

New York
November 21, 1941

MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S FIFTH CLASS FOR PROFESSIONAL ACTORS

"EXERCISE - REPETITION IS THE GROWING POWER"

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Twelfth Night
King Lear
Max Reinhardt

It may happen that some of you will wish to make practical use of what we have been talking about, but this is impossible without exercising. Therefore, for those who want to exercise, I will give a suggestion about how to exercise, and what actually the idea of exercise is.

EXERCISE BY REPETITION:

We know that rhythm substitutes for power, and that repetition is actually the growing power, and herein lies the key to exercise. So to exercise means to do the same thing again and again, and to know that we are doing the same thing again and again is very important, because the psychology of one who exercises is quite different from that of one who ex-

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ercises without knowing that repetition is actually the growing power.

Therefore, it is so important to start exercising as if anew. That is the secret. Not to have the psychology that I am doing something which becomes somehow stale and dull for me. No. Each time we do the simple lifting and lowering of the arm, do it with a fresh approach and a desire to do it again and again, as if for the first time. This economizes the time and energy very much, because if I think I have done it, and then do it again without any special interest, it is a loss of time and energy. Sometimes we forget this while doing the exercises.

EXERCISE AS ART:

Another point, and this is even more important, we must try to get the habit of regarding each exercise as if it were a small piece of art. For instance, lifting the arm up and down must not be done superficially. No. It must be done as a little tiny performance. While we are exercising we are trying to fuse the psychology of a creative person with the exercise, so that the exercise will not be somewhere else and we, as creative persons, be here. The exercise must be where our creative spirit is. These two conditions are very important if one wants to exercise in our way. Each time with a fresh approach, and to do it so that each small thing is an accomplished piece of art.

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ATMOSPHERE:

We have spoken about atmospheres, and how we must imagine the air filled with the atmosphere chosen for the exercise, then we start to move and speak with the aim that everything we do will be more and more in harmony with the imaginary air around us. That is the spine of the exercise on atmospheres. A certain creative power and will is awakened by this exercise for atmosphere.

CONCENTRATION:

Concentration for us means to choose an object, either physical, audible, or imaginary, and try to merge with it more and more by going out of oneself to catch, to embrace, to grasp, to hold, to possess and then to merge with the object and become one with it. That is the spine of the exercise of concentration. Just as one can think either chaotically or in an organized way, just so the exercises on atmosphere or concentration can be done.

IMAGINATION:

The best way to exercise the imagination is in three degrees. 1. Try to imagine things which we know
thing in our room. As if to remember the object,
st step to the imagination. 2. The next step
gs which we have never seen, but have heard
to imagine not only by means of remembering

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but by means of a certain activity which will shape for us certain things which we have heard about but which we do not know. 3. The third step is to imagine things which do not exist at all. Pure fantasy. Whether it is a character which we have never seen, or a plant, or a super-human being, but something which you cannot think of because you have never seen or heard of it. These three stages are sufficient for the moment: 1. The real thing which is not seen at the moment, but is remembered. 2. Something real which is half-known. 3. Something which is unknown - pure creation.

FEELING OF EASE:

The best way to start these exercises is to recall your state of mind when you are in a sad, heavy mood, and compare it with moments when you are gay and happy. Pay attention to how differently you experience your own body in these two extreme moods. When you are gay, you feel your body almost without weight, and when you are in a heavy, depressed mood, you feel the weight of your body to be very heavy. By this means you can distinguish between the extremes. Then start to move and try to develop the feeling of ease.

Try to speak and let the words fly out of your speech apparatus more easily, regardless of the content. "How" it is said is important, because this "how" is actually the feeling of ease. The content can be very heavy, but the means of expression, the "how," that is the feeling of ease.

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SUSTAINING:

The "trick" of preparation or anticipation, movement or speech, and the sustaining - for this we must have the inner impulse, then the word or action, then the sustaining. While exercising this, it is very good to use our arms and hands, because this will give us a real impulse later on. Later we will talk about our psychology and its connection with our movements. Instead of exploring the part philosophically or psychologically, and then plunging into the part, knowing much about it but not being able to say one word, we have the means of doing the same work, but starting with our actor's means of exploring the part.

THE OBJECTIVE:

To exercise the objective means to choose the aim, and to imagine it as if already fulfilled.

CONTRASTS:

There is another means for making our acting on the stage more expressive. The principle is a very simple one. Each time we have a part, or even parts, on which we have been working for several months - these are very suitable material - we must try to find, wherever we can, the contrasts in the part. Contrasts in every sense. For instance, I will give you some different examples to show that contrasts can be found everywhere. Let us take two sentences as an example:

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"Do you want me to go with you?" and, "I will not go with you." These can be spoken in exactly the same way, and it will be one straight line, which means in every form of art that it is the poorest, weakest, most obvious expression.

The straight line is nothing for us - art requires curves, and spirals and such forms, but not the straight line, unless the straight line is used consciously in the psychology, the voices, etc. then, of course, it becomes a very strong means of expression. But if used throughout the whole performance, then it is a very dull business. The last time we exercised our scene it was a very straight line - noisy, shouting, a straight line from the very beginning. Instead of which we must try to find many contrasts, many polar things which are everywhere.

For instance, you can speak the first sentence in a very quick tempo and the second sentence in a slow tempo - immediately there is something expressive there - or try it just the opposite. The contrast even in tempo makes it more expressive. You can combine these contrasts by speaking one sentence in a quick tempo and a low voice, or in a slow tempo and a loud voice. You can give one sentence a warm quality and the other a cold quality. You can play with the two sentences just as a juggler does, and actually that gives a great pleasure not only for you but for the audience. They cannot tolerate a straight line too long, but if there is a variety

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of polar things the audience will be absolutely with the actor.

You can do this with sentences, with scenes, with everything. For instance, let us take the Cellar Scene and the Letter Scene in Twelfth Night, in which the same characters meet twice. It is very helpful for the director to find such contrasts. The Cellar scene can be base and heavy, muted, pleasure in all physical things such as eating, drinking, embracing, etc. And the Letter scene, or Garden scene, can be absolutely the opposite - everything unreal, like magic, not of this earth. Immediately the whole play gets relief.

It depends on the part, and the actor must know what he wants to do with the part. For instance, let us take the following contrasts from King Lear. The three speeches are from the one scene - the Heath scene. The first speech is, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!", the second speech is, "Poor, naked wretches," and the third speech is, "Why, thou wer't better in thy grave than to answer with thine uncovered body this extremity of the skies."

It would be a good exercise for the actor to find what contrasts can be used in these three speeches. For instance, the, "Blow, winds," speech can be spoken out of the will. Then the, "Poor, naked wretches," speech can be spoken out of the region of the heart - it comes from the heart, and the, "Why, thou wer't better in thy grave..." can be from the

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head - thinking. So the same character can use the contrast of these three regions of will, feelings, and thought which we have spoken about. Lear will be more expressive if he uses such contrasts.

Then the director can imagine the play, and find the contrast between the beginning and the end. This can be found in every play, but we will take again the example of King Lear. It begins in a stately, abstract atmosphere in which everything is centered on a despotic being, who plays with people as with puppets. A depressed, heavy, hopeless atmosphere of unreal activity, as it were. The end is a catharsis - everything is the opposite from the beginning - if the beginning was heavy, the end must be as light as air. If at the beginning, Lear was oppressing everyone, in the end he is the victim of his destiny. In the beginning he was evil, and at the end he is enlightened. In the beginning he was sitting higher than all the others, and at the end he must die being down.

Everything must be used for expressing such contrasts. This will mold the characters, and then the characters can speak more staccato or, again, more legato, or at one moment warm and at another cold, or muted and open. Innumerable possibilities of contrasts are everywhere, and then the play will be much more expressive than it would be without such contrasts.

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Questions and Answers:

Question: I was wondering about our last improvisation, based on atmosphere. Did you intend us to use actions, and have objectives which we chose for ourselves, or did you intend us to rely entirely on the atmospheres for our improvisation?

FOUR STAGES OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS:

Answer: I intended the latter. Of course, we cannot switch off all our experience as actors, but for our present aims it would be better to concentrate just on the atmosphere, and see what will come out of it. What was wrong was that the atmosphere was forgotten and you started to act, because you are actors. It cannot be overcome immediately, but we must make the effort again and again to drop the things we have become accustomed to, when we are exercising new things. I should have made it clearer to you that the basis for the improvisation was only the atmosphere - the four stages of the creative process: 1. atmosphere. 2. imagination. 3. incorporation. 4. inspiration. Of course it takes tremendous courage to say, "No," to all the things which you have been accustomed to using, but this courage must be found.

Question: In what way would it have been different if we had all been aware of the atmosphere? Also, if we were not as aware as we were meant to be, would we just become aware of the atmosphere, and stop all the impulses to act? Would that be the final objective?

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Answer: If we could stop all the old habits, other impulses would come which are much more subtle, much finer, more your own, more individual, more personal, because the things which you did, instead of the atmosphere, were very much "in general". Everyone can shout, everyone can go on like that, but what we are trying to do is to let the individuality come out and sparkle. It can be done only if we discard all our habits, and let our individualities respond to whatever we choose - in this instance it was the atmosphere. Then you will see that you are not poorer but actually much richer and more expressive as actors. You will see that nothing will be lost, if you will somehow switch off your old habits.

Question: What you say about allowing finer, more individual things to come out of me is very appealing, but I don't understand how I can do it. In the improvisation for atmosphere the other day, I found myself involved with a lot of things. So much started to happen that I could not control, in your sense. What is the alternative to that? Must I sit back and wait for something to come?

Answer: I understand your question. We must not sit back and wait - that is fear which chokes us. First of all, because you are an actor you cannot sit and wait, except if you are embarrassed, then, of course, nothing happens. For example, let us take the moment when the sailors are drinking and talking to each other in the atmosphere, there is so much to do!

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Even the drinking alone in this atmosphere would be enough. As soon as you drink one imaginary glass in this atmosphere, you will be over whelmed by the actions which come as a result.

Question: Then what happens when we have to develop and continue the problem of the plot? Something is supposed to develop, and I am supposed to take part in it. When I am taking part in it, I lose some of the atmosphere. How much time should we allow ourselves to sit in the atmosphere, before we begin to be involved in the plot?

Answer: If we were going to rehearse a play, it would be a different thing. But I have chosen this improvisation as an example by which I can show you what I mean by the Method - certain principles, methods, and "tricks". Therefore, it was not a normal rehearsal. A rehearsal would be quite a different thing, and this is only an attempt on my part to make it [the Method] as clear as possible, by means of acting in this improvisation. If it is not successful we do not need to worry about it, because certain understanding of the Method will come, and that is my task.

Question: May I say then that in the next improvisation I shall make it my task to wait to be pushed, rather than to get in there and push someone else.

Answer: If we go on with the atmospheres, then it would be very good, but I had hoped to take another step today, by

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giving you some lines for the improvisation. However, on principle, you are right. It would be better to wait and "listen" to the atmosphere. For instance, if you drink a glass of wine, having developed the atmosphere, there is no time needed to get the atmosphere - it will come immediately. As soon as you know that the atmosphere is one of drunken gaiety, then you do not need any time to wait because it is around you immediately, and you only have to know it.

Question: I think the only way we can know whether we are right or wrong is by criticism from you. You are the only one who can tell us whether we have understood your example.

Question: I have never worked in terms of atmosphere before, but everything that happened in the improvisation has happened to me before. We feel impelled to do a lot of action. When the improvisation goes wrong, I think it should be stopped, and we should be told where we have gone off the track.

Answer: My fear was only that my criticism might be considered a destructive one, but if you will accept it as constructive, then I will do it.

Question: Even after all this discussion I don't know whether I create the right atmosphere or not, or whether I was creating at all.

Answer: The main mistake last time was that, as modern actors, we are very easily led by action on the stage, and, first of

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all, by what we are doing and speaking. Therefore, we were immediately enticed into doing things instead of relying on this new element of atmosphere which would entice us to do and to speak, but in a different way. So there comes the question of "how" we act and speak with the atmosphere or without it, because the atmosphere is actually "how" things happen on the stage.

We can get up and drink a glass of wine, without atmosphere, but if we want to do it differently - that is "how" - we must find the atmosphere in which we are doing it. We change the atmosphere, not the action - the "how" will depend on different atmospheres. So this is the question of adding to the "what," the action, the "how," or the way I am doing it. And this "how" depends on the atmosphere and other things. Therefore, there is no question of whether you have created right or wrong atmospheres. You can change the atmosphere while you are acting, but the atmosphere must be there. There is only the question of whether you have lost the atmosphere, or whether you are still in it, doing and speaking things through the atmosphere, because of it, in it.

Question: Is it true that when we are working properly with the atmosphere, it is something which we are giving back and forth. If you share something, you would not be working alone, but you would be absorbing what is created there.

Answer: Absolutely.

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Question: I feel the only time we got anywhere near the atmosphere was when we united in singing a song. Was that right or wrong?

Answer: When I say that the atmosphere was gone, that is not quite correct, because it was there in spite of certain wrong things. So I would say that not only was the song atmosphere there, but all the other atmospheres, too, however, they were not strong enough for us to get inspiration from them. So it is a question of balance.

We may understand atmosphere, but when we start to act, our old habits overwhelm the atmosphere. Therefore, without exercising this new thing, it is actually impossible to produce it. In time, it will become more and more obvious that atmosphere is one of the ways - one of the most important ways - to get new things out of ourselves, and to be original and ingenious each time. We do not have it because of many habits and clichés, which do not allow us to break through these things and create new things. It is a matter of having the courage to say, "No," to these other things which are deceiving us.

Let us try to investigate and rely upon this atmosphere, by saying one sentence and doing a definite gesture which I will give you. Speak the sentence, "I love you," with this gesture, in the atmosphere of secrecy, very warm but very cautious.

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Because you recognized that it was simple, your creative impulses were immediately there, and it was all much more individual than in the noisy exercise you did the other day. But whether it is Hamlet or some uncomplicated thing, it is just the same thing if we have this simple technique.

Question: It was easier for me because I was all alone, but the disturbing thing is to do it when you have to work with so many people. How do you keep in the atmosphere, if your partner is not in it?

Answer: The difficulty of our art is that in general we depend so much on other people. This problem has to be solved by a similar culture, if we are aiming at the same thing and have the same training; then it will be diminished and the problem will disappear.

Question: If I am working in a Broadway play, and am the only actor who knows the Method, is there any way I can lead my partners?

Answer: To a certain extent you cannot, but many things can be done. If you cannot entice everyone, some of them will follow you, and you can accomplish many things, being alone. Of course, it is difficult, and it is one of the unhappy things in our modern theatre.

ACTORS AND THE METHOD:

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I have tried certain things in Germany when I was acting with Reinhardt.¹ German actors are incredible from the point of view of clichés...like rocks and stones. Do you think that a group of German actors would come together as we have? They would not even dare to ask anyone what they thought of this or that. It is such a polite country, in the wrong sense of the word. Nobody had any interest for what I was doing, but I used one thing, although I knew it would be taking a risk. While the other actor was speaking certain words, I did certain things by which the audience's attention was directed to me. The poor actor was very unhappy, but he could not find the person who was doing it. Finally, when he discovered that it was I, he came to me, pale and trembling. He begged me to allow him to act alone, instead of trying to find out what I was doing so that together we could try to do something more interesting. But he would never allow that. Another time, I changed the mise en scène while acting, and the stage manager whispered, "Stop it! You will be fined for this!" When I asked what was wrong, he said, "You have changed your mise en scène, and what will the others do?" It was very difficult to act in Germany - they are so stiff there - like a corset.

CROWD SCENE PSYCHOLOGY:

We often make another little mistake - and this you have done in the improvisation the other day. When there is

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a crowd scene actor's make one mistake - suddenly they forget that they are individuals, and each one tries to become a crowd. They try to perform the whole scene, all the noises, etc., instead of waiting for the result, because crowd scenes are always the result of many things going on. But actors confuse this, and each one tries to act the whole crowd. If you will try to remain individuals in this crowd scene, you will get a very attractive scene.

APPROACH TO THE REHEARSAL:

The first thing we have tried to apply was the atmosphere. The second thing was the imagination, and I have suggested that you read the text of a play, not so much for the content, which will happen of itself, but to imagine while the words are spoken - see and hear them and see how the action goes on in your imagination while you are reading the text. In this way you will get the text through the imagination and not through the content.

After the first draft of the performance is clear enough in your imagination, then the next step will be to incorporate this imagination. Whether right or wrong. Rehearsals are for the aim of finding better things. First imagine the whole thing, imagine the atmosphere, imagine the characters, imagine how the words are spoken. It is always important to be able to create one image, we can also create another and a better one. Read the play by imagining it.

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QUALITIES OR CONTRASTS:

Let us try to enumerate the things which we see in this room. Try to enumerate them in one long, straight line of speech. Now start by speaking slowly, and then increase the tempo. At once it becomes more expressive. It becomes some psychological thing at the end. Or try the opposite - nothing will come of it if it is even, equal, or straight. Of course, it can be made consciously even, but then it must be used very consciously. Let us speak equally, then more and more slowly. From this you will see that we can combine many qualities.

First speak with the quality of being annoyed, then become more and more interested in the things you are looking at. Begin quickly and then become slower; it is immediately interesting to watch, and that is acting. Simply the process of expressing is interesting. Such acting is more interesting possibly than Hamlet often is. If we can do such things in this simple exercise, how wonderful it would be to do such things with Shakespeare, whose plays are full of these contrasts. Let us repeat the exercise, first it is quick, annoyed, and loud, then at the end, slow, interested, and soft.

These qualities or contrasts will entice certain feelings in us. For instance, if we imagine that our individuality is longing to express itself, but the means which we place at its disposal are so even, so uninteresting, that the individuality cannot use them. Let us imagine that this straight

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line is nothing that the individuality can use, but as soon as we give a little contrast, such as quick and slow, the individuality immediately tries to use it. A little exercise will give us ourselves, and will enrich us by means of ourselves, because we have everything in us as actors.

Exercise:

By taking a position and holding the hand, say, "Please don't." Then place the other hand on the chest and again say, "Please don't." Another nuance will come. That is pure acting - no philosophy, no psychology behind it. We move in a certain way and that awakens our emotional life. Now add the fourth movement - drop the hands to the side and say, "Please don't." Don't think of it consecutively - just go on and see what happens.

This is the proof that our actor's nature does not want to stop. If we have injected our being with something - objective, atmosphere, or simply gesture, it must go on and that is acting. That is improvisation which must always be present on the stage. It is clichés which make us dead and which stop us.

IMAGINATION:

One more suggestion: I have already suggested that we make excersises in several ways - 1. By seeing something in my imagination which I know exists, but which I cannot see

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with my physical eyes. 2. To imagine things which I have never seen but which I know about. 3. To create something which is absolutely the product of pure fantasy.

Now I suggest another exercise which is a guide to imagining the character, which you will choose or create anew. Try to imagine this character fulfilling objectives, different objectives - purely in the imagination. Ask the character to fulfill the objective, "I want to get some money." Imagine some situation - where the character is, and from whom he or she wants to get the money. Try to imagine the character fulfilling the objective. That will be the next step. Follow your imagination so that there will be no breaks in it.

FEELING OF EASE:

Recall a moment when you were gay and happy. What was the weight of your body? Now lift your arms and hands, making the movement a little piece of art. Now toss the imaginary ball from one to the other, using the body very freely, everyone taking part all the time. Then we will begin to feel something flowing in our bodies. So many emotions will come to us, if we take full part in this. Everything immediately appeals to the feelings, which shows what a childlike nature the artist has, if we appeal to it. This feeling of ease is one of the four qualities which the actor must have at his disposal all the time.