the conflict dynamism, but we would argue that the risks are considerably less than turning one's back and allowing a conflict to escalate.

One of the students recognised that they 'steer away from conflict and bury it'. After the workshop process, however the same student observed that conflict 'is a good healthy thing to have' understanding that sometimes there is a need for conflict to create change. Taking a risk is an inherent aspect of acting, and a quality which actors learn to develop. It involves a high level of self-awareness and psychological robustness, qualities that are implicit in actor training and imperative for working in conflict transformation.

Conclusion

The workshop process confirmed our belief that Stanislavski-based actor training, has a lot to contribute to the deepening of conflict transformation processes. Stanislavski's exploration of 'given circumstances' has much in common with narrative forms of conflict analysis, including an exploration of context, background, linguistic choices and metaphors in order to discover the characters' hidden motivations and assumptions. The

approach to this analysis, however, differs in certain ways as actors in most cases initially base their research on textual analysis whereas peacebuilders working in real-life situations have to develop their attention through active listening. Exploring this process enhanced the participants' awareness of the complex, continually developing dynamics of which they were part.

We were surprised by the reciprocal nature of the process in which actors discovered that they have many of the skills required to be a peacebuilder, and reversely their engagement with conflict transformation processes helped them to reflect on and deepen their learning and understanding of their actor training. They honed their skills of self-reflection and expanded their awareness of their own impact.

We found that Stanislavski's magic 'If' can work as a stimulus to peacebuilding in several ways:
- It can help shift the personal perspectives both of the conflict parties and the peacebuilder themselves, developing the understanding of the prisms we look through as well as the existence of multiple, complex and often contradictory simultaneous realities. This affects relational dynamics and can contribute to the softening of the conflict dynamics
- It can stimulate a paradoxical curiosity, deepening empathetic inquiry and helping go beyond judgment and assumptions
- It is a stimulus to creativity as it helps develop transformative processes in acting as well as peacebuilding arenas
- 'If' can help take the creative leap into the unknown and create new alternative scenarios, change and reframe narratives and search for possibilities that transcend the existing realities

Following Stanislavski's lead we hope to continue our exploration further by asking 'how' – how can we continue developing a dramatic approach to conflict transformation, how can we expand Stanislavski-based transferable acting skills, how can we deepen actor training? This project was only a beginning, a contribution to the imagining of 'if'.

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[1] Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 53.
[2] Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 33-40.
[3] Mirodan, *The Actor*, 1.
[4] Ramsbotham, et al., *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, 7-10.
[5] Galtung and Jacobsen, *Searching for Peace*, 107-108.
[6] Levinger, *Conflict Analysis*, 113.
[7] Ibid., 113.
[8] Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 87.
[9] Mirodan, *The Actor*. i.
[10] Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*. 54.
[11] Ramsbotham et al., *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*. 317.

[12] Stanislavski, *Creating a Role,* 4.

[13] Lederach, *The Moral Imagination,* 89.

[14] Phelps, *Shattered Voices,* 55.

[15] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors,* 281.

[16] Benedetti, *Stanislavski,* 57-61.

[17] Lederach, *Moral Imagination,* 36.

[18] Stanislavski, *Creating a Role*, 20.

[19] Ibid., 11.

[20] Boal, *Games,* 165-177.

[21] Mirodan, *The Actor,* 163-180.

[22] Hallmark, *Alexander Technique*, 11.