

Michael Chekhov

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Lecture to Members of "Actors' Cue"  
 CRITICISM OF SCENES SHOWN BY MEMBERS

FEELING FOR STAGE SPACE - DIMENSION  
 THE ACTOR'S MOVEMENT AND SPEECH - THE WHOLE BEING  
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 THE ARTIST WORKS IN THE WORLD OF INVISIBLE  
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 RHYTHM AND METER

King Lear  
 Hitler

Thank you very much for letting me see your sketches. Were they directed by anyone, or is it the result of your own independent work? I have so many impressions that I must ask you how long I should speak. I will start with some general suggestions which all of you can apply to your work, if you wish. Then I shall speak about certain individual impressions which I received tonight. Please follow me, trying to see what I have seen as positive or negative things, and try to find what you feel about it, and what you feel and what I feel will be something which will give the right impression - your opinion and mine together.

FEELING FOR STAGE SPACE - DIMENSION:

Don't you think that all the sketches we have seen



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were very limited from the point of view of using the space. Recall as many impressions as you can, and then we will understand each other. I got the impression that the space was not taken into consideration, and whether the actors walked or sat down or were standing quietly, they were unaware. I think in our profession, whether we have the director with us or it is our independent work, we should never allow ourselves to be on the stage and not have connection to the space in which we are. It gives the impression that the whole thing hangs in the air somehow, and whether you act well or not so well, everything is somehow not present, not there, not incorporated on the stage. Because nobody can discard or ignore the fact that the audience is there, and the actor is here. If we don't feel these dimensions, we are somehow wrong psychologically, even if we act well.

For instance, if on this stage (I will speak about the audience later on) you are going to act King Lear, and you don't take into consideration the space, you will act in such a way that it is tactless because the space does not allow it, and you will look like a wild animal. The space does not allow such passion. Just as in the same space you can just whisper, and it will be wrong - only your aunt or uncle will hear. So, even before we have the director, our instinct, our actor's intuition must tell us what is the mysterious space of the stage. It is not a space we can measure - that is not



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acting. When we are acting, it [the stage space] is our whole world, and that is the secret. Of course, there are many more secrets of this strange stage space here, but concentrate only on the feeling of dimension now. You will see how many creations we can always get from the space, from the dimensions themselves.

Quickly recall all the sketches we have seen and try to determine whether this was the fact. Sometimes I saw some of the actors working in a small space, although we were shown a bigger space, and somehow we couldn't adjust ourselves. Sometimes it was big when the space was really small. If you only believe what I say or not, it will not be useful to you, but if you will really imagine and recall the scenes and see whether it is true or not, it will be of great use to you.

#### THE ACTOR'S MOVEMENT AND SPEECH - THE WHOLE BEING:

The second impression is also negative (praising does not help very much. If you want to hear what is wrong with open hearts, I think it will be more useful). I have heard many words from the stage, and words followed one another in quick or slow succession, but very often I got the impression - where is the person who speaks? I don't see the bodies - I heard the voices, but when I looked, I got the impression that there were helpless bodies standing and voices coming from figures which were not here on the stage. Two



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beings - one speaks, and I cannot see it, the other I see, but it does not speak.

That is not only your mistake - it is the mistake of all the actors throughout the whole world. The mistake is that for decades we have become accustomed, under certain bad influences, to think that to play the part means only to speak the words which the author gives us. Not at all. The author and his text - the words - are only the pretext for us to act.

Authors, generally speaking, have no idea about acting, and they interfere with our profession. They insist upon their words, and they have no idea that they are getting poorer and weaker under the influence of their words, but where is the acting? When we rely upon the words only, what happens? Please recall the scenes while I am speaking, and you will see what I mean.

All the words, if we rely only upon them, accumulate in our head, and they remain there, and then we have dead plays because our head is the deadest part of our being. We cannot make gestures with it, we can only make grimaces which are tasteless and not artistic. This dead, round thing is our tempter, and we begin to speak out of the mouth - not even out of our lungs.

The right speaking on the stage comes from our heart, from our hands and arms, from our torso, from our legs and



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feet. When the whole human being begins to speak - you don't even have to move - but when the impulse for speech comes from our whole being, except the head, then it appeals to the audience because there in the audience are sitting beings with arms, hands, legs, and hearts, and lungs.

When we hear something even in our everyday life, we undergo the illusion that we hear with our ears. It is not so because if we did hear only with our ears, we would not hear or understand. We would just look at the person who speaks and see what is happening to him. We hear with our whole being. If you are attentive to yourself when you are somehow free in your feelings, you will see that you hear with your arms and hands, and your whole body, and you prepare your answer from your whole being, too.

When we are on the stage, under the influence of the author's lines and other people around our profession, then we speak from our heads. Now I will give you an example. We have no right to act and to speak using only our heads. Therefore, what can we do to avoid this thing - and, by the way, I must tell you that when we are speaking out of our head only and not including the whole being, then there are two things seen on the stage - either it is bad and not harmonious and it is slow, or it is the extreme nervousness which has nothing to do with art. Our nerves are waiting to kill our art because our art lies in our heart, our arms, our



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legs and feet and not in the head or the solar plexis. When we speak out of our head, we use our nerves. If you act a nervous person only from the head, it is like a clinical case. It is very unpleasant and one must be cured of this, and the audience must be cured.

Of course, you do not show it to such an extreme degree, but to a certain extent when we exclude our body to that extent, our head possesses us. So there is no hope to avoid this clinical business in us if we don't pay attention to our whole body. What shall we do? I can only hint at two suggestions. One is - while you are preparing the part, spend a little time or much time for creating and reviving all your movements on the stage. That means to be responsible for how you stand, how you sit, where your arms and hands are, if you are inclined this way or that way - everything must be considered by you.

#### PEDANTIC TRAINING OR ACTOR'S BODY AND SPEECH:

Now let us go over the sketches we have seen, and ask ourselves whether the actors were really responsible for their arms, and hands, and shoulders, and whole beings? Not quite. Very much was just as though it was accidental, or it was a series of habits. When we don't force - I say force because at first we have to force our bodies, but later on we will get it easier and easier, and the body will become inventive of itself - but first we have to force our body to



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be inventive on the stage. We have seen one actor today make three simple gestures and that is all. When we do not use our body, we do not revive it, and this devil immediately says, "Ah, now I have you." And this quasi-humor comes.

To let our bodies be free on the stage, we have not yet the right because we live in such a rude, materialistic epoch - in an epoch when we have to think of Hitler and Mussolini it does not make us finer, it makes us somehow "Hitlerish" because we have to think of it. This business is much more profound than we know. He kills our mental abilities because he attracts our attention to him. He kills our hearts because - perhaps you will not remember - I remember even before the first world war how distressing it was to hear about something which happened, somebody was carried off by somebody, somebody died somewhere. And now thousands, perhaps millions are being killed, yet we are all right. Why? Because Hitler has killed our minds and our hearts and all that part of us which is the actor in us. And, therefore, in this materialistic time, we cannot let our bodies do on the stage what they want to. No. We have now to awaken them, to revive them. We have to force our bodies at first to be responsible for each position we have on the stage. Maybe it seems to you a bit pedantic - how can I put all my movements, even those of my fingers, consciously in the right place without killing my inspiration or spontaneity? But this is



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the question - is not our spontaneity already killed by a "Hitler?" (let us use this word as a symbol)

We have lost our spontaneity to a great extent, but we do not see it because we think that speaking the words on the stage is enough. But it is not. When you meet each other in life and have certain personal connections to each other, don't you often feel that you are more alive in your everyday life than on the stage? And when you come on the stage, you accept - or someone is accepting for you - that you are puppets, and you have to speak words, and you don't even see your partners, or have the feeling of space, and your body is just hanging there. That is so wrong.

We must start to awaken our bodies and then the inspiration will come. Spontaneity will come back, but much richer than it is now. Then one part of this "Hitler" job will be defeated. A little spontaneity is not worth relying upon, for it must be like a fountain and then it will give something to our audience and ourselves. Otherwise it is one of the materialistic illusions. To have a little spontaneity is not enough.

Let us say you are preparing the part. Take a short section of it and try to rehearse it with imaginary partners, and go over the scene absolutely pedantically. Don't be afraid of it. You must know whether it is right, and you must create it. Only then, after this little



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torture, can you begin to feel your body, and you can act without making unnecessary movements, but like electric sparks are everywhere. Then the "Hitler" is killed in your body. Then the inspiration will come - not from our head, where we are very stupid because we can't even understand that there is a war going on. I hear so often on the radio that we are at war, but the whole world does not understand it. Even Hitler does not understand that he is at war because he does not know what the war is. He has an idea about himself, but not about the war. In our head there is no help for understanding the war - even the part on the stage or the way we sit on the stage, we cannot understand in our head. We have to understand it in our body.

If God wanted to punish Hitler, He would awaken his heart and body, then he would understand what he is doing, and that would punish him. Our profession requires that we awaken our hearts and bodies and to do this means to go through a period of absolutely pedantically controlling our bodies.

#### FIRST APPROACH TO THE TEXT:

Another means for the same end. When you begin to work on your text, don't start to speak it too loudly. Before you come to the first reading, first hear the words. First see yourself speaking the words on the stage, but don't speak



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in reality, only listen to how you speak them. Listen to several sentences at least, and listen to them until you hear what he, (that is you) speaks in your imagination, from his or her heart. This experiment will awaken things in you, not at first because it is a difficult thing to hear your own voice. Perhaps you will not succeed at first, but if you succeed, you will see that you are really speaking.

For example, when we say "hello" to each other every day, do we really mean this senseless "hello."? Are we so crude and rude? We are not, but when we do it, it means we rely upon this dead habit and forget that I am a living being, and that he is a living being. If we would really see how painful it is to get from somebody this "hello," we would see that - again symbolically speaking - the "Hitler" has done his job. He has killed our human connections. This extreme case of this street "hello" we bring on the stage. We are speaking a series of "hellos" instead of our part.

Therefore, we must first hear ourselves in our imagination speaking these words. We must reverse the whole problem. When we are speaking, somebody else is listening, but in our imagination we must reverse it and become the listener while somebody else is speaking. Then the whole thing may be cured - I say cured consciously because the "Hitler" is a disease - if we go the other way round. Reviving our body is easier than hearing ourselves speaking.



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so don't be discouraged with the results.

#### INVENTIVENESS - INGENUITY:

Let us try once more to recall the scenes, and you will see that in the whole series of scenes which we have seen today, we have the feeling that they could have been more ingenious, more inventive. The possibilities are given by the author, and, first of all, by yourselves as actors, but my impression was that you have not used all the possibilities. Sometimes it became monotonous in every sense - in the manner of speaking, of moving, and in the manner of expressing one's emotions. You get the impression that at first it is interesting, and then comes the same thing, and the same thing, and then the sketch is finished.

#### IMAGINATION:

Not enough variety, not enough inventiveness. Why? There are many reasons, but I will mention one point - I don't think you use your imagination very much when you are preparing your part. I think you must use it more. To use the imagination means to see with your mind's eye your part, your character, acting before you and waiting only until this imaginary actor or actress (which is you) develops the part in the world of the imagination, where there are no heavy, undeveloped bodies. In your imagination you can juggle very well. In your imagination try to juggle three balls, and you will see



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that it goes marvelously. So your imagination is a better actor than when you are using your body. Let this better actor work for us first. Let us enjoy this better actor playing the part in our imagination, and you will see that you, yourself, while looking at yourself acting the part, how inventive you are. Otherwise, you would not be actors. Something led you through your whole life to the stage. What was it? Your desire to juggle with parts. But we cannot do it if we limit our imagination. We cannot do it if we rely only upon our voice, our outer appearance, and our habits.

#### THE CREATIVE SPIRIT:

Our inventiveness will be a great revelation for us if we use our imagination and learn what we actually are. Here again is a great mistake. We think that we are actors, having our bodies, costumes, voices, and make-up, but these are only the tools or the means of expression. The real actor in us is an invisible being, an imaginary activity, or the activity of our imagination, which is our creative spirit, which cannot be seen or felt. We cannot put on our creative spirit these things. We can put them on our physical body, which is only the instrument for conveying to our audience our spiritual, imaginary ideas or visions. And the mistake is that we think that it is enough to take the part and to read the lines and to move our body according to the director's suggestions. We rob ourselves of ourselves.



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THE ARTIST WORKS IN THE WORLD OF INVISIBLE THINGS,

We must come back to this original idea which all the great masters had before this terribly materialistic era started - I think it was somewhere in the last third of the past century - this materialistic business started in the world and developed more and more. We artists - people who are born to use their imaginations, their fantasy - we have forgotten that we are people working in the world of invisible things. Because we have forgotten this - it is the mistake of the whole of humanity at the present time - our inventiveness and ingenuity has become weak because we cannot get the right, the rich imagination out of our physical surroundings or our physical bodies. We have to use something else - not the head, never the head - our imagination. We will see how we can get prepared and rehearse our parts while we are free from our bodies and can see ourselves objectively speaking this or that line. Then again our actor's nature, our creative nature, will respond to this invitation to become alive and sound again. That is the aim.

Criticism of scenes:

Scene I:

CONTRASTS - VARIATIONS:

Having seen you only once, I may be very wrong in my suggestions, but the positive thing, the good thing in your performance was that you were free inwardly and outwardly, and



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this freedom was enough to have been able to develop more variety, but variety was the weak point in your performance. It was monotonous because you did not know how to create this variety.

If you would take your speech and, being free as you are, try to find the contrasts in every sense. Try to justify each word so that you will make as many contrasts as possible. Psychological contrasts too. Your character is in such a mood, for instance, then try to find out how you can make each incident just the opposite.

This is also true of your movements. When you are holding your hand in your pocket, it is not true to think that we are satisfied with that. If your hand is all the time in your pocket, we feel that you, as an actor, do not know how to use it. You don't need to move all the time, but you must find the moment when you take your hand out of your pocket. It must be part of the acting so that it will satisfy us. If you don't want greater variations in movement, then find the way of using your hand and arm. Try to use contrasts in every sense.

### Scene II:

#### RELAXATION:

In your case I would say that you have a very good ability for acting. Rely upon the acting and not upon tension. In these two performances it was very pleasant to see that



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you could both be on the stage without words and that you could hold the audience's attention because you were doing certain things on the stage. But your mistake was that you didn't entirely believe in yourself or you have been somehow wrongly led in the theatre. Instead of freeing yourself, you became very tense, just when you should have been free. Try simply to relax your muscles. At first you will feel as if naked, but go through this stage when you are afraid that you are too free.

You have a very strong, rich, juicy temperament. If you will drop certain habits, you will have a connection between yourself and the audience. You think that perhaps they will not get your temperament and power unless you impose it on them. You know instinctively that you are powerful on the stage but don't make the next wrong step, which is to force your power on the audience. We will get it without this forcing.

Scene III:

INWARD AND OUTWARD ACTING:

This was a very good example of a positive thing. Both actors felt that somehow there were deeper levels in the scene, and you tried to dig deeper and deeper, showing us the seriousness of the situation. The human seriousness. But you spoiled this good work because you simply didn't



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know what to do on the stage, or how to express these profound things which were looming somewhere. You were simply standing, and that is not possible on the stage because it was not expressing what you had in your heart. These profound heart connections - you killed it by doing nothing outwardly.

You cannot persuade the audience to believe that you are serious, but you don't want to show us anything. We are looking, so you must satisfy our eyes and ears as well. You appealed to my heart, but my eyes didn't see anything. What you had inwardly didn't happen outwardly. In the other case it was different. You chose a means of expression much lighter and more primitive and superficial than your intention was. All your answers were in the same way. Your heart wanted to do something more expressive, more alive, but the form you had chosen was all the same. You walked this way and that way, but I could not understand what connection it had with what you were experiencing. It was unjustified because you didn't want to establish a connection between your heart and your outer expression. You didn't use the right words because you used more superficial ones that you wanted.

Scene XIII:

THE ACTOR'S INNER POWER:

You have great power. You can make out of yourself many things. You can order yourself to move, to speak, even



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to feel. You manage yourself strongly, but you use it in the wrong way. First of all, if I may be absolutely frank, your whole entrance was wrong. I will tell you why. We actors sometimes act in life, and this is a very detrimental thing. The more we act in life and not on the stage, the more we waste our inner power.

The whole situation, the whole psychology of an actor who uses his acting abilities while among his friends does not increase his power, but diminishes it. I cannot prove it to you in a minute, but if you understand what I mean, you will say to yourself, "I must not act when I am not on the stage." Either to hide, or to impersonate, or to make a pleasant impression on others, or to amuse your friends. It is a loss, and you will become weaker and weaker on the stage. What you do when you act on the stage requires great inner power.

Scene VIII:

THE ACTOR'S INDIVIDUALITY:

You have a certain feeling, you guess what humor on the stage is. You guess what your individuality wants to do. You guess what is youth, what is life on the stage. How to be light on the stage. You know how to drop sentences so that they become significant, just because you have dropped them. But you know it too well, and you stress it. You confine yourself to three things, three means of expression,



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whereas you could use innumerable things to express this thing which your individuality is longing for. You use things which you are sure the audience will accept, but the audience is not the judge. The audience can be very misleading. You have to find something better and that is yourself.

You have to criticize yourself, asking whether your means of expression are rich enough in comparison with your inner hidden desire. And here, for instance, one of the confusing things for you is, and always will be if you don't stop it - you confuse the laughter of the audience. When the audience laughs because of the author's words, you think it is you. You must distinguish whether you are acting humorously or whether it is the author. You lose your control. You must always know whether it is the author who receives the laughter, or you as an actor. Today the author was more amusing than you. It will help you greatly if you will try to find a humorous way to act and not steal from the author his humor.

Scene VI:

RHYTHM AND METER:

It would be good for you if you would continue to work upon this scene, trying to distinguish two things - the rhythm and the meter. You were a little under the weight of the meter and not the rhythm. The difference is the feeling.



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The meter is always somehow something which you can beat out, whether it is 1,2,3, or whatever you like. But that is not rhythm, and the meter must have rhythm behind it, which is as follows: You can express the rhythm with your arms and hands and things without any metric beat. If you can make the whole speech with your arms and hands without any beats, you will come to this rhythm. But if you drop this inner big wave and rely only upon 1,2,3 in your speech and psychology, then you undergo this meter, which is never alive. If you have a real, concrete gesture with your arms and hands not dancing, but moving to the whole speech, speaking with your words inwardly. When you have enough of these movements which express the meaning and the heart of the speech, then you can use the meter just as you like, and it will always be alive.