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Michael Chekhov

October 14 - 15, 1938

ARTIST'S RELATIONSHIP TO LIFE  
SUGGESTIONS TO INDIVIDUAL ACTORS

Mrs. Elmhirst

Criticism of scenes: The aim of tonight was not to criticize you but to see some new things which you have to show me, as a result of your free work, having been together for two years. But in order not to lose this opportunity, I will give certain suggestions and certain criticisms in a very very brief form.

First, the voices are so much better - such a great improvement in everyone. Peter, for example, but almost everyone has made a big step forward. Now you can speak almost as real actors, and this has made me very happy.

Another good point is that when I gave you freedom and asked you to show what you could; your best; your dreams; your idea; your inner actor; this freedom gave you a certain scope. You were much freer than ever before.

What is bad and what made me so very sorry is that all these dreams, all these images - I speak in general - are fairly weak. If this is the dream of an actor then he has to go through two schools, through the theatre many years and through the life school. I must be frank and honest with you, and with myself. I must repeat what I have said before, the same thing, you are not yet born, you don't know what human tragedy or human humor is - I mean humor which means to laugh upon life.

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If I judge you as a group of really awakened people, what can I imagine you will show me from the stage today, being absolutely free and having had the whole summer to imagine and the last few weeks to incorporate these simple situations? Perhaps I might expect to see noble wrath - I should see some signs and notes of this noble wrath against all the things which are going on around us. Perhaps I could expect tears to show how these artists are mirroring the life with their tears, with their pain about all the tragedy which we can find in our newspaper every day. But no, simply a quiet atmosphere, or perhaps tremendous irony because of these things. But no.

Then I feel what are they going to show as artists, and this was a little bit disappointing for me. If you have a part it is more difficult to show, but it is possible to show me the connection to the life in each part, and I see that you are quite, quite, quite unworried about the life around us. This is the point which gives me so much pain because I feel and I know, and you know that the artist of today cannot be an artist if he is disconnected from the real life. It has never been possible in any age, in any epoch of culture, and I feel that this group is disconnected from life. Nothing hurts you, nothing makes you wrathful, nothing makes you laugh at yourselves.

The matter is too serious; you must be awakened by any means, but to go on as artists with such separation from

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the life around you, it is simply impossible. It is not very pleasant to hear these words, but you will hear it in as much ruder form from the life itself. It is better to take it from me in a friendly way, than to wait until your destiny will put it to you so strongly, but too late. Think of it and each of you will find his own way and where he shuts his eyes and ears. This is the point which made me unhappy. If you wish to go on as artists, perhaps some personal suggestions will help you.

Mrs. Elmhirst: I have told you many times about your inner difficulties; you are not a weak person, you are perhaps stronger than all of us, but you have taken upon yourself such a mask - a good one in life - you are too humble, you are too noble and too humble. As a person you may need this, but on the stage it is your main difficulty. You are hidden from us on the stage behind this mask of deep modesty, which perhaps you have had for many, many years. If you do not throw it away you will not be able to open yourself not only for us, but even for yourself. This is your personal difficulty.

Today I have seen through this modesty a strong feeling of form which I have never seen in you before, although it was often hidden. You got some moments which were very interesting; for instance, instead of developing certain feelings which are arising in you, you shut them up by this

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modesty, which is not only modesty. You have certain gestures which are like magic keys with which you shut yourself.

One thing is your hands; this is a magic thing for closing you. Another gesture is when you begin to feel something you clench your fists and lift your arms. You think this gesture is opening you but it is closing you; you think it is expressing your emotions but it is closing and shutting them. If you will fight with this thing you will discover things in yourself which you don't even know are there. The feeling of form which I have seen is very important for you, because you were formless before - almost streaming and sliding. Today for the first time we have seen this feeling of form. Then why not open other things like that?

Your ability to radiate which is so strong in life, becomes weak on the stage. Why? Because, being afraid, you use this magic key to shut yourself. You must develop yourself and not drag this work or stop it, and this magic key must be thrown away forever, if you wish to discover certain things which I feel are there. Some moments were very expressive even through this modesty, and these other difficult conditions, which you place on yourself. There is no need to do anything but take away this feeling of modesty, and the magic key.

Terence: I saw again very interesting ideas and original interpretation, and I am very happy about this. I think your way in the theatre will be to find new forms and new things. I underline this because you must appreciate it and must tell yourself that you must work to create the

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settings in your imagination. Not that you may have to do it in reality, but you have to imagine many plays, many operas which you will produce in this way and that.

Now what concerns you as an actor in what you have just shown me, I would say there was a great lack of fire, and this is the point that you perhaps have to think about more. How? In the same manner; imagine yourself acting with fire, until you will see what I mean by fire in you. Train yourself in these two ways.

Blair: This is a very good example of the theme being much deeper than the actor's connection to it. If you take such a theme you must meditate upon it much longer and much more profoundly so that both the character and the theme will be taken from above by you. Today when we take such big themes as this we make two mistakes; we are either schematic and dead or we are sentimental, because the theme is up there and we are here.

You will never be able to belie the audience, no matter what settings you make, what gestures you find, what voice you find. The audience will understand that the actor is here, and the theme is there. This is your mistake, and I think it was a mistake in the preparation of this character. You thought you would be able to do this theme without special meditation. No one is able to do that, but you are able to meditate on the theme so that you will become higher and higher and will catch the theme there.

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So I accuse you of lack of aspiration which must be done consciously. If you are flaming today, tomorrow you may not be flaming. It must be continuous work; day after day you must imagine the character's life, his feelings, everything. Then you will reach the point where you can appear before the audience and say, "This is my experience with St. Francis of Assisi."

Peter: The same mistake has been made by you. If Blair was on the earth with his theme, you were under the earth with yours. It was absolutely un-elaborated. You did not tell us anything with your Judas. You should have done the same work, the same meditation work that Blair should have done. Of course, each of us has inside of us Judas and all other characters, good and bad, but to perform our little understanding of Judas is not worthwhile. If you show us your interpretation of Judas it must not only be words and how you see the conception. You must love it, and be such a specialist about this Judas question that you will have the right to show us your own feeling and will about Judas. So I accuse you in the same way as Blair. You must try to find your way to the character by trying to lift yourself to it and not to pull it down.

Jean: The same accusation as before - cold, tremendous cold. What this means I don't know; there is something which you substitute instead of your real feelings; what it is I don't know yet; I think something with the voice

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perhaps. But the mistake you make is the substitution of this cold for something else. If you will do the Eurhythmy exercises in a more meditative way, and if you will do the "Ah" gesture - to simply do it is not enough, but to experience it knowing that by doing this gesture you will get some streams, some real cosmic streams. Really open your soul and body in the experience of this sound. You must experience these gestures, and you will get the idea about this substitution, then when you move your hand you will get the experience that the whole world is moving with you. You will find this through Eurhythmy. Please take my criticism knowing that I am helping you by showing you your mistakes, and not pleasing you by showing you your good sides. This is true for everyone.

Paul: I have seen a new thing in you, something of real fire for the first time, which I think is very, very good. It was not yet very much, but there is something with which you have difficulty and that is that your body is very little elaborated. You move your hands so well but as a whole thing - you must be able to move your hands so that you feel every joint; the whole arm must be elaborated like Shan Kar. We don't need his development but we have to get the same ability to the extent we can; each actor must have that ability.

You must think of this elaboration of each part of your body. That is why we have Eurhythmy - that is the whole

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secret. It will not give us anything if we do it in a certain way - only if it is for us what Shan Kar's exercises are for him will it be worthwhile. Eurhythmy will give you more than flexibility, it will give you life and a new outlook. It is a very strong means of developing if it is taken, but if not it is half-dance, half something else. In your case Eurhythmy can develop your body, and your fire will find so many possibilities to flower, whereas now it meets some bodily difficulty.

Paula: Very good form; very elaborated and clear-cut which is always very pleasant to see on the stage, but again the same mistake as the others - cold and calm. And you had such words, such situations! If they are not the forces through which our fire will burst out, then where are such parts? These are the parts for fire.

Alan: I think what you have done is you, and you, and you entirely; what you have done before the school, what you dreamed of doing, all this is your life, such kind of things. I was very happy to see it because it has shown me many things about you. If you will do something again, try to do something which is quite opposite, and then I will get the full picture of you. If we could continue with these scenes I would give you certain other work. I would tell you that today it is a heap of rhythmical elements but it is not yet an organism, and your next step is to organize all these things in one rhythmical whole. It is still elements



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flowing around you, but not yet a whole. Try to develop yourself from quite a different angle.

Sam: It was good but it is again too small; somehow too contracted. You have such a tall body and such a voice, and you have a character unbridled, and angry, a drunk figure with vague and strange ideals about man and freedom and work and labor. This is a thing in which you can show your whole temperament, your whole ability to be an actor on the stage, because this part is written so that whatever you have as an actor you are able to show; the part is written for an actor absolutely.

But you have done it in too small a way - contracted, although the idea was quite the opposite. You have contracted your soul, your body, and you could not take the next step because you were contracted. This is a psychological thing in you, and this leads you to other characteristic things which we find in actors. For example; you have spoken for ten minutes until you came to the moment when you drank, and there was emptiness because you have not radiated anything before. When you came to the pause there was a gap, and emptiness, then came the word and you felt freer. It is not good.

Having such an unbridled person you must fill the whole stage, the whole theatre, and everyone must look at you, waiting for the next moment. The difficulty is your tendency to contraction. Think about it and try to escape all these outer and inner contractions.

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Erica: I tell you nothing because you are an actress, and a very fine and good one. I have seen you for the first time.

Daphne: You are absolutely charming. Go on like that and the moment will come when I will tell you, now please think about the Method, but the moment has not yet come. So be free and do whatever you like.

Mary Lou: It was just a little bit better, but you have not yet discovered your point of view on these things. How do you interpret and understand this situation, this character, this time? It was almost as if you were reading the play, but I could not see what the actress had to tell me about this play. You have not yet discovered yourself.

It is the same question as with Peter and Blair - the big theme, the big strong character, but no approach to it. I don't know your opinion about it, but that is the most interesting thing. I know the theme, I have my own idea of it, I know how I would play it, but I don't know your opinion. It was in general, speaking in general, feeling in general, etc. I don't know what is Mary Lou - it is the same thing as I told you before. You must discover yourself by all possible means, and I am sure our Method leads to this, the same as Eurhythmy. If it is taken it will recreate and enrich the human being.

You are still too closed, not like Mrs. Elmhirst who is in a much easier position if she understands what she

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has to take away from herself, then she will be an actress with such eyes, such strange points of view, such strange radiation; she has only to take away a certain veil. It is quite a different case; she is there; she is born, but you are not yet born. You must find yourself. If you will compare yourself with Mrs. Elmhirst you will perhaps find the difference. Whether you have a point of view I don't know; she has and only a veil of modesty disturbs.

You must elaborate a point of view and this means to discover yourself. Can you be angry when Chamberlain flies to see Hitler? This is a point of view; Mrs. Elmhirst has it; the actor must always have a point of view, right or wrong; this is the actor sitting inside of us, and this is the whole difference. This political thing is only an example, but if I have no point of view I will not have it tomorrow, and the day will come when I have no point of view at all. I will be only an actor, and that means nothing - only a cheap profession. I believe you have very much inside you, but you are young and you must find different points of view. Put before yourself the question of Hitler, about everything. Make it quite clear to yourself.

Hurd: It was very interesting for me from the point of view of the imagination. Your weakness; - now I know your weakness; it is weakness! Everything you do is good and interesting, but you always do it muted. I have told you before that your need is to develop yourself in great

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dimensions, and now I will repeat it. I have not made a mistake. It is the same. Try to break all these things which are hanging on you, making you weaker, so that sometimes you are as if existing and not existing - like a ghost. Better to get flesh and blood and voice, and be angry and happy, but be material and then later on you will be able to be un-material.

It is the same in our rehearsals; you have no flesh, no blood, no existence. First, try to eat a good beefsteak - a spiritual beefsteak! For me it is sometimes necessary psychologically to think of the stage as something which does not exist. It exists for you. To Paul I would say to imagine the stage as something which is almost a dream, almost out of life; but to you I would say it must have soul and body and everything.

Iris: It was much better but the same mistake was there as with everyone who has a scene with a knife - everything was on the same level. This is one of the biggest mistakes you made. Even if you have some good quality and you carry it on and on, it becomes nothing. The actor must have the ability to say the same thing in twenty different facets. For instance, Erica in her small soliloquy has shown perhaps twenty different qualities - this is the actor's quality. Paula was on the same level and at moments I thought she would show a new quality, but she fell back.

If only you could have found a fourth quality, a

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fifth and even a sixth, just as Mrs. Elmhirst has shown some different qualities. But she has put this veil over these different qualities. If she does not take away this veil, whatever qualities she possess will be lost. I can accept this veil myself, and see what could be done, but the audience, which has no special interest to penetrate, will see only the veil. Paula has no veil but she has shown only three or four qualities, whereas Mrs. Elmhirst has shown many qualities under the veil. For you this evenness is not right.

Mary La: In comparison with what you have done with Peter last time, when you showed a series of habits which we deny in our school, today you have not shown such habits, and that is a great step forward. Whether you have done it consciously or not, I do not know, but it is the right way.

Woodie: I appreciate very much your idea, and this is one of the most profound things we have seen on our stage today. Paul's idea I liked very much, and also the ideas of Peter and Blair and others, but all these ideas were incorporated in so many mistakes. But in your case it was not a mistake; it is again a special case.

You are still so young as actors; you have all to go through such a long experience as actors, so you have no mistakes, you are too young yet. And this is the best criticism which can be made in any school; to say to a young actor you are still too young, but you have all the qualities there. You should be happy. It is not a mistake, or a wrong way

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you are going, but you have only put your left foot on this path of acting. You have to consider yourself a student in the sense that you want to learn how to act, and then you will go forward very quickly. You have certain interesting things inside of you, and now you must find the way to experience them, without hurrying, as a student, not as a student in a school but as a special kind of student who must say to himself, now I am going to learn.

It is worthwhile to spend your whole activity and effort in learning. When you are walking ask yourself, what can I learn in this moment. That is what it means to be a spiritual student. I can do a small exercise when I am moving. Then you will find how marvelous it is to go to bed at night after having done something. You have to be a spiritual student.

Anna: I think Anna has done her work marvelously. It was quite exact.