

Michael Chekhov

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Hamlet

IMPROVISATION:

We will improvise for the whole day - we will take some of the themes we have already used, and you must improvise on the basis given you. Old Students must take the basis given, and then add something to it. During the improvisation, the director will suggest some basis for you, and on this given basis, which will be continuously there, you must take into consideration further suggestions. In addition the Old Students must add some suggestions themselves.

We will take first the theme of The Fishing Scene; you must improvise, having the idea that the people are waiting for the fishermen to come home, and only one returns. How you will develop the whole improvisation is your business. The ground is the feeling of ensemble, or contact. That means that if you are on the stage, you are attentive to everyone's life and outer movements, and you are ready to receive the suggestions and develop them. If the actor gives a suggestion he is sure it will be taken.

CONTACT - ENSEMBLE:

Establish contact, then increase your activity consciously at once - real good inner activity. Throughout our

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whole professional life, when we are together we are active. Bring the structures with the feeling of contact. The task is difficult because you are a big group and this makes contact so difficult between each person. Therefore, by having this contact you will be able to improvise in groups, which will help you. If the contact is really there you will find the improvisation more easy and more beautiful through grouping.

Criticism:

Imagine such a big group establishing contact without a director, and with only a vague idea of the sketch. It is a very difficult thing, but you did have contact - sometimes more, and sometimes less, and sometimes with groups. Beautiful groups came out of the feeling of contact. Old Students must constantly change their basis. How often have you broken this straight line on the basis of contact? You must continue this until it is within your conscious control. What is not good is when you forget the task, and do not notice that you have forgotten it. But from my point of view as a teacher I was happy, because I have seen some very satisfactory things.

Again on the basis of the same ground of contact, let us improvise a fairy tale. Into a very old kingdom has come a very small girl from the forest, bringing to the old kingdom new life. Just at that moment some enemies approach, and try to fight and they take the girl away. The first moment is when the girl comes into the old sleepy kingdom. The second moment

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is when everybody is becoming younger and younger. The third moment is when the armies of the enemy are coming nearer and nearer, and preparing for war. The fourth moment is the war itself - the enemies fight the kingdom and take the girl away, and the old kingdom is broken and dies.

On the basis of contact, try to find the idea which can be used by the army in its strange mechanical movements. Don't prepare beforehand. Make a habit of creating this activity at the beginning of the lesson, and keep it consciously for the whole time - real activity on the part of everybody. Open your eyes, hearts, and ears to one another and be ready to have good suggestions and develop them. Establish contact with the setting.

Criticism:

I am very satisfied. The task was beautifully fulfilled. For the first time I have really seen free creation of everything, and there was a beginning and an end. It is as simple as you have done it. What was good? The feeling of contact was there - perhaps for more complicated and subtle things it would not have been enough, but it was enough for this sketch. Then, you have understood the problem and have taken it absolutely non-naturalistically and free. You have done very stupid things, and they were justified from the style which you have not spoken about.

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Ask yourself whether you know what it means to have contact, and whether or not you have established it. Have you developed the ability to take other things in the Method and apply them during the work? This requires a certain skilfulness.

IMPROVISATION:

Follow with your active imagination and desire to do this scene, which is a naturalistic one. A group of rebels: some years ago the whole group was very young and idealistic, and flaming with their ideals. After a certain time they came to the point where they are disappointed in their leaders and their methods, and in each other because many of them are spies. Every revolutionary group has such difficulties. They must come together because they belong to this organization, although they don't want to come because they no longer believe in it. They are dead people inside, protesting against their old ideals which they had before they could see the realization of their ideals. In addition they are living at a time when they know that they can be captured and sent to prison. Some of them are honest enough to live this life to the end, and if they are arrested they will accept it, although they now hate each other.

The scene is a secret meeting, at which they must decide certain things, certain practical questions - not longer idealistic ones. They have a sort of despairing loyalty to the

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thing which they have started. At a certain sign everyone will leave the room, but so that if the police enter the room they will not get the impression that everyone is running away. It must be so justified that the whole process of leaving the room is a very fine organization. Make the scene short because this is a very good test on the stage, to do this in a short way and not drag it out. Everything that is too long is tasteless in life, and on the stage. Do it on the basis of contact.

Criticism:

Certain qualities I can again accept. You have good taste for doing the things which you did, but this time the contact was not used for the scene. All the speeches, all the themes, all the movements came from the intellect and not from the contact. Instead of creating the theme you have thought about it, and there is a great difference between creating a play, or thinking a play. When you begin to speak about the theme, or your situation, or your feelings in a bare way, it means that your intellect is leading you. If you say, we must be united, because you know the theme is to be divided, it is to a certain extent intellectual. Real creation is always to throw a certain veil over the bare theme - only that is a real sign that the creation is here. If you take it intellectually it is quite different.

You will find in Shakespeare's plays many times cer-

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tain bare sentences, but the real content is under a number of veils. When Shakespeare really begins to create you will find many, many veils covering the theme. The scene you have just done was too bare, therefore there was a certain amount of intellectual content. Out of content you could and should have found some suggestions to cover these bare things. That is why the contact was not holding, because it was lost and weakened by the intellect. The intellect is really the fool in us - for instance, it has nothing to do with a fairy tale - only our heart and creative abilities can do anything with a fairy tale. When you allow the intellect to think that it is the real creator it will be very active, but it will spoil the work. In this scene the intellectual approach made the contact weak.

A very bad habit may be developed in our group if we don't stop it at once. During the rehearsing you must not speak any words if you don't feel them necessary. All these unnecessary words, intellectual words, must not be spoken on the stage at all. If the word is spoken it must have something in it from will, and feeling, and gesture and atmosphere, color - everything. With time you will get this unpleasant feeling that the words have been spoken without any artistic necessity. Intellectually it may be necessary to speak a long sentence, but from an artistic point of view it may be nothing. From an artistic point of view it must be necessary; the words must have wings of atmosphere and gesture. In time you will

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get this ability and a feeling for good words, bad words, and unnecessary words on the stage.

Formulate your ideas and opinions of what you have just done - do it quite consciously - draw some conclusions and rules, so that you will no longer allow your intellect to interfere with your work. Why? Because it disturbs this and that - make it quite clear for yourself. Review the work as though you were a teacher explaining to new students what they have done. I consider such exercises of great significance, and it is good to have Miss Crowther with us and to have her comments about the speech work.

Old Students and New Students:

Awaken your activity and keep it through the whole lesson during the improvisation. There is a small difference between improvisations for our new students and for the old students, who have had some special advice which has not yet been given to the new students. Follow with your active imagination, and then we must improvise on the basis of atmosphere. Old Students must add their own suggestions and change them in order to be flexible inside, and in order to help themselves.

IMPROVISATION:

The scene is the bedroom of a child of six or seven years. The child has placed, in her own manner, all her toys and dolls before going to sleep. The child is afraid of the

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dark, and so there is a light left on in the room. In this light all the toys look strange and fantastic and they begin to move. With the dawn they go back to their places. The atmosphere is a very fantastic one. You must take the problem psychologically. You must penetrate into the imaginative figure of the toy, and into the psychology of it, and embrace it psychologically as well as outwardly. It is not enough to embrace it outwardly.

CONTACT: Criticism:

There was no contact between these figures - one half was on the right way and the other half on the wrong way. The wrong way is not to have any contact. You must become aware of each other - in order to start to do something you must know the other people's ideas - that means to have contact, to know your partners. In this sketch it was very obvious that this was the mistake. If you don't know what the other characters are and what they are doing, then you will only be lying about contact. You must open your heart, and ears, and eyes towards your partner, then you will be able to do things in contact - you must know your partner. For instance, if you are playing a dog you must create the dog in relation to the others around you. You must not rely on yourself alone. This was the same mistake made by everyone. The real life of the actor, and everything about his work, is much deeper than we take it sometimes.

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You were asked to interpret this sketch psychologically, and not to go the easiest way of cliché and banal noise and movements. You were asked to penetrate into the psychology of a child - if you have observed a child you will see that a child has a much finer psychology than we have. If, for instance, you try to find the psychology of a bear, or a dog, or a clown this is such a complicated psychology, and when the child moves the toy it means the whole life of the toy. For the child the moving of the toy may be an outer suggestion of the complicated psychology of the child, who is able to read some psychological connections between the moving and arranging of the toys. Therefore, you must penetrate into the psychological connection between the toys. The child's toys speak to him about such complicated things.

Try to escape this first level which is so grown up, and which has nothing to do with the psychology of the child. Take the problem psychologically under the guise or charm of the child's psychology. Then you will move and find each other and speak in the right way. The atmosphere was not good, but this is understandable because you have not taken the problem deeply enough to justify the atmosphere and to be affected by it. If you take the problem as deeply as the child would, then it will help you very much. As artists you must take the problem to understand the child's psychology.

AESTHETIC CONSCIENCE: Improvisation:

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This scene I would never give unless for a special aim - that of the aesthetic conscience - war - killing - wounding - and everything dreadful. I insist on a very rude, rough performance but with aesthetic conscience. Your shouting, your movements, must make an aesthetic impression. One group is sitting in the trenches and the other group must attack with great difficulty. Which group will win will depend on the improvisation. As rough and rude as possible, but without chaos. Each voice in dying must be beautiful in some way. It is difficult but it is a very good exercise. This time the ground will be a very primitive objective: to overcome and kill the enemy.

Find each other - each time make more and more effort to open your hearts, without which we are not able to establish contact. All the suggestions I gave you can be real or they can be an illusion - please distinguish between these two. The audience will never believe in us if we are only under an illusion.

Criticism:

In many ways it was well done, but sometimes it was really rough and not artistic, but in general it was well done.

Improvisation:

The basis for this scene is again the feeling of contact. Take suggestions, develop them and give suggestions.

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Take the Hamlet scene, playing the director and choosing the actors yourselves. It must be done in the purest tragic style. Hamlet is the highest point of tragic style.

BIOGRAPHY: Criticism:

It was not in the tragic style at the beginning. You didn't find the style - you were as if in a dream. You have done something without any real response. You must know that if you are only standing on the stage you must have a biography. Each actor, each character on the stage must have this biography. It is not right to enter the stage just to speak a few words or to stand there. There must be a biography. That means that if we are performing Hamlet we are trying to find out what his biography is. Even the crowd standing there must have a biography. Many actors laugh at the suggestion that there are no bad parts, only bad actors, but this is a great truth. Bad actors do not know that each human being has a biography. The difference between the animal and the human being is that the animal has no biography. The human being is the only thing on earth that has a biography - "I am".

The biography of Hamlet must be shown in his arms, his hands, his voice, his soliloquy, etc. If he speaks, "To be or not to be," the actor has not created these words but from the moment he speaks the words and adds how he speaks them, they become part of him. This how is the question of biography. The actor knows who he is as Hamlet; he has style, and biography

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and everything. Today you didn't have the biography at the beginning, but it came later.

STYLE:

To understand what is the style, it means to understand the style with each point, each part of your body. If there is style in the play, then in every part of your body the style, like blood, must run through you. The pantomime was out of style - it was a lie but it should have promised us the tragedy which is to come. Repeat the scene for style. Let it saturate your body like blood. The psychology of the style helps the body and the body helps the psychology. Don't show just any court, any king, any queen - try to show a special court, a special king, a special queen - it is who you are on the stage.

Criticism:

It was much better in general. The movements and the whole complete scene was much better, but again our aim is to be much more ingenious, more original. There were clichés lying about you. Everything can be developed more if the suggestions are taken. Develop the lines which are suggested. You must feel the interesting development of the suggestion - much more inventive inside, but this is only possible if you will really take the suggestions. You have only taken half of the suggestion.

You have not yet enough feeling for the places where

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you are walking or sitting on the stage. As actors you must feel it when you are not seen - you don't appreciate the place in which you are on the stage. You must not only appreciate your place but the moment. Where is the center of the stage, and where is the audience attracted? Then you will know whether your movement is in vain. The center gives a different significance for each actor, but this is a fine feeling which you must develop, to know where the center of the play is.

CONTACT:

I have asked you to walk around the structures, because I want you to know what the play suggests to you. It is a mistake to take a position and not take the same position inwardly, or to have a very important position inwardly, and an unimportant position outwardly. These things you must develop by means of contact with the setting. The real contact with the setting, and with each other, requires a much deeper connection with each place and each person on the stage. Think of it and the great danger it is for us to think we are in contact, to think that we have atmosphere, etc. Try to distinguish as to whether it is an illusion, or whether you have really understood what it means to have contact.

SPEECH:

We are going on with our movements and the style, but our speech is so far behind. We must not allow this because

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when we start the preparation of our plays such speech will not be possible. When I think that we are going to show such voices I feel that it will not be allowed to speak as we do. You must take the problem more seriously. It goes too slowly and it is very dangerous. I am sometimes very afraid of the speech problems we have. I don't like the casual speech on the stage in England, but even they speak much better than we do. But we must speak so much better than they do, because they have not had the opportunity of studying such a method as we have. We will get it, but why should we drag out our work? You must be afraid of this because it is very serious. Imagine an actor with poor speech - it is a caricature on the stage. Until your speech really disturbs you, nothing can be done about it.

Movements - bowing - as actors we must remember what it means to bow, to agree, to disagree, etc. This is our material which we are molding. Actors forget the significance of all these things. Long ago a greeting was made on the ground, with the forehead touching it, but later it became less and less and degenerated. But as actors we must find the way back to the original impulse.