

Michael Chekhov

IMMENSITY

by Sergi Yablonovsky, Paris -
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There is an immense joy for Russian Parisians: the performances of M. A. Chekhov.

Any good actor would be a great joy for those who love the theatre and are deprived of it as a constantly necessary food; but such an absolutely exceptional phenomenon as Chekhov is a gift from God, for which the giver must be thanked with delight.

An old Moscow theatre-lover, I knew this actor in Moscow very little and will confess that I could not distinguish him amongst the other immense actors. That is, to distinguish in the sense of selecting him into the category of the most immense out of many immensities. Being professionally engaged in a series of other theatres, I was not often in the studio of the Arts Theatre, where his star was ascending.

I heard the words "Ah, Chekhov!" around me; and I myself, I think, in those three plays in which I saw him ("The End of Nadejda," "The Flood," and "Cricket on the Hearth") used to say "Ah, Chekhov!" but, I repeat, his exceptional and unique quality I felt and sensed only here in Paris.

Perhaps the highly exceptional Moscow ensemble

interfered, perhaps Chekhov himself has grown since then, and perhaps I, for my sins, simply failed to appreciate him.

I heard later how deeply and touchingly Moscow grew to love him, I read about him in "Rul," but still I did not suspect. In the realm of the theatre until one applies one's own touch, one will not believe nor feel! My joy from the contact with Chekhov's art grew each time.

I first saw him at a literary evening where he was giving readings of the stories of his wonderful uncle. This already was a revelation because it was not reading, even superlative; it was real creation, establishing an independent kind of theatrical art. Chekhov the nephew pushed himself off from Chekhov the uncle as a swimmer pushes himself off from the shore and swam along the river limited by those shores, but leaving to the swimmer all the potentialities of his art. He took from the stories a great deal of that which can only be taken out by a great master of theatrical interpretation and put in so much of that for which the author had left space, often quite unwittingly.

I grieved for those who did not see and hear this; I was pained that Anton Pavlovich himself did not see and hear it; for when he died, his nephew was about ten years old. The second time I did not only hear, but saw him; also in Chekhov's stories, but acted. This time I realized that this artist is the possessor of such a supply of qualities of technical

interpretation as I had never seen; neither in the Russian or the European giants of the stage. All of them, the most prominent, left intact their customary individuality beneath the external and internal transformation; and on the background of this perpetual and ineradicable individuality they painted and embroidered. This individuality of the actor is considered essential by Schopenhauer.

I have always seen that as soon as an actor attempts to get away from it, he acquires an artificial, dead quality. For example, some actors of the Arts Theatre are miraculous, but their aim to get away from themselves often led to an acquisition of hundreds of little characteristics which they carried as a conjurer carries a large number of various objects. He does not drop them and that is amazing, but one sees the effort not to drop them. Miraculous juggling, but nevertheless juggling. And I know that two types of actors existed: one approached the improvising type, deep and inspired, but not hiding his own self; the other (to extend the example) approached to the type of Fregoli; with astounding diversity, but with much that is alien, taken from without and not confluent with the inner self.

Chekhov is the first actor to prove to me that there is yet a third. To find some common individuality, a lowest common multiple, between a raw student proceeding to an assignation, between a rescally old man with tooth and claw in his daughter's suitor, between a drunkard pretending to be drowned,

and an official combining within himself a Molchalin-like outlook and a Schedrin-like malicious acidity - that was quite impossible. It was amazing not only because the figure, face, voice, gestures, even, it seemed, the height were different - it was amazing because all that was inseparable. Not put on, not hired, but given once and for all: none other can be. And it was amazing that this unity, different in every image, was internally alloyed with a complete and complex inward content, revealing more, much more, than was given by the author. After these two evenings all Russian Paris looked forward to the announcement of Chekhov's performances. It looked forward to them as to a holiday.

The first, Strindberg's Eric XIV, left the public with a certain sense of confusion and dissatisfaction; the play, lacking action and clarity, was unknown to the public. A further handicap was the fact that the mental disorder of Eric was not justified in an artistic-psychological manner, as those of Lear, Ophelia, Theodore Ioannovich, Hamlet are justified; and the fact that the spectator waited for and did not get a development of mental movements, internal and external dynamics, in the character. A first acquaintance with Eric left an unclear impression. I also did not know the play. The impression of the majority of the audience was also my impression. Only later, having left the theatre, and on subsequent days, I went back involuntarily in memory to Chekhov's image and understood that

the beautiful in it was not only that which I had seen and which had delighted me, but also that which I had failed to see, distracted by the peculiarities of the play.

I saw, first of all, an external elegance; every gesture, every pose and movement were naturally harmonious, without thought and effort. A king followed by a long series of generations of kings. I saw the absolute integrity of the image, I saw gentle, impotent madness, bursts of anger resembling innocent childish pranks, like Moliere's cotton-wool stick, like the huge cotton-wool boulders that come hurtling down from the heights of theatrical mountains; friendly storm. I saw supernatural simplicity, bearing the stamp of genius, in which extreme lack of will merges with absolute free will: the place where Eric, with the one word "Time?" asks whether it is time for him to die and then drinks the poison. It is thus that children ask whether it is time for them to take sweet medicine, and it is thus that they take it.

All this I saw and appreciated while sitting in the theatre, and afterwards, having left it, I appreciated more; I understood that I had seen a totally new image, created by completely new methods; that these methods were so gentle, so delicate, were so reticent, that one could have passed them by without realizing all their preciousness. I understood that I had seen something new. Something new in the realm of art, as in the realm of thought, is almost a miracle. Unusually

simple and bold; unusually bold and simple. And Eric remained with me, like the Othello of _____, like the Hamlet of _____, like the Nathan of _____.

And then came Fraser in "The Flood." Previously, Chekhov had acted this Fraser, in Moscow, not as a Jew, but as an American. The portrayal delighted everyone. And suddenly he destroyed this image that had conquered spectators and actors, and replaced it by another, completely different, without a single point of resemblance.

Let yourself go, Michael Alexandrovich, however rich you may be! But his wealth is unlimited, and he was destined to spend it freely.

He let himself go in the part of Fraser. Actors usually present some aspects of the character, as indicated in the play. Chekhov gave the complete Fraser and went outside the limitations of the play in all directions. Firstly, he presented a highly national type, a negative Fraser; stock exchange gambler, brothel keeper, one who had speculated on the famine in India, then an angered bankrupt - what could be better? But there is in a man, apart from his personal make-up, soiled or pure, something else: **THE MAN HIMSELF**, with all that is personal and racial; that was the man presented by Chekhov. Apart from personal vices, a national entity. In the first place, the existence side by side of an age-old fatigue and a forty horse-power energy is incomparable. A

personal fatigue, created over thousands of years. It was this fatigue that had so bent his back, stamped itself upon the emaciated, contemptuous face with its large nose and hanging lip, it was this fatigue that had created the slackness of all the limbs and had caused a state of nerves possessed by no other people. The fatigue broke down the nerves, and the broken-down nerves created an energy not possessed by strong, healthy people, and which makes the possessor doubly strong. An astounding bundle of nerves; not a man, but perpetuum mobile. He cannot stay still for a single moment. He dashes about the stage like a frenzied cat, and one feels that it could not be otherwise. He touches and rearranges objects a thousand times, not seeing, not noticing the fact, and all the time reacts with the same sharpness with which an inflamed ear reacts to sounds. He wants everything, everything excites him, gladdens him, angers him, astounds him, saddens him, delights him. He fixes his shining, tense eyes on everyone, he interferes with everything and everyone, he is a walking convulsion. How much of the comic and how much of the really tragic there is in it all! What an eternal obstacle race was in his whole life! How Fate had battered him before transforming him into this figure at which we all laugh! In a small, insignificant, comic, and dishonest man to show greatness and tragedy - and with astounding artistic methods - what a creative value lies in that!

He showed yet another most important trait; a

capacity for unlimited idealism. Those who have had to live in the "borders of Jewish settlement" of evil memory, will know that the Jew - the cobbler and the small dealer and the unscrupulous businessman - is at the same time a philosopher, and such a deep, sincere idealist as is not to be found amongst other nations.

Look at Fraser. All the characters of "The Flood" brighten in the face of death, but only up to a certain point, but Fraser does so entirely, uncontrollably, dissolving in ecstasy. In the shady businessman there is this thirst for the great, the humane. Look closely; how much of the child there is in him. There are adults all around him, but he is a child, naive, mischievous, unconsciously mean and unconsciously bright. That laughter; cunning (a successful swindle) at the same time friendly (he loves everyone) and at the same time full of suffering (to him even the comic is painful).

Does Chekhov himself understand what he is doing, what he has brought on the stage, to what new heights he has raised art?

Do we understand what good fortune has fallen to our lot? And will we create the conditions under which he can create amongst us?

I do not know. I only know that up to this time I had only one beloved name of Chekhov. Now I have two!

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