

Michael Chekhov

September 27, 1937

OLD AND NEW STUDENTS - RELATIONSHIP  
ADVICE TO TEACHERS  
THE FEELINGS  
THE OPEN HEART - THE FEELINGS  
IMPROVISATION - RHYTHMICAL IMPROVISATION  
ARCHETYPE

Chaliapin  
King Lear

Let us spend a few minutes enjoying the new studio and greeting one another. At this moment I feel a great responsibility for the future. Having been given everything by Mr. and Mrs. Elmhirst and Beatrice, I feel we must give everything we have, and we must give them our warm thanks. Now that we have a new group of young people I must give you some instructions with regard to them.

Concerning the old students helping the new students:

First of all, you, as old students, must feel yourselves older than they are; and you must believe that you know more than they do, and that you can do more than they can. Without this feeling you will not be able to help the new students. But you must help them. You have a big responsibility towards them because they do not enter a studio which is empty, but a studio which is full of atmosphere, and you are the atmosphere of the studio. Therefore, you must have a responsible feeling towards them, and you must lead them. You must be very careful with yourselves. I mean they can be very friendly with you, but this is only one part of their consciousness. With another part they

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will look at you with hidden eyes which you will never notice, and they will take lessons from you, subconsciously and unconsciously.

Therefore, especially during the first months, your behavior is very important: your attitude towards the theatre, our school, our friendship, etc. We must be serious enough, humorous enough - everything must be shown them. They must understand that we are not a cloister, but neither are we a superficial crowd of people. Everything must be shown them in a very concrete form. Therefore, how they will progress depends not only on what you will teach them, because you will teach them as well, but it depends very much on who you are. I must repeat that I am absolutely against the famous "cathedral" atmosphere; but I do want you to realize that our work is a ground and basis for life, not only a period of temporary theatre life. We have laughter and humor in our natures, and these we must use as well. This is the first point.

The second point is that we must teach them. I will give you certain simple exercises which we have done last year, and these exercises we will lead in turn. For instance, I will give you some lessons and then some of you will also give lessons; knowing who is able to teach what, we will teach them together. I will tell you now what kind of exercises I want you to give them; and you must think over each exercise very carefully from the point of view of "I am giving a lesson

on . . . ." Don't assume that you know the exercises. Think them through carefully and then you will be able to give them.

You must not only give the technical lessons, but you must be able to give explanations as to why the exercise is necessary, in which form, how to do it, how to understand it, how to apply it in the future, etc. Don't be afraid to tell them things which they will not understand at the moment. They will not understand it with their heads, but with their hearts. If you repeat the exercises many times, the understanding in them will grow with time. The right order of the exercises will be found by our assistants.

A list of these exercises

1. Concentration.
2. Imagination - not only images to see, but images to hear as well.
3. Incorporation of the most simple images.
4. Movement: begin by being conscious of the body, etc.
5. Exercises for justification of the simplest characterization. Give them the most simple things, such as keeping the hands in the pockets all the time while they move about, and justify this as their characterization; or a character who is always looking for very small spots; or a character with a very stiff neck. All such characterizations must be justified; and you must help them by explaining to them that each justification is a psychological thing.
6. Atmosphere exercises.
7. The actor's march exercise: the march can be used in a much wider sense than we used it last term. In giving this exercise, try to give it in its widest sense.
8. Legato and Stacatto.
9. Originality and Ingenuity: begin this in the simplest way.
10. Objectives: In teaching the objective please use the term in our sense, and not as we find it in Stanislavsky's books - that is the foundation - but how we apply the objective, in our sense, that is;

- by taking the activity with the whole body.
11. Exercise with groups: with given music and a given idea, without explanation - this will come in the future. Let them build the groups instinctively, without analysis.

You must think through these exercises and prepare yourselves inside before giving them to the new students.

There is another thing which we must give them: they will act, almost from the very beginning, certain kinds of exercises which consist of acting small sketches no longer than one minute, perhaps even less. Such sketches, although short, must be full of meaning. They must contain a few short sentences. Each sketch must have a very strong atmosphere, very clear objectives for each person, and all the other means which we have learned through our exercises must be incorporated in these sketches.

In this way, after you have given them lessons in concentration, imagination, incorporation, etc., you will be able to give them the sketches and ask them to act them as freely as they like, by trying to exercise their understanding of atmosphere, objectives, etc. This means that they they will be able to apply at once in a professional way the things they will be taught in the exercises. Of course, they need not only be used as exercises. They can become much more than that, but that will depend upon the teacher. For instance, a teacher may wish to awaken some special thing in a new student, and that is the teacher's business. Naturally, I should like you always to point out the Method when working

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with them because without consciously using the Method, they will flounder and will never have a basis.

We must cling to the Method, because this is the only way in which we will in time have a ground. Without a Method it is sometimes much more pleasant to flounder, but it is useless; therefore, I want you to point out that we have a Method. You must work with the method carefully and patiently because this is the ground for your future work, and we will never be allowed to flounder in our school. Our school is the enemy of such floundering art, or "as-it-were" art.

Therefore, please prepare as soon as possible a lot of such small one-minute sketches which contain very expressive texts. You will recall the exercise we did last year in connection with a sudden shock or reaction to a sudden sensation. It is a very good exercise because it awakens many things which want to sleep in the actor's soul, but we were afraid of this exercise and we stopped it because I was too lenient with you. These small sketches must be as if a little bit extended, that is, they must have a little more power than the event in everyday life. Each must be an exercise for awakening certain abilities in the souls of our students. I should like to have a little library of such sketches for our new students.

You must lead the new students in two ways. Some of you will be "nurses" for certain students for a fortnight,

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and then the "nurses" will be changed. Then there will be another kind of helper who will give lessons here in the studio.

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Now the work with the old students:

During the summertime I was able to think back on our work last year and I got many impressions; I am sure you did the same. I made many reproaches to myself because until now my work has always been with Russian, Jewish, Latvian, Lithuanian, and a little with German people. The meeting with you was quite a new experience for me. In you I met qualities I had never met before. On the other hand, I could not find in you some qualities which I had been accustomed to find in young students in other nations. This was a very wonderful experience for me, but was also responsible for some of the mistakes which I made. They were small things which are very good to see and to know.

THE OPEN HEART: THE FEELINGS:

I have made an examination for myself and, as a result of this summer's thinking, I find that we lack two things very much, and these things will be a trial for us. If we are able to awaken these things in us, then we are actors, we are a future theatre. If not, then we have nothing to show our future audiences. It is very serious but very simple.

I have told you many times last year that we must

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find in our souls feelings, emotions, human vibrations - this open heart, the heart which is not afraid to be hurt. Without these things we are not able to be actors. We must show our audience something which is precious. And what is precious in our life? Only our hearts. We have so many thoughts, we are so clever and everyone in the audience is so clever, and knows much more than we do. So that we are not able to make a persuasive impression on them only by showing our outward ability and knowledge. In each moment of our performance we must show them that we are human beings who have a center which is our life, our physical life and psychological life. Without this we are nothing for our audience. If we are not able to awaken this part of our human being, we are not able to be actors in the real sense. To be actors "as-it-were" is quite a different thing and we do not prepare such kind of actors. It is not interesting for me or for you.

You have heard this before from me, but we must speak about it again, because this is what we are going to get or not going to get, in which case it will, of course, be tragic. Don't think that I ask you to call from your souls your personal blood temperament. Not at all. I speak about your artistic emotions and feelings. If you are not able to understand now what I mean by this, it does not matter. You will understand with time. I will always point out which is the right feeling and why. You must open your hearts. Without this gymnastics, without this heroic act, you will never

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get the artistic feelings. You must open your hearts with pain and tears - but you must do it - otherwise your heart will be a nice box, but nobody will see the jewel that is lying there.

To open the heart - this expression is too general - but on the other hand, it need not be too general because everyone knows what it means to open the heart. That is why we don't open it, because we know what it means. Therefore, don't think you don't understand me - you do. You must open your hearts, not only in our rehearsals and our work together, but you must try to do it in your everyday life. If your heart opens to those you like and love, it is no great wonder. It will close after that person has left. But if you are able to open your heart to everyone, then you will awaken your actor's ability. You must exercise your hearts in your private lives and then we will have the results here. It is inevitable to speak about these things: not only to open your heart to everybody, but to do it with an effort, because what you do without effort means you can already do.

You must take this suggestion concretely: our problem is not to use what we already have, but to add to our abilities. As an exercise, try to think about your enemy if you have one, or about somebody whom you do not like. Or think about the people to whom you are quite indifferent. You must concentrate on this person, and try to make a psychological gesture to open the heart, having this image before you. Then try to touch this person with your heart, which is



not only physical. And then try to find in him or her good abilities and good sides to his or her soul, which you did not notice before because your heart was closed before them.

Sometimes when you do this exercise, you will feel something like seasickness, because your heart will protest against this thing. Pay no attention to this sickness, but go nearer and nearer to this person whom you don't like. You will hear many protests around you, suggesting that if you do not stop you will become almost crazy and unnatural. Do not listen to these protests. They are small devils which try to stop you, but go on and in time you will get something which is not to be described. This something will give you what I mean by artistic emotions. Then you will get something which we call feelings. Of course, they are feelings and emotions, but quite a different kind of emotions from those we experience in our everyday life. If you will do this exercise for five minutes every day, it will be enough for the beginning.

When you have penetrated more and more into the soul of the person you do not like and have found good qualities and abilities and intentions in them, you will get another feeling. Instead of nausea, you will be fed by touching this soul which you do not like. It is quite another feeling. You will feel yourself, first of all, "mighty" in a certain way. Not that you will be mighty in the accepted sense, but you will feel yourself more free in your feelings. You will not be afraid of showing your feelings or of having them. Many of

the locked doors in you will be opened and you will have the keys in your hands.

This is a concrete exercise which I ask you not to forget, because it is a very crucial point in our work. We must take the problem of our feelings very seriously and tackle the problem this year. How long we will require for this work depends on us, but we must begin to work and not leave it until we reach some result.

There is only one thing which you must be able to hate, and that is when you see actors on the stage as empty figures jumping there without feeling. This you must hate. Then you will get from one side positive things arising in your consciousness, and from the other side a hatred for the actor on the stage who is only shallow and empty and less than a human being.

IMPROVISATION:

There is another thing we must develop which is as important as the question of feelings. It is a more professional thing and one which we must develop consciously. We will have many pleasant hours developing it. This is the ability to improvise. If you will look back on your past rehearsals and performances, you will realize that you have done many things - not only in the proper way, but very clear, very sharp, very clever - but almost without any improvisation. You have not added anything from yourselves to the given scaffolding. You were very honest and conscientious with the tasks you were given, very careful and attentive,

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but not yet creative.

When I think back, I get the impression that they (the creative forces) are sleeping - and from a certain point of view it is a kind of sleep not to be able to improvise, because the improvisation is the ability to see at the moment and to hear at the moment everything which is going on around you, inside you, in the real facts. It means to be awake. In an extreme case, not to be able to improvise is to be concentrated on a small thing, which makes you very concentrated but very sleepy, and the whole world inside you and around you is getting small. You must be free enough to have the whole world around you, and not to show at the moment that you are thinking of something else.

To be free enough to enlarge your world. If you are able to do this on the stage, you will get many sparks as if you have been struck by lightning and everything is possible for you. This is the real pleasure, to be on the stage when you feel you are able to do everything. This is our real life and the reason why all of us have come <sup>to</sup> this profession - because somewhere this desire to be free and to create on the stage is sitting in us. We will have special exercises for improvisation, and I hope with time we will develop this ability, until the moment when the lightning will strike you, and you will get a revelation as to what is really the actor's art. Then you will understand what I meant when I said the art on the stage is more life than the life we live.

The two problems we are faced with are the development of the feelings more as a human problem, and developing the ability to improvise more as a professional problem. You must not be afraid of the fact that we will confine ourselves to these two problems. They are so important for us that even if it is difficult for us and very tiring and tiresome, we must go through with it and cross the threshold, because everything without these two things will only be an illusion that we are doing something. We must get these two things and then all other things around will grow and flourish by themselves.

Improvisation, as I mean it, has nothing to do with license on the stage. Last year we had two very good examples of this. Do you remember the very happy improvisation with the dancing couples, and the less fortunate one of the Italian scene? Why was this? Because one improvisation was accidentally built on a certain subconscious ground, and the other one was without any ground. But both of them were license, of course - one happy and the other unhappy. What we are going to do to escape this kind of improvisation is to do everything consciously until this conscious work will disappear in our subconscious, as everything must in our profession.

Everything we have done so far with atmosphere, objectives, imagination, etc., is nothing other than the basis for improvisation. When you are going to improvise and you have the theme and objectives, it means that you have a stick

in your hand which will really give you support each moment. You will never flounder. You know that you must take an objective, or atmosphere, . . . With the means at our command you will never be lost during the improvisation. Your soul will be so flexible and accustomed to this kind of work on the stage that you will be able, for instance, to take an objective, and then on entering the stage you will change to the psychological gesture or atmosphere, etc. You must have a handful of different things that you can juggle with inside.

My idea is that you will develop so much that you will be able, being invited to improvise and being given some themes, to stop me if I tell you to take an objective, for instance, because you will know what to do. If you need imagination, you will take it, or if you need an objective you will take it, so that you will never be lost during an improvisation. Your soul will be so flexible and so accustomed to this kind of work on the stage that you will take an objective on entering the stage, or psychological gesture, or atmosphere, etc. Therefore, at the beginning you must be pedantic with yourselves. Don't allow yourselves to be happy because you are happy. You must know why you are happy: because you have taken a psychological gesture, or objective, etc.

#### RHYTHMICAL IMPROVISATION:

If you succeed in such improvisations as I will give you, then I will give some small things in rhythmical improvisation, but this will come later and it will not make the problem more difficult. Therefore, our rhythmical attempts

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of last year, which were very small and humble, will be postponed. We must get some other things first: the ability to have our feelings (this is the wrong word, but you must understand) and the ability to improvise. If we get some results in this way, we will come back to the rhythm, which is much more complicated than it was last year. In connection with the sketches we worked on last year, I want you to forget, or almost forget, all the things we have spoken about in connection with settings, colors, costumes, etc., and concentrate on the actor as a being who is able to master his own inner life and forget all the accessories.

Our problem now is to find the things inside of you and not outside, and this question is connected with the settings, costumes, lights, and other problems which we will be speaking about. There are some exercises which I want all students to continue with me; there are very few, because other exercises you will get by teaching the new students. Exercises with rhythmical and musical things which are part of our sketches, you will continue with Beatrice and Alan. Then we have to do exercises for radiating and flying and molding, and exercises for the rhythmical gesture, and for justification, legato and staccato, etc. Very few, but they are necessary for us.

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I would like you to give me some suggestions for the coming year, in whatever direction you wish. Perhaps you will be able to suggest some new things which will help us to find a better way to work together, because we are really creating our school together. My idea has always been not to be a despotic leader, but to lead with your help. I will consider your suggestions and draw conclusions, and if necessary change my plans in order to find the right approach.

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