

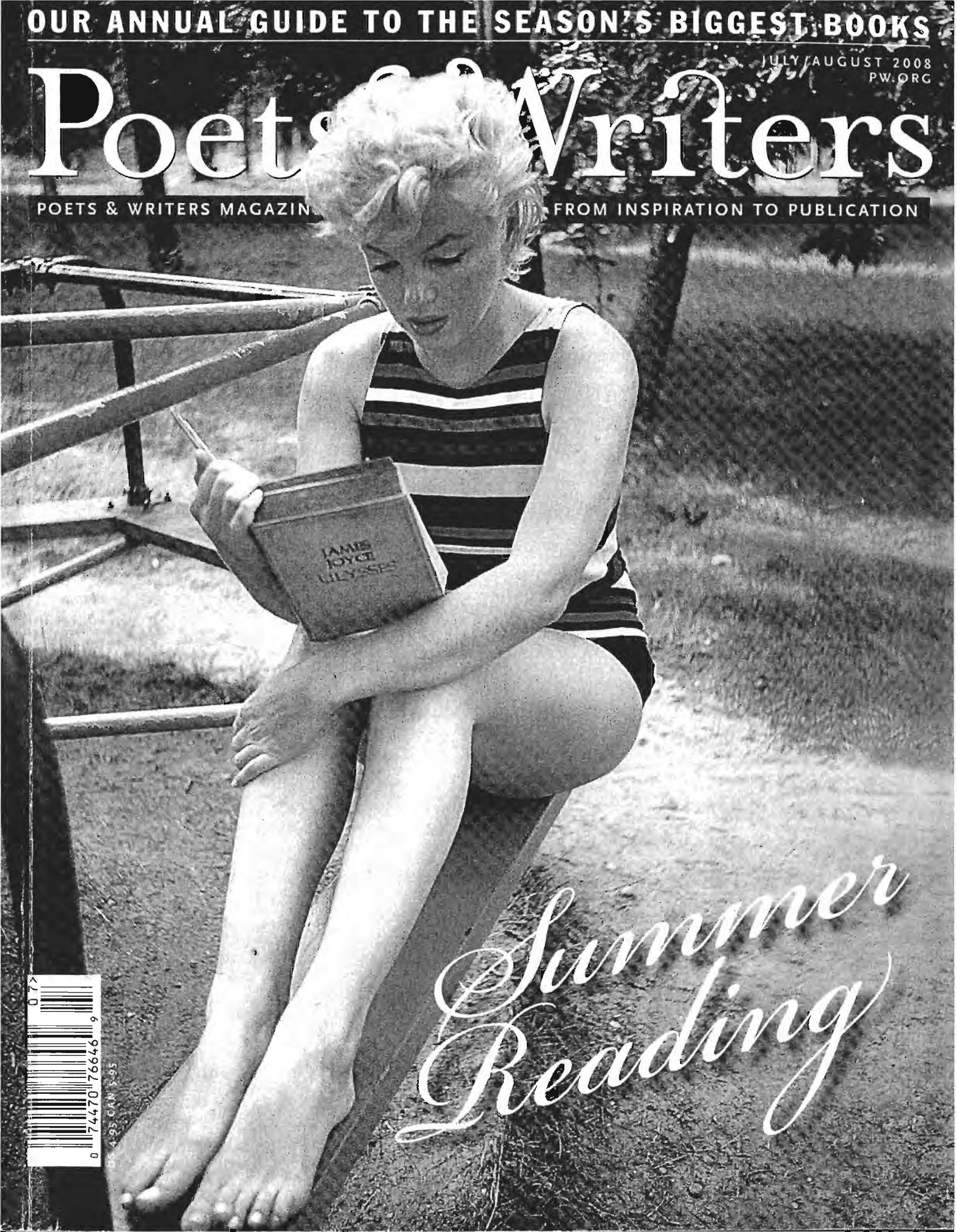
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JULY/AUGUST 2008  
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# Poets & Writers

POETS & WRITERS MAGAZINE

FROM INSPIRATION TO PUBLICATION



*Summer  
Reading*



ISSN 0744-7076 CAN \$3.95



BY SCOTT DRISCOLL  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANK HUSTER

AFTER A SERIES OF SETBACKS IN THE RACE TOWARD WRITERLY SUCCESS, NOVELIST GARTH STEIN FINALLY TOOK THE WHEEL. AND WON.

# That Which You Manifest Is Before You

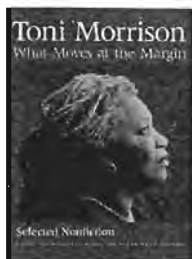
**I**N THE summer of 2006 fiction writer Garth Stein hit the road to promote the paperback release of his second novel, *How Evan Broke His Head and Other Secrets*. He'd sold the book to New York City-based indie publisher Soho Press two years earlier, after parting ways with an agent who hadn't had success placing it. As he logged thousands of miles traveling through his home turf of the Pacific Northwest, giving readings and hand-selling his novel, mostly to independent bookstores, he was determined to use any free time he had to write his third novel.

It had been ten years since Stein's first foray into publishing, and although his first book had been published by a major house, the experience hadn't exactly been what he'd hoped for. So he'd taken matters into his own hands—first selling his book to a small press himself, then hiring a publicist to promote it, and finally working the bookstore circuit on his own dime.

Stein is on tour again, but this time his travels have taken him coast to coast as he reads from his new novel, *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, in major-market cities, including Boston, New York, Miami, Denver, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Published in May by Harper, Stein's novel was the subject of a bidding war that ended in his receiving a reported \$1.2 million contract. The book was released in a first printing of 160,000

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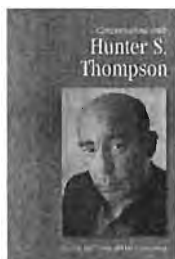
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copies, and subsequently chosen for Starbucks's book program—copies of it are on sale in the company's coffee shops nationwide.

Not bad for a guy who initially couldn't even get an agent on board.

**T**HE story of an up-and-coming race-car driver named Denny, his wife, Eve, their daughter, Zoë, and the trials they endure, Stein's new novel is told from the perspective of the family dog, Enzo. Although the dog-as-narrator isn't a new conceit (Russian master Mikhail Bulgakov's 1925 novella, *Heart of a Dog*, and Paul Auster's 1999 novel, *Timbuktu*, are just two examples), it is a risky one. And, when Stein first shopped the book around, it was one of the reasons he couldn't find an agent to represent the novel. But ultimately it is Enzo's voice that has made *The Art of Racing in the Rain* such an appealing read.

**S**TEIN lives in the old Seattle neighborhood of Mount Baker—think mature shade trees and quiet winding streets only three traffic lights away from a Lowe's hardware and building supplier. He has a quick laugh, piercing eyes, and an easy manner, and comes off as an optimist. "I do register as upbeat," Stein says. And it is precisely this quality that helped him persevere to arrive at his present success.

Stein's positive attitude comes leavened by what he calls "a soul searching," which began in his childhood. Born in Los Angeles in December 1964, he spent most of his growing-up years in the quiet, wooded, suburban commu-

nity of Shoreline, at the north end of Seattle, a haven that offered safe outlets for an energetic, adventuresome boy. His older sister suffered from chronic illness, a potentially fatal form of epilepsy. If a seizure slipped through the "defense grid" of medications, her cycles could go into a persistent loop, threatening to restrict blood flow to the brain. "Let's just say a lot of my parents' energy was spent making sure she was okay," says Stein. While he's quick to add that he was close to his sister, the stress on his family caused by her illness led Stein to escape whenever he could.

At the ripe age of sixteen, for instance, he and a friend loaded up bicycles with gear and pedaled north to Prince Rupert, British Columbia, to catch the ferry to Alaska. "We rode about nine hundred miles or so over two weeks, crossing and recrossing the Cascades twice. We'd stop at night at camps by the roadsides and eat hot dogs and mac 'n' cheese and Wonder Bread for dinner." They eventually got off the ferry at Wrangell Island, near Ketchikan, so that Stein could visit his Tlingit grandmother, who was then in her nineties.

"That was our big trip," he says with a shrug. No mention of hardships, fighting headwinds, scorching interior heat, huddling in tents on the ferry deck through sheeting rain. Nothing about that. Along with giving him the Tlingit stories that would later bloom into his first novel, Stein's early trip exemplifies the disregard for adversity that has helped him follow his writerly instincts despite a series of setbacks.

**S**TEIN'S first passion was documentary filmmaking, and he pursued an MFA in film at Columbia University School of the Arts. After graduating in 1990, he began working on a documentary about homeless rap musicians in Brooklyn, New York, but he soon ran out of funding and couldn't complete the project. Needing something to take his mind off that failure, he and his wife, Drella, set out for Alaska to shoot a film in his grandmother's

**SCOTT DRISCOLL** has won awards from the Society of Professional Journalists as well as the Milliman Award for Fiction at the University of Washington, where he received his MFA. He works as a freelance writer and teaches literary fiction at the University of Washington Extension in Seattle.

house about mythical Tlingit beings called Kushtaka—"land otter man," in literal translation.

"Tlingit people believe in reincarnation. But for your soul to move on, your body has to be cremated," Stein says. "If the body goes missing, no cremation is possible." The Kushtaka have the power to take bodies that are drowning and keep them as a kind of undead dead, which prevents them from completing their journey.

In 1994 Stein and Drella cowrote the screenplay, but they both concluded that it was lacking something. Stein then wrote it as a story so they could figure out what that something was, and *Raven Stole the Moon*, Stein's first

novel, was born. Through his wife's friend, Stein met agent Tina Bennett, who agreed to take him on as a client and sold the novel to Simon & Schuster imprint Pocket Books in 1996. But the book was orphaned three times, shape-shifting along the way, through rounds of editing and revisions, into a horror thriller—a far cry from what he had originally conceived as a literary return to his Alaskan Tlingit roots.

The first editor he worked with felt the story was loaded with too much background. Stein revised it accordingly, only to find his book orphaned when that editor left. "My second editor had cut his teeth on thrillers. He had me pump up the horror aspect," says

## EXCERPT

**The Art of Racing in the Rain**

Gestures are all that I have; sometimes they must be grand in nature. And while I occasionally step over the line and into the world of the melodramatic, it is what I must do in order to communicate clearly and effectively. In order to make my point understood without question. I have no words I can rely on because, much to my dismay, my tongue was designed long and flat and loose, and therefore, is a horribly ineffective tool for pushing food around my mouth while chewing, and an even less effective tool for making clever and complicated polysyllabic sounds that can be linked together to form sentences. And that's why I'm here now waiting for Denny to come home—he should be here soon—lying on the cool tiles of the kitchen floor in a puddle of my own urine.

I'm old. And while I'm very capable of getting older, that's not the way I want to go out. Shot full of pain medication and steroids to reduce the swelling of my joints. Vision fogged with cataracts. Puffy, plasticky packages of Doggie Depends stocked in the pantry. I'm sure Denny would get me one of those little wagons I've seen on the streets, the ones that cradle the hindquarters so a dog can drag his ass behind him when things start to fail. That's humiliating and degrading. I'm not sure if it's worse than dressing up a dog for Halloween, but it's close. He would do it out of love, of course. I'm sure he would keep me alive as long as he possibly could, my body deteriorating, disintegrating around me, dissolving until there's nothing left but my brain floating in a glass jar filled with clear liquid, my eyeballs drifting at the surface and all sorts of cables and tubes feeding what remains. But I don't want to be kept alive. Because I know what's next. I've seen it on TV. A documentary I saw about Mongolia, of all places. It was the best thing I've ever seen on television, other than the 1993 Grand Prix of Europe, of course, the greatest automobile race of all time in which Ayrton Senna proved himself to be a genius in the rain. After the 1993 Grand Prix, the best thing I've ever seen on TV is a documentary that explained everything to me, made it all clear, told the whole truth: when a dog is finished living his lifetimes as a dog, his next incarnation will be as a man.

From *The Art of Racing in the Rain* by Garth Stein. Copyright © 2008 by Bright White Light, LLC. Published by Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

## SARABANDE BOOKS

**Incident at the Edge of Bayonet Woods**

POEMS

**PAULA BOHINCE**

"Piety within shades of pantheism —that is clearly one way to look at *Incident at the Edge of Bayonet Woods*. Bohince is, however, more naturalist than romantic, meaning that her poems above all honor their dark side, their realism, their edge. These are country matters here, incidents in the male American tradition of Frost, Sherwood Anderson, and James Wright, a fact of gender that not only distinguishes this poet's pastoral concerns but separates their power."

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Stein. "Then that editor left." With each new editor, the book's publication date changed too. Originally scheduled for release in June 1997, the book was pushed to the following fall, and then to January 1998. When the third editor retired—nearly two years into the process—Stein's novel was handed off yet again. "She was really nice," Stein says. "I liked her, but..." She had her own list of books to promote, and by the time his was published in spring 1998 it had fallen to her midlist, that graveyard for books that aren't given much of a promotional push once they're out the publisher's door. Still, *Raven Stole the Moon* sold well enough—twenty-five thousand copies in hardcover and paperback combined, according to Stein—to jump-start the author's career.

With his first novel finally in stores, Stein turned his attention to his second, *How Evan Broke His Head and Other Secrets*, the story of a Seattle rock musician who discovers that he has a teenage son. After Bennett sent an early draft of the book around to about ten publishers, none of whom were interested, she and Stein agreed that the book wasn't ready, and they parted ways. He revised the book and tried unsuccessfully for a year to find a new agent to represent it. He then decided to submit it himself to three small presses. Graywolf Press in Saint Paul and MacAdam/Cage in San Francisco both passed, but Soho Press made an offer, and Stein happily accepted. "Small presses treat you fairly, lovingly," says Stein. The book was published in hardcover in 2004.

During that summer of 2006 when he took to the road to promote the paperback of *How Evan Broke His Head and Other Secrets*, Stein had planned to spend time writing a follow-up to *Raven Stole the Moon*. Minding the home front, Drella, who is also his first reader and editor, gave him page-count assignments "to make sure I wasn't going to the movies all day," Stein says. Somewhere along the line, though, he began playing around with



a new voice—the voice of Enzo, the Labrador-terrier mix.

Stein abandoned his work on "Raven II" and started to work in earnest on *The Art of Racing in the Rain* in mid-July at the Riverside Lodge in Bend, Oregon. Four months later, in early November, he had a completed draft. He sent it to an agent he'd hired to help him review the contract he'd secured on his own from Soho. "I was outside Whole Foods shopping for Thanksgiving dinner when my cell phone rang," Stein remembers. "I said, 'What do you think?' He said, 'It's narrated by a dog.' I said, 'Yes, it is.' He said, 'I can't sell a book narrated by a dog.' I said, 'I don't believe you.' He said, 'It's a gimmick. It doesn't talk to me.'"

Not one to stew over rejection, Stein contacted Agent Research & Evaluation, a group that researches agents' performances on past book deals and, for a fee, plays matchmaker between writers and agents. Stein received the names of six or seven agents reputed to be good fits based on his publish-

ing history. The responses he received after sending them queries ranged from “You can’t write from an animal’s point of view” to “Great book, but I don’t know how to handle it” to no reply at all. Regardless of their reasons, they’d all said no. All of them.

Just as Stein was beginning to lose faith, his friend and fellow author, Layne Maheu, suggested he contact Jeff Kleinman of Folio Literary Management, who after reading the first fifty pages left a message on Stein’s answering machine saying, “I love this book. Send the rest of it now, now, now,” which Stein did. Kleinman read a hundred or so pages, then stopped. While he responded to Enzo’s voice and what he stood for, Kleinman wanted changes to the story, and he refused to read further until Stein had made them, because “you can only get a first impression once,” he told Stein. “I honestly think the other agents’ objections to the book had nothing to do with it being narrated by a dog,” says Kleinman. “The issue was you didn’t care enough about the dog’s family.” Stein made the revisions. Kleinman wanted more. Even at the eleventh hour, in late June of 2007, with Kleinman poised to send the book out, Stein wrote an entirely new scene virtually overnight and e-mailed it to the agent.

Shortly thereafter, Kleinman submitted the book to more than twenty publishing houses. “Between one that afternoon and midnight, I already had six or seven calls,” he says. “All over

New York people were shutting their doors and reading this book on screen before even printing it out.” Kleinman says that within twenty-four hours he had three solid offers on his desk. At that point he and Stein agreed to send the book to auction. While he certainly wanted a high advance, Stein also was interested in the kind of author-editor relationship he’d had at Soho, having learned the hard way with his first novel why that mattered. He found what he was looking for in Jennifer Barth, the senior editor at Harper who acquired *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.

**N**ow in his early forties, Stein seems to have moved past those earlier struggles that shaped his life as a young author. He’s landed the major book contract with an editor he trusts, and the house is clearly behind his book. It would seem that a full-time residence on easy street would follow. Not so, says Kleinman: “Stein’s working his ass off for this book probably every bit as much or even more than he did for the one that came out with Soho.” Until the furor dies down, Stein says, his life is not really his own. Then there’s the pressure—albeit some of it self-induced—to achieve commercial success with his next book. All of which can keep him up at night—until he remembers his roots and takes heart. *The Art of Racing in the Rain* was also named as a number one pick by Book Sense, a marketing program of independent booksellers—the very contingent Stein remembers so fondly from his days driving himself up and down the West Coast to promote his last book.

“No matter what happens in the future, I hope to continue to appeal to the world I came from,” Stein says. “I made my bones with the indies and that meant a lot to me. I spent a lot of time asking them to sell my books and they did. It was a good fit. I never want to forget those roots.” ∞

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(Viking, 1962) by Ken Kesey

#### Tennessee Williams: Plays

(Library of America, 2000) by Tennessee Williams

#### Papillon

(Morrow, 1970) by Henri Charrière

#### Love That Dog

(HarperCollins, 2001) by Sharon Creech

#### An Actor Prepares

(Theatre Arts, 1936) by Konstantin Stanislavsky