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Michael Chekhov

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Moscow Art Theatre  
Michelangelo

DESIRE FOR EXERCISING REGULARLY:

What was the result of your holiday tasks? Did you find difficulties in this work with the imagination, or was it successful? With regard to the illusion that you do not have time in which to do such work, I must tell you that this will only disappear after you have made many, many efforts. Then you will get quite naturally the desire to work, just as you desire to eat and drink and walk when the weather is fine. The human being is able to acquire the things that he tries to do regularly, even if there is a great effort at the beginning. We cannot escape this difficult threshold, but once we have crossed it we will have the interest to work regularly, and this desire for the work will come of itself. Try to remember this simple law, that if you make an effort now, you will get the desire to work later on. Even if you have an idea about this, it will give you energy and power. Try to remember this when you next get a task.

Criticism: Two Kings

Now I'd like to make a short criticism of the Two Kings performance which we saw at the end of last term. To

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begin with, I feel that you have lost a little the quality of the fairy tale. It has become more naturalistic - not quite naturalistic, but it is inclined to fall into a naturalistic quality. This contradicts the fairy tale quality, which is always a mixture of reality and unreality; and this mixture makes the beauty of the fairy tale. But if we consider what we saw as work in progress, then this is not a mistake. If, however, it was the final stage of the play, then it would be. In the plot, and in the text itself, the fairy tale quality is lacking now. I feel the loss of the scene in which the boy is brought in, and the scene in which the book of the law was used. These scenes were perhaps more naive, but they were more fairy tale like. It is important that you, as directors, and the actors, should know that you are too near to reality.

#### CHARACTERS:

Secondly, about characters. While the Old King's character was better, almost all of the other characters have disappeared. Again I repeat that if this is just a stage in the progress of the play it is all right, if you are going to find other characters. But if it is a final stage, it is wrong, because although we must never repeat even good things, and must improvise freshly each day, on the other hand we must not lose the good things which we have done. In Catherine's case, I feel that the character of the seamstress was much better than the new character. Blair and Paul's characters have gone. If you continue this way and bring it to a certain final point,

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you must elaborate these characters or bring back the old ones or give new characters, but do not leave them in this unbalanced state.

As director, you must give Paula some scaffolding for her character. When working with characters, you must remember all the things we have spoken about: the center, the invisible body, etc.; then you will gradually get the things which belong to the character. The characters must be coaxed by means of our Method, and the actor must not be left to flounder groundless, so that even the character disappears.

In this instance the director says that he felt that the characters were the actors' business, and he only gave them small suggestions to go by. This is not quite right. From the standpoint of the school it is the students' business, but when they are actors it is the business of the director. It is quite a different psychology. Therefore, if we continue this work, I would like the director to give the characters, to lead and to guide them. As a director you must know that if you give the actor something interesting, he will always take it and will not feel that he is being forced. If you do not tell him clearly what you want, it is worse than being forced. Sometimes by forcing him, he will feel much more free, just as by being free sometimes he will feel that he is forced to do something. The psychology is a little distorted sometimes.

With regard to the schema: It does not seem to me that the schema corresponds very closely to the real performance. It is a very good idea, but it must mean something for the actor - how he has to play. The mistake which you have made is that

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your schema was intellectually interpreted. It belongs to the intellectual understanding of the play, but it does not give any support to the acting. The schema must be in the same key as the actor's acting. The schema is the psychological gesture of the whole play. It can also be the archetype for the play. It can contain everything, just as the seed contains the oak tree; but from an oak seed only an oak tree will grow, not some other kind of tree.

As director you must be aware of the things which your intellect will suggest to you as corresponding to the play. The same is true of Terry's character, but in his case it is less so because his character has led him to this more direct condensation of the will. However, on the principle it is wrong. The director's mistake was that the style was quite different in the schema than in the play - different in dimensions, qualities, and activity. It is only right to create a psychological gesture, archetype or schema if it really gives the ground on which the actors can stand, or if it is something which inspires the whole play.

There is something very good in the idea of the Magician; some actor's trick in it. Then it disappeared and you disappeared as an actor. You stopped acting and you disappeared. Were you lost because you did not know what to do? What was your psychology when you disappeared?

If you will continue this work later on, I would like you to bring it to the moment when you are ready to show it on the stage, together with drawings for settings, costumes, make-up,

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lighting, etc. Then we will stop this work.

FUTURE THEATRE PLANS:

Now we come to the main point of today. I want to tell you about the plan which I have for the coming term. As you know, each term brings us nearer to the moment when we shall say: "Now we are really a theatre," to the moment when we will perform our plays before the audience, to the moment when the walls of the studio which protect us psychologically and physically will fall down. We have to appear before the whole world, and many stones will be thrown at us and into our hearts. Many stones will hurt us and many of our ideals will be laughed at. Many, many difficulties will come which will make us uncertain during the first days of our real life, when the protecting walls have fallen away. Each term brings us nearer to the crucial, and yet desirable, moment. This is our last aim - the point to which we are working.

I must speak with you quite openly about this; and I know you will understand me because we are friends and can speak honestly with each other. You have always allowed this, and I will continue to do it. I don't make any reproaches, but I must point out certain things, the first of which is that although you know we are coming nearer and nearer to the moment when the walls will fall down, I don't think you are really preparing yourselves for it. You don't realize that this crucial and painful moment will come. You are still too quiet inside. If you work hard in the studio, you are tired in the

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evening, but that does not mean that you are really working. You may be spending many hours doing such and such work, but whether you are really working - this is another question.

I speak in general, because each of you is in a different degree of this stage. What I mean by this real work, I will tell you. I mean that you must get the feeling that in spite of or because of all our aims and ideals, and because of the long way we have to go, we must have a real ground under our feet. We must feel that we don't want to be floundering somewhere "Luciferically," but we want to stand on the ground in our profession, and this feeling for the ground is what we lack now. What does this mean? It means, first of all, (and now I am going to speak professionally) that you don't yet realize what our profession actually is - the development of the ability to have our feelings in our will. Without this we are not standing on the ground. This is our ground.

If you were scientific people, your ground would be thoughts, and you would have to develop the ability for logical and objective thinking - the feeling for experiment, etc. If you were religious people, your ground would be an active incorporation of the spiritual ideas and desires of spiritual beings through our will, to bring on the earth and re-create the earth through the power of our will. This is the real religious approach to life. But there is a third realm, which is ours: where the will and the thought cross; and this is the moment that the feelings begin to be born; and this is the realm of art.

Without these feelings we are not able to be actors or artists. If we think we are making efforts, it does not mean that we are creating a ground; we are only making efforts. But at the moment when we ask ourselves what we are making efforts for - the feelings - then we are creating our ground. Without this professional ground - without this ability to get the feelings and keep them and re-create them and send them out - without this we are quite helpless at the moment when the walls will fall down. Without this, any actor on the present stage will be much better off than we will be at the end of our three year course. He will be able to walk on the stage, quite freely, and we will not be able to do this. He will be able to make tricks with his voice and his body which we will not be able to do; he will be able to make tricks with his costume and make-up, which we will not be able to do. He will be simply free on the stage, and we will not.

At the moment when we appear on the stage before the audience, we will be compared with other contemporary actors, and people will say, "But these are children - the others are actors." This is not our aim. Our aim is to show on the stage that an inner technique can exist. That means the ability to HAVE OUR big, rich realm of emotions and feelings in our power and to be masters of our own feelings. This is a wonder which will stop all criticism from outside. If, after three years, you are able to open your hearts and send your flame to the audience, the audience will say, "Yes, there is something for which it is worth while to sit the whole evening." They will

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be fed by this flame, this life, and all the things we can give them. And this is what the audience cannot get from the stage at the present time. The present stage is dry, full of corners, staccato, intellectual, and mechanical. The stage is dead. What is dead? The heart is dead on the stage.

If we can once understand that for us the real ground is the feelings, then we will understand that it is worth while to develop an inner technique. Without this heart which is flaming, the technique means nothing. If you are able to do staccato and legato, it is not important if your heart is sleeping. If, by making certain efforts, we are able to send out the atmosphere, but it is an illusion, very soon the audience will laugh at our attempts and we will have to blush and say that we have worked for three years and made certain efforts, but there is no result. It is a very dangerous thing we are approaching, but there is still time for us to get the understanding of what it means to work in this school and prepare ourselves. But we must open our eyes, and speak frankly with each other. We must acknowledge the weak point which will give our enemies the possibility to throw stones in our hearts.

**FIRE - FLAMING FEELINGS: ARCHETYPAL FEELINGS.**

From the point of view of the feelings, I want you to make a real effort to find how you can be the master of your own flame, your own heart, your own feelings. It is worth while to be tired from such. Now I want you to go through the whole



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Method which I have given you, and you will be astonished when you realize that I have given you nothing which does not lead to the realm of your feelings, but only if it is understood in the right way. For example, in the staccato and legato exercise, I have seen you do this exercise many times when it was absolutely nothing - it was dead like a machine, absolutely without feeling. Then I have spoken to you about the activity, the atmosphere, the need for the whole body to be permeated with this or that quality, etc., as a result of which you have done the same exercise so beautifully that I, who know the exercise so well, have felt that I was present at a great performance, have watched a great piece of art.

This is for us like a central point. We must understand everything from the point of view of our flaming heart. We must say to ourselves that if we are not doing the exercise with a flaming heart, then we are doing nothing. We are losing time and more than that, we are living in an illusion for which we will have to pay when the stones will be thrown into our hearts by the audience and critics. I want you to do what I am telling you - not only understand it. Then if you will really think of all our exercises from the point of view of the feelings, you will save your time and energy. One day spent in this way will be worth three days if you will allow yourselves to do our exercises by including the feelings. Without this, our three years will only be worth six months.

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#### RIGHT FEELINGS THROUGH RIGHT MEANS:

By reminding you that our aim and ground is the feelings, I don't speak about our personal, private feelings. I speak about the feelings which belong to the realm which is bigger than we are. To the realm of feeling which comes from inspiration. If I say the line, "To be, or not to be," as if it were my personal problem, no one will be interested in it - it is too small. In order to say these lines, I must get some feelings, some electricity which changes my whole being; and then perhaps I have the right to ask, "To be, or not to be." I am speaking about this kind of feelings. There is no need to remain three years in a school to be able to say something on the stage which belongs to me in my everyday life. If I am such an actor, I will possibly get a big salary if I have a big voice, and small parts and a small salary if I have a small one. The director will look upon me as a horse, and say "yes" or "no"; but this has nothing to do with the school.<sup>1</sup>

#### EURYTHMY:

We must ask ourselves what we are attempting to develop in the school. The answer is the inner technique which will give us the inspired feelings - feelings which come from inspiration. When you understand this point, you will realize that everything we have given you is leading you to this inspiration. If you will really deeply pay attention to what is given you in Eurythmy, you will see that you have a golden key to the inspiration. But only if you will take the key and put it into

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the lock and turn it. Through Eurythmy you will be able to discover the archetypal feelings. If you take our exercises with the archetype, you will see that this is another approach to the same beautiful world of the feelings. The rhythmical or psychological gesture is again the key to open this door into the feelings, which we are trying to express on the stage. You will find nothing in the Method which does not lead you to the feelings.

Of course, you may say to me, "We have been working now for a year and a term, and you tell us that we have no feelings. Perhaps, Mr. Chekhov, your means are not sufficient." I can only answer that I have tried to give you everything to help you, but whether you have really tried to take is my reply to your imaginary question. Where is the mistake? This, again, is not a reproach - only an effort to establish the business contact. I only possess technique; one gives and another takes. If you think of what I have said to you, you will see that all the means I have given you are keys. I have given you nothing useless.

From my long practice as a teacher - I started in Russia many many years ago - I have learned to distinguish between the means which are really helpful and useful, and those which seem to be. I can give you a series of exercises which seem to be helpful, but which are empty. I know them. I went through that long way myself as a student of the Moscow Art Theatre.

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As a student I had the experience of what is helpful and what is not, and again as a teacher. Then I worked with teachers in three countries and taught them. I taught children and young people.<sup>2</sup> This has been my first experience with English and American students, and it has given me many things, but I must tell you that my conscience is clear towards you - I have given you nothing that is useless. If you will take all the means I have given you, you will find that each one of them is able to open the door for you. This is one main point before we start our new term.

The second point: We have a Method with which to approach the world of the feelings, and we have to be able to manage not only the world of the feelings, but the Method itself. We have spoken about this very often. You must be able to use all the means I have tried to give you in the Method, as you use your spoon and knife and fork. If you are not able to master the Method, you will not be able to manage yourself on the stage; you will be helpless. To be able to manage myself and get myself in my power and to escape from this floundering and accidental things which surround us. That is what I mean when I say that you are not yet able to manage yourself through having the Method. That is why last term I insisted that you should take something, yourselves, from the Method as a ground for improvisations, in order that you would feel this necessity for mastering the Method yourselves.

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There are two things: to manage the Method is one; and to manage the feelings by means of the Method is another. These two things will create for us the firm ground on which we can stand when the protecting walls of the Studio must fall down. Then the stones can be thrown into our hearts, but we will know that we have done all that we could do, believing it to be right. Then we have only to suffer, and this is good; but to suffer and to know that we have done nothing, this is a blow which really hurts. The twinges of conscience - this is a different kind of suffering. Therefore, this term I want you to take as your slogan or device, the following: "To get the right feelings through the right use of the Method." This is what I want you to work for throughout the whole term.

I want you to be aware that when I remind you about this realm of the feelings, that we can only create this ground if you are firmly standing on it. It is so beautiful when you are able to appear on the stage and are sure that if you do this technical thing inside you, you will really throw to your audience so many intangible things which are the feelings which have come as an inspiration to you - that your audience will say in the first ten seconds, "Yes, here is something." Your stream of something is so strong that you will get from the audience, "Yes, we are ready," and then you will get inspired because the audience has sent its "yes" - the audience is open. Then you must create with your audience, together, first this way and then

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that. If you have one kind of audience, you will have one kind of inspiration, and another for another.

This intangible thing we call feelings is really tangible - is a real ground. You can stand on this real ground with confidence if you have atmosphere, contact, images, psychological gesture, etc. It is only the question of technique. Nothing can be more beautiful in art. If not this kind of art, then better none. Any substitute for the real art in the realm of the feelings is like an illness. If I am a painter and I sit for years and years trying to find some expression, it will lead me to the asylum. For everybody art must be flaming. On the stage throughout the world today actors are walking and contracting and "as-if" thinking, "as-if" looking. This is a disease.

Who was Michelangelo? A human being as we are. Why, then, did he stand before his stones and rocks and pray to God not to give him any more inspiration? Of course, he was a great genius, and we are only plain people; but it is a question of degree - but not a question of technique, of the inner approach to life. If Michelangelo was able to flame with such power, it does not mean that we must do the gesture of blowing out our flame. We must try to flame in the same way. The question of degree does not mean anything. If you have such a small flame - but it is flame - it does not matter. As long as it is a flame, you must do everything possible to make it burn. This is your human duty, your

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obligation to your destiny.

The flame has the same quality that Michelangelo's flame had, although the dimensions may be different. It is the Michelangelo quality, no matter what the degree is, and we must know it. If you will look at the pictures of Michelangelo's sculpture, you will be astonished how the stone is full of feeling, of flame. It is radiating, and there is nothing of the quality of dry, clever technique. The technique is there, but on the basis of the flame. Without this flame the technique would mean nothing - it would be a box with a handle, nothing more. You can walk with it to the train, but it does not exist. If you are full of feelings, there are no boxes. It is life and flame which burns all the boxes. We shall see Michelangelo's figures and we shall concentrate on the hands. Each thing is a symphony of feeling. As we are all Michelangelos in a lesser or bigger degree, we must produce the same with our hands and arms, with our legs, our faces, and with our eyes. The same. No less. I mean in the nature - in the degree, perhaps, but the nature is the same. An artist is an artist.

Our feelings penetrate and permeate each part of our bodies - penetrating, radiating, living in atmosphere - flowing through the psychological gesture - coming out of the archetype, etc.

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In Michelangelo's sculpture you will see that the feeling is really penetrating the cold stone. If you want to call it a miracle, call it so, because it is a miracle. How much easier it should be to penetrate our living being with feeling! Only a certain effort is needed. To make an effort and have a clear idea of what we are going to do. We are going to love someone with our hands - it is possible - or to ask somebody something with our hands - or to persuade with our hands, with our chests, with our whole figure. It is possible to do everything with a body which is full of feeling. Try to remember our very first exercise: "I have my body"; "My 'I am' is moving my body." This is an appeal to the Michelangelo sitting in us - to give the idea that I am lifting my hand. All our exercises are appealing to this thing: how to coax the feelings into our bodies.

By trying to persuade you to increase the technique of taking what I am trying to give you and to base it on the idea of the feelings, I will try to help you in the following two ways: Whether I will be able to carry them out will depend on you. First of all, I will do only some specially selected exercises with you, and will try to develop them more and more in detail to deepen the understanding for them. And through these exercises perhaps we will get a clearer, practical approach to what I mean by getting the feelings.



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ACTOR-DIRECTOR RELATIONSHIP:

The second thing - as we are approaching nearer and nearer to the crucial moment when we will be a theatre - I will try to consider you sometimes as actors, and not as students. I will be your director sometimes, so that you will see quite a different psychology. Now in the school we are developing something together; sometimes I am very happy about your success and am suffering over your failures. You have much time in which to prepare things, and I am waiting and keeping you in cotton wool with love. But in the theatre it is quite a different psychology. As director, I will give you a task, and tomorrow it must be done. It does not concern the director how it is done, or how tired you are, because that is the psychology of the theatre. The opening date is given - it must be done. You must be able to do your part. If not - goodbye! This is the psychology of the theatre, and the psychology between actor and director - quite different to that of student and teacher.

I will try to do this new line, which is more like a business line. I will try from time to time, as an exercise, in the following way. I will give you some small improvisations, as if it is a rehearsal. I will give you something, show you what is wrong, what I want to have from you tomorrow, and tomorrow you will bring me your work. This is the professional approach. In the school it must be done in a different way. Being very cunning, I will use the same thing for the feelings. I will give you some sketches to do from the two future plays - as director to the actors, and will

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require the work from you. It will not be real rehearsing, but something of that kind, you will feel. That means that at the same time we will be preparing the plays with which I want to start our theatre.