

Michael Chekhov

November 3, 1938

PLANS FOR THE STUDIO'S LIFE IN
DARTINGTON AND IN AMERICAMeeting of Designers:

What is the sense of this meeting? If nothing had happened in the destiny of our school, Miriam and Isabel would have had the same meeting, because our idea is always to discuss the attempts made by our young designers. Because we are going away it does not mean that we will lose Miriam.

As Dartington's idea is for us to go on here and in America, this meeting will be as a part of the work which actually will not be broken. We will take all these events which lead us away from here as temporary events. How many years or how many months we do not know, because we don't know our destiny. The idea is for us to come back and continue our work here, so there is no reason to break our work, our rehearsals, the work with the designers, directors, etc. Without giving any promises to anyone, we have the right - and this I know absolutely definitely - to speak about our work as a continuous work, both psychologically and in the real life, because Mr. and Mrs. Elmhirst have decided that some time later on we shall go on with our Studio here. Our intention is to do this, and this must be made quite clear.

Mr. Heckroth you have collaborated with the Studio and as the teacher of Miriam I should like to have an opinion about her work and your suggestions for her development. Because we are going away does not mean that we will lose our interest for Miriam's development and her individuality.

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MEETING OF DESIGNERS

Present:

Michael Chekhov
Hein Heckroth
Miriam Garthe
Isabel Wintemute

Criticism of designs for Spanish Evening settings and costumes by Miriam Garthe and Isabel Wintemute.

Hein Heckroth: I find the style very gay, but there is an enormous difference between painting and stage design. It can be a very good picture and yet not support the director, the actor, or anything. From this picture I don't know what ideas you have for movement, tempo, character, etc. I don't know whether the dress helps to support your ideas or whether the dress and scenery take away from the actor, but as painting and design I must say I like it. If the atmosphere is dusty, old, morbid, decayed, dirty, then it is absolutely right, and comes out of the designs.

M. Chekhov: I speak now as the director. Can you answer these questions? From all the pictures I get a negative thing. It is so heavy that I cannot imagine this absolutely light performance which does not actually exist. For instance, I like many things here. Shall I say to the designer that the painting is heavy, or that the idea is heavy? She can answer that it will depend upon the material. It looks as if it is carved, but she can say that in reality it will be very light. What shall I say to the designer?

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H. Heckroth: If you gave the order for a light, easy atmosphere, it must be taken by the designer, and she may have to make twenty or thirty drawings before getting this light, easy line. The designer makes a design for the dressmaker which suggests the idea, and she creates from there. You can make the same design with the same colors but with easier lines, then the dressmaker must find it. The ideal thing would be for Miriam to know how to make the dress herself, but this is only possible in a small group.

M. Chekhov: So, on the principle, Miriam is responsible for this quality of light and ease in her designs. If this is true then my first criticism of her designs is that she does not give us the possibility to move and fly and be easy and light, which is the idea of the play - which exists and does not exist. As a stage designer, what would you require from Miriam? For instance, should she show us pictures of the back and sides of the costumes as well?

H. Heckroth: Definitely, the designer has to show front and back of the costumes and other details. Miriam's drawings are not clear enough for details; she must bring a little technical drawing which shows whether it is an overskirt or a cape, for instance.

Isabel Wintemute: I have always made the costumes I have designed myself, but if I were making my designs for someone else to execute I would have to show both back and front designs.

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M. Chekhov: My second criticism of Miriam is that she has not thought of the technical way of fulfilling her ideas. As a professional person from the theatre, I must speak about certain points of view which I think can be very useful. In future our designers must show different sides of the same costume.

METAMORPHOSIS:

Then we come to the third point. We know that we have somehow divided the play into certain sections, certain parts, and you have shown the three parts. If we should go on with this I would say that Miriam should try to express the metamorphoses of the costumes and the characters.

When you are working with such directors as we have in our school, who are trying to elaborate this idea of metamorphoses in the whole play through costumes, settings, acting and everything, the designer must be more interested and more careful with the transitions and the metamorphoses from the beginning to the end, and why the play is divided into three parts, etc., etc. When working with such directors it will be essential for the stage designer to pay attention to the idea of the metamorphosis of the whole. I am sorry you have not brought everything with you. If you had the settings, I am sure you would see the costumes in a different way.

Miriam Garthe: You have always wanted improvisation, but it is difficult when the actors only use old stuff. So I looked at old pictures of carnival processions. That is why it

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became very heavy because I took many rude and heavy things from Breugel.

H. Heckroth: We can take things from Breugel and others but just so much as suits the author and the play. This is always the danger when taking a certain style, it becomes so heavy that we don't see anything underneath. I would like to see more difference in the characters, and so far as I see there is too much of the same rhythm and the same tone.

Isabel Wintemute: I am inclined towards more plastic sets. I like light humor sets, but humor which has some weight.

M. Chekhov: I like your models very much, but again I would say to you to think in terms of three parts and in the metamorphoses, so that you can help your director and your director can help you.

H. Heckroth: My first reaction is always from the technical point of view, before I come to the artistic one. So my first question would be, how long do you intend to travel with this play, where and in what kind of theatre, how many stage hands, would you transport your settings by train or by car? In America they build in a certain way because they know stage hands are so expensive, and because of this economic thing they have come to a good style. This economic point of view has taught them that it is possible and necessary to find such a style. It is also necessary for our theatre here - I speak always as a technician.

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It is absolutely right for the director and the artists and actors to dream, but in the end the technician has to realize it and support it, and therefore I always start from very practical reasons. That is why I question the screens. I don't like to fill up the stage with stage hands because the stage is small, and I know how difficult it is for actors to do it; to lift such screens would be difficult unless the technician finds a way to make it easier. It is possible to do it - there is nothing impossible in the theatre, but we have to study how we can realize this. How do we build the basis under the screen? I think the screen we have seen is very charming but immediately my question would be how high is it, how heavy, how many men must lift it, and where does it stand, etc.

M. Chekhov: If you consider this screen designed by Miriam would you say that it is impossible or possible, having not only our own Yarnier Barn theatre in mind, but other theatres as well?

H. Heckroth: The design calls for a screen 12 ft. high, and this means you would have to make it in two parts for transportation purposes. For a travelling screen you should make it of plywood and not of canvas, or if that would make it too heavy then make the middle screens of canvas and the ends of plywood.

M. Chekhov: Would you make such a big screen for this play?

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H. Heckroth: I like to have a contrast. As far as I can see Miriam's design is a sort of Commedia dell'Arte style, but I would like to have it much easier. I like all of Miriam's things, but the screen is too elaborate. You see the work in it, and I don't like to show that you spend energy. Miriam's screen is definitely a painted town, but I thought the idea was to take things from the theatre and make them part of the setting.

M. Chekhov: At our next meeting I would like Miriam to show us the sketch of the town which she has made.