

Michael Chekhov

October 4, 1937

CONTACT
CONCENTRATION
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IMPROVISATION

The Inspector General (M. Chekhov's role)
Anton Chekhov comedy

CONTACT:

We will work on establishing contact, and then go on to some more complicated exercises. Keep in mind that the only aim we have to pursue in this exercise is the establishing of a psychological contact between two or more human beings. Don't flounder about, but be very conscious of the aim - how to get this psychological process inside you. Be sure that you are able to establish the contact with the person you want to. Begin the exercise by opening your heart to your partner. Do this several times. Then stop and realize what it means not to have contact, and what it means to have contact, then definitely and concretely begin again. Repeat many times.

The more famous the actors of today are, the less ability they have to establish contact with one another. They may be very friendly but when they are on the stage there is nothing between them - a gap. This is one of the illnesses of the present state of the theatre; not only are they not able to establish contact, but they even don't want it or admit that it is necessary. Try to remember some concrete characteristics of what I am saying.

Now you must take another step, which means that you

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must add warmth - without warmth such contact is nothing. The idea can be so clear and so cold that you believe that you have contact, but it will be purely an intellectual one which is quite useless for our art. Don't try to be sentimental - only try to find a very serious kind of human warmth. Do this many times, starting and stopping very quickly - we must be as flexible, and adroit, and skillful with our souls as we are with our hands.

Exercises:

We had done the first stage of the exercise by moving together symmetrically; then we had three people with a leader moving together, but not symmetrically; and then four people with a leader. Now we will take some of the boxes and structures, and by taking them into our consciousness we will compose things with each other, and with the structures. Do not take the shapes indifferently, but try to find the gesture, the movement, the desire of the structure. What is the idea of the movement of the structure? How shall I be in harmony with this construction? The structure requires something from us; first of all look at it and then take it more and more into your being; study it with your will, with your artistic desires and emotions.

This exercise is given for the purpose of establishing contact with our environment, with our surroundings, with everything on the stage. Let us take two groups with three per-

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sons in each; one in each group is a leader - those of us who are watching must not criticise but must live with them, and work with them, and understand them through being with them. Moving continuously as you have done before, but this time including the structure as well, opening your hearts to each other and to the structure. Do it very actively inside, nothing vague or half-way, full activity. Don't look at it without understanding what is going on; try to understand, not with your intellect only, but with your artistic will and emotions, with your heart and with your warmth.

Now you can feel how important it is to be the real master of feeling the composition in space and everything. You must gradually get accustomed to see, and hear, and feel with your center; it is necessary for our profession to look on everything from the center, and then we will awaken a special kind of activity which is often asleep, but which we need as the first and most important helper.

Later, in your lessons with Beatrice and Alan you will get some knowledge of how to do this, but now we must only appeal to our actor's instincts to establish the contact and try to find harmony. When the old students are helping the new students, please try to come to this exercise slowly and carefully, with many bridges and transitions to make it easier, but always try to come to this point.

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CONCENTRATION:

Let us do a short exercise on concentration. Imagine how you will be able to do all these things after some years of practice, when you are well experienced in these psychological things which we need for our profession. Concentrate on a triangle in your imagination, then be quite free and compare the two states. Now concentrate on a sound. Now be free. Now concentrate on each object, take each with your will so that you have it.

IMAGINATION:

Imagine a big white flower, then to the count of ten, change it into a red flower.

CONTACT: New Students:

Let us take an exercise on contact. With your actor's "feelers" you must touch this stage construction, and when you are ready you must approach it. The scene takes place in an airplane landing field; there are some planes flying about, and one takes your attention. The airplane soars and then, being very, very high, it makes three loops. After the third loop you notice that something is wrong; the plane appears to fall down and then it rights itself, and gradually comes back to the starting point. Through your feeling of ensemble and contact you must find out where the plane is at each moment, without speaking to each other. It must be done so that we will be-

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lieve you.

First of all take the stage construction as a gesture into your soul. Do it inside. Then, keeping it in your soul, add to the feeling of the construction, the feeling of the group as a whole. Try concretely to keep it - you must have each other so finely in your consciousness that you will begin to work together. Through this you will discover how beautiful it is to act on the stage, being in contact with each other. Each time you start, take the construction into your hearts, and then each other. The scene is nothing, the object being to establish the contact. Do nothing alone but sacrifice your egotistical will to the group.

Another exercise for contact which will be more simple. See the cord on the window; try to touch it with your hand from a distance. Try to remember what this was like - it will give you something. Then feel the outline of the blackboard with your fingers, and then without using your hands, but having the sense of it in the tips of your finger. Try to get the feeling of this possibility of touching things without really touching them. Then form a circle, give your right hand to each other and really meet each other. Then slowly separate but keep this contact; psychologically keep the contact. This ability is our capital on the stage; without it we are poor children, and nothing more. You must want, you must wish this contact. When you have it add your left hand and this must

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increase the contact enormously.

Now an imaginary piece of paper is lying on the ground. Find out through contact where it is lying. Be very careful with each other - do not be alone. This is the most difficult thing and it may take months of exercising, because we are so egotistical in our daily life. The contact that I mean is much finer than a mere physical contact; the solution lies of course in the psychological and not in the audible, physical things. Therefore, we must understand ^{the} aim of the exercise as penetrating into the psychological level of such things. It depends so much on the character of the group, but the principle is the same.

Now lift the stage constructions with ease and lightness. First of all do it inside, psychologically, because everything in our profession must be first understood psychologically. It will help you to do things when you understand that through long space and time there is one movement. You have not yet established this one long, long line which does not break at all. Therefore, please do the exercise for lightness and ease. Run and touch a post and then come back with the feeling that this is one big movement on the stage; don't break it anywhere. While watching, others must do it inside. Pay attention to the moment when you start and when you finish, as this is very important for the feeling of the whole. It must be a great experience for you, then you will awaken your actor's

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ability so that not only Hamlet or King Lear will exhaust you. The real actor reacts with his feelings to the smallest things - then he is an actor. The anticipation on the part of the on-looker is part of our profession. All these things must be developed with time.

Repeat the exercise of running and touching the post, or pillar. This time sensing the artistic contact each time before anyone begins. The dynamic and the character of the run will change the tempo of the next person's start. You must feel these things. It must be an artistic event inside you. The whole story of the theatre is music, nothing more. This is all part of the music of the theatre.

All of our feelings, even the most beautiful, if they become too personal they become unclean or used. If you will imagine great suffering - someone has died and the other person is crying and suffering. You can imagine it in a beautiful form or in an ugly form, irrespective of the feelings the person may have. You will never be able, in the real drama or tragedy, to act too personal, or realistic, or "used" feelings. Let us repeat the improvisation of the Wedding Scene.

Criticism:

When you have some true things you cover them with untrue things, with the idea that you are underlining them. You must go through all these difficulties until you reach the

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point where you believe in inspiration. The feeling of ensemble was not established, and you have lost many opportunities because of the lack of ensemble feeling. Each of you contributed one or two moments to creating the whole scene, but you must be much more bound together.

Think back on what you have done, what possibilities you have lost, what good things you created. It often happens that when we come back from rehearsal we realize what fools we have been. We could have done this or that, and now it is too late. Think, try to recall what you have done, and see the possibilities in it. We must get rid of this dreadful feeling that all actors have - this mob or crowd feeling which steals our psychology; either you are all doing something, or you are all silent. But you must keep your own line throughout the whole mob scene. You will see how it is possible in one moment to develop the whole story inside you, this is what it means to be an actor.

Take one moment from the Wedding Scene, when the General puts his hand to his head. Feel the psychological effect of this. Try to develop the psychological pattern. The stages you must go through are; first of all you must ask, is he drunk? Then everyone understands that he is drunk, and then the crowd is free because he means nothing to them.

Try to understand one simple thing. If the theme is given, such a long theme as this, the wrong side of the ac-

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tor's nature suggests that he has so much to say. Not at all - it consists of "sparks" each moment. When you enter the stage you must not think, "I have to act this scene and that, because I will be on the stage like a lunatic. I will say nothing, and everything will begin to be in general." This is death for an actor, and from this wrong psychology which every actor has at some time, we see how actors act such famous parts as Hamlet as though they are made of one stuff, with one psychology, because the actor is afraid of this whole psychology. If he could understand instead that he has only to react and "spark" at every moment which presents itself.

Your mistake today was that you have an idea of the whole, and it seems to you complicated. It is not complicated if you will take it step by step, if you will take one step at a time. To help us in this we have objectives and atmosphere and all these things are like the banks of a river, but the river must stream from inside. This psychology which is always alive; this ability to take and to give. This you must try to understand today because our lesson turned on this. It is a very good opportunity to think about this, and it would be a good idea if you would spend some time rehearsing this thing in your imagination. Go through the scene and try to understand what was lost, what opportunities and possibilities you have failed to take.

The exercise of two people standing in front of each

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other you did well, because it seemed to you to be very simple. On the stage there are no more complicated or less complicated things. There are always two possibilities to develop the psychology to the fullest extent, in one moment or in five acts. It depends upon the insight, not from the part itself.

When I acted The Inspector General I was a young man, and I was quite afraid of the part, and I really couldn't rehearse it because I was under pressure.¹ I could not get away from the idea that I was unable to act it, until one old actor understood my difficulty and told me, "Forget only one thing - that the part is famous." This advice meant everything for me, and I was entirely free from then on. The same is true for you; take off all these weights that are lying on you, and you will be able to act this complicated sketch with the same beauty that you have done with seemingly more easy sketches. If you are able to understand this you will understand so much and you will feel so free, once you get rid of this thing which is like a weight on your shoulders.

I had another experience in my acting life when I was very nervous, so nervous that I had to be cured by hypnosis.² After some treatments and after having been ill for one year, I felt my body was light and easy. These certain weights which we have on us, or in cases when we are thinking wrongly, or when we are psychologically ill - it is the same thing.

The third time when I was afraid of certain things

in my life, a friend told me to try to tell all the things I was afraid of just to leave me. Again I had the same experience, and I was no longer afraid. It depends always from this side - you must tell yourself that you want to be free from this wrong idea that one part or one play is more complicated than another. Think of it and you will find this power from inside.

IMPROVISATION: New Students:

The scene is in a fishing village. It is three days since the men put out to sea; there has been a great storm and the men may be drowned. Only women and children and old men are left, and the mood is a very tragic one, almost hopeless. It is early morning; dawn, after a restless night. Everybody is tired; nothing can be seen on the horizon. Radiate this heavy, helpless, tragic atmosphere, but do it actively inside. Don't be passive inside, but send out the atmosphere with all your activity. Fill the room around you with it. The people have gathered together on the shore, and they are looking out to sea. There is nothing to be seen; it is hopeless.

Now, out of this atmosphere, being inspired by it, get up gradually and try to permeate your whole body with this atmosphere. Try to move in this atmosphere, and out of it only. Each movement must be expressive of this atmosphere. Every part of your body is able to respond and to express this atmosphere, which is all around you.

IMPROVISATION: Old Students:

The scene is from one of Anton Chekhov's comedies; it takes place in a summer resort; the family consists of a husband and wife, no longer young, but very happy - quiet, happy, and passive. It is evening; they are sitting enjoying one another's society. The husband wants to take a little walk, and goes out to enjoy the evening. Everything is very psychological. The maid in the next house has gone out to meet her lover, the night watchman. She has her baby with her but she leaves it on a bench; the husband sits down and finds the baby and he realizes that his past is going to be exposed.

Improvise the first moment when the husband returns home and enters the room with the child, on the basis of the objective. The husband's objective is to calm his wife, while her objective is to understand what it is all about.

Now take the scene when the husband sits down on the bench to enjoy the evening air, and finds the baby. The whole psychological pattern must be followed, on the ground of the objective. The husband's objective in the beginning is to persuade himself that it is not so. After this objective is not fulfilled, the objective must be to create a picture as the character with which he has to appear before his wife. The moment of the meeting is a problem for him.

The husband and the wife are completely reconciled; everything is over. Now they are full of a certain kind of

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happiness - they will live for this small thing. She is happy because she has something nice to look after, and he is happy because she has forgiven him.

Base this small sketch on three atmospheres: 1. Heaven and happiness has come to them. 2. Battle, chaos, unhappiness, everything is torn to pieces. 3. Everything is gone, and now comes the moment when the husband is not able to look into his wife's eyes.

Criticism:

When you are one or two together you are capable of developing a long psychological path, but when you are all together you act in a hurry. They are the same thing, only that there are many threads between you when a number of you are working together, instead of one or two. Blair very often finds the right line, and then he underlines it and spoils it. Don't do anything - let it go as it is and you will get the inspiration. Paula sometimes felt an imaginary audience, but in the wrong way. She was not sending out something as part of the atmosphere, but she was showing that she was aware of the audience. In another case, Jocelyn could not find the contact, and then came the moment when she felt she had to do something, and it was not good.

Sometimes the atmosphere dropped because of the words. Sometimes actors, instead of acting, began to speak the content of the words as they are taken by the audience, for instance,

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when the audience laughs. The actors sometimes think that they are good because the audience laughs, but that is the author, not the actor. Atmosphere is acting, but the content of the words is something very different.

IMPROVISATION: Old Students:

The scene takes place in a lonely hut, a hostel for travelers, run by thieves. Someone comes and asks for shelter; when he enters the room he finds a very religious family sitting reading bibles. The ground is that of atmospheres: 1. Very tense waiting. 2. Religious atmosphere. 3. Atmosphere gradually becomes gay. 4. Burglary. 5. Chaotic and rude.

IMPROVISATION:

This is a psychological study, and the basis is characterization. A landowner family which includes many generals: A lady landowner who is a very fine woman, but she has nothing to do in her life and so she begins to analyze herself -- the same psychology as in The Three Sisters. In her are many tears. Sometimes her neighbors come to call on her - a frequent visitor is an old general who pays her compliments, but who really comes to eat and drink. Another frequent visitor is a solicitor who comes from the city with much news, and is very temperamental and very stupid. The woman's psychology is to give, to serve, to be active in some way. There is another person, an elderly lady who comes for a cup of tea and stays for weeks and weeks.

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Then there is an old servant who takes care of her mistress and tries to protect her, while another servant longs to go to the city and despises the people around him.