

Michael Chekhov

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King Lear
 Goethe

RHYTHM:

These lessons are aimed at the rhythm which I hope will be our eventual achievement, and the things which I am going to touch upon will be used in our production of King Lear.¹ Do not take the work theoretically. If you do not take it practically, it will be of no use. This one drop can make a very great difference.

All points of rhythm and composition are very close to speech. You must consider them as two brothers, and you must find the approach between the speech method and our Method. The nature of the things is actually the same. There is only one artistic nature, one artistic source, and somewhere these things come to certain general principles which are the same.

THE RHYTHMICAL LINE:

We have spoken before about the rhythmical line.

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which is the unspoken part of the creative life of the artist:



Then we have divided it into certain bars, or measures. If this is taken without regard to the rhythmical line, it becomes a purely mechanical thing, and makes the human being a machine, as it were. Whereas if one concentrates only on the rhythmical line, one becomes more and more formless, shapeless, and unbridled and loses the connection. Only a combination of the two is the right thing - certain "un-speakable" [un-spoken] lines; lines which are not spoken - and the form into which the artist has to pour his life.

This rhythmical line has so many things in it that we may say that all human qualities - dark and light - everything which the human being is given by God and the devil, is included here. There is nothing for an artist elsewhere. The highest ideal and the lowest animal are there. As it is so full and so complete and so humanly impressive, we have to exercise certain qualities of this "un-speakable" [non-spoken] rhythmical line, one by one, trying to assume it, to digest it, and become masters of it by knowing what is here, and by trying to manage it in the form of our profession.

CONSTANT MOVEMENT:

Let us concentrate on one point of the rhythmical line, which is constant movement. In every sense it is movement.

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If the artist wants to use this rhythmical line completely or partially, if he wants to use it so that it will always be at his disposal, he must concentrate, first of all, on the idea that it is constant movement. In which sense? In a very educated sense. To understand it we must, first of all, understand one thing which disturbs us very much if it is not discovered and discarded. This thing comes from the science which is detrimental for us if we accept it. There is an opinion among scientists that first there exists static conditions out of which the movement begins, but it is quite the opposite. First there exists movement, and when the movement wants to express itself in a certain special way, we call it a static condition or state. So, static conditions are only moments in the same movement which never stops, even if it stops.

If the actor's nature believes in static movement, it means that our artistic nature is somehow killed. We must not believe in a static state of art - we must be able to produce out of movement, static movements, but we must not believe in it. This belief in a wrong thing makes our artistic soul somehow dry and brittle. So we have to discard this thing. When we are producing or observing a static condition, we have to immediately understand it as one of the means of expression of movement.

THE ARTIST'S SPIRITUAL POINT OF VIEW:

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One thing must be understood. Art, as you know, is considered to be above our usual kind of perceptions of life. That means that all artistic emotions, and all artistic life is somehow, whether one sees it or not, already out of the physical, material world. It is already a little step towards the spiritual world. If you want to be absolutely clear about your profession, the more inspired you are, the less you are a usual person, and the more you are in a certain strange state of mind, the more you are in the spiritual world. So, in the artistic state of mind, we have already met certain spiritual experiences and, therefore, we have also to accept certain spiritual points of view on our art.

We cannot with the same measures, with the same principles, approach our art in the same way as we approach our everyday life. When we do so, we encounter certain inner difficulties which we do not know how to overcome perhaps, but we nonetheless experience them very clearly. Sometimes we try with the same hand to touch this world and the other. It is impossible. I don't mean to say that our art is a purely spiritual world, but it is a step towards it, and that is enough for us.

MOVEMENT IN THE PHYSICAL WORLD AND IN THE SPIRITUAL WORLD OF ART:

So being in two different worlds, we have to accept different principles and find different points of view on the

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same subject and that is what we must do with regard to movement. How does the movement look in the physical world, and how does it look in the spiritual world - the world of art? In the physical world each movement starts and then comes to a certain end. If you do something, you do it and finish it. If you move the chair, you do it once or twice, and it stops. In the spiritual world of art it is quite different - there you can constantly move the same chair without moving it physically. You can constantly be involved in the movement of moving the same chair and never come to the end. You can live with the desire, idea, feeling, super-idea, whatever you like to call it, of moving the chair constantly, without stopping. You can take your whole life - imagine you are very old, and you look back on your life and see certain problems and difficulties. You feel yourself somehow near to the end of your life. You can have the impression if you are looking at it from the physical principle that I have started my life, and soon I am going to finish it. Now take it spiritually - from the world of art - take it as a character, and you will see that you are constantly here, constantly dying, constantly being born, constantly moving - a spiritual kind of movement which never stops. This difference between the spiritual meaning and the physical we must get as clearly as possible.

Why on the stage? As soon as you step on the stage,

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you must become somehow constantly moving. You have to get into this stream which is not physical. When you get the part, the director's suggestions, etc., it does not mean that something has been finished. Whether you have finished the scene or not, the movement of the scene remains, not only during the whole performance, but you can really say that you are acting - some very pleasant kind of movement is going on. Even the next morning you can awaken and be up and still the movement goes on. This never happens after a bad performance - then you will get a feeling of something which cannot be moved - like a stone. If you will peek into your soul after happy performances and after unhappy ones, you will see that I am speaking about. We have only to realize it and to know that it is one of the progressions in our knowledge of our art.

CONSTANT MOVEMENT WITH QUALITIES:



This constant movement is something which is never abstract movement. The idea of abstract movement is something which has been born out of an intellectual approach to the physical life. Movement always has certain qualities - movement is always colored by things which we are going to exercise. After we have got the movement, and after we know that it is colored by certain qualities, then you are already on a different ground than the earth - you are already masters of your own profound life. After we have it, it will be so easy

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and pleasant to make rhythmical exercises and to understand what it can mean for us actors in our art.

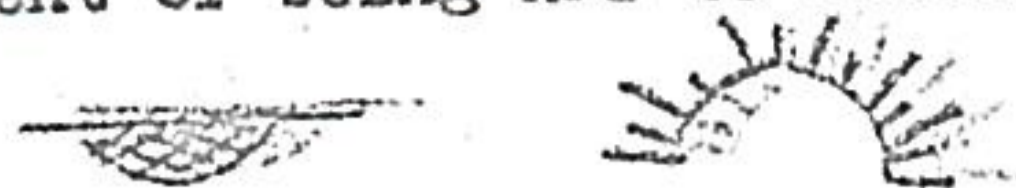
One law of evolution may seem very abstract. Try to listen to it in an abstract way, and you will get the feeling that it has nothing to do with plays or acting. Then try to look at the same process from the point of view of this constant movement with qualities, then you will get the feeling that is is our art.

Everything in the world is in a constant process of development - whether animal, plant, mineral, or human; and wherever we find the development, we find always two processes. There is the first stage from which the movement seems to start (although it never starts), let us say the stage of development which we are going to study. We have to follow the development of the thing to the highest degree. What happens? There, in simple or materialistic minds, we find that it moves upwards and is there. But it is never like that. The process is much more complicated. First of all, it divides itself.  One part of it has to be sacrificed and becomes much darker and lower than before  and moves downwards, but because it has become so dark, the other part becomes shining and much higher and lighter. So we can say that because one thing goes down, the other thing goes up and becomes shining. That means that one part of

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the event of being has to become lower and pay for the higher part.



When this thing gets to a certain degree, a very interesting thing happens. The shining part turns back to the dark part which has been left and lifts it up, and they merge again. When the light part has done the process and taken back into it what was sacrificed because the other part became lighter and got the power to go back to the darker surfaced part, the whole thing becomes higher because of the act of "saving."

We may say that this has nothing to do with the art of the theatre. But if we have this feeling of constant movement with qualities, and we look at this process - whether in the world of plants, or beings, or sections of the day, it is always the same. If we make this process of this sacrificing painfully darkened something and then take it back, it will become higher. If we make this movement inwardly - and what a complicated movement it is - we will see that it cannot be otherwise. When we make this inward movement, we will see that this kind of movement is an eternal one in the sense that it never stops. Only by means of this new kind of inner movement can we grasp this idea of how the world develops itself, dividing, sacrificing, going higher.

COMPOSITION OF MOVEMENT IN THE PLAY:

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We have to be able to reproduce this movement. It is something which cannot be done only by light or dark - such a thing cannot be in art - King Lear cannot be written without Edmund, Goneril, or Regan - without them there is no Lear. And it cannot be only them - there is no play, no movement, no life without Lear. When we try to produce inwardly this law of movement - this existing movement going on in the world around us and in our art definitely - if we are able to produce this movement, then we will see that there are qualities of light and dark. There is in this movement already at least two big qualities - dark and light - darker and lighter - it cannot be deprived of qualities.

Let us take King Lear as an example - one of the inner lines of the play. Here is King Lear. What is his state - the King? The King is in the state of light and dark together - it is not yet divided - then the play begins to break this being of Lear into two parts. One part is very dark and becomes still darker until this dark part becomes mad. That is the moment of sacrifice when Lear must pay for the light which he will get. And while this part becomes darker, and eventually he becomes mad, surrounded by the Fool and Kent in disguise, four or five characters speak about one thing - madness - darkness.

Simultaneously another part of King Lear comes up, and Lear says to the Fool, "My boy, my heart suffers for you."

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Is it not this abstract law? Just the same strong, beautiful movement going on forward. Then he gets new feelings, a new consciousness because he has paid with his madness and pain. Seeing himself in Goneril and Regan, his blood and his being - when he says, "You are my flesh and blood, or the disease of my flesh and blood," - he speaks about himself.

Then what happens? The next stage of this beautiful, cosmic, rhythmical process of composition or evolution - he falls asleep in the shelter, which is a simple, very mystical death - when one lives with one part of his consciousness, and the other part of his being is "as-if" dead. Then he disappears from the play for a long time. The middle part of the play is played without him, and this is also exciting from the point of view of composition. We see him falling asleep, saying strange words, and then there is no more Lear - Goneril, Regan, and Gloucester, but no Lear. Then he appears on the heath - mad.

If we will approach the play having this construction in our whole being, we will feel that now we see what is dead, what is not Lear. Shakespeare shows us just what is not Lear, but we know that according to the law of polarity, if Shakespeare shows us and we understand when we are acting "not Lear," it means where is "yes Lear." Then we get the anticipation of the Lear which will come in the tent of Cordelia. It is not the Lear which we have seen or the Lear we see as

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a madman - it is Lear, a newly transformed Lear. The more we see this empty, shallow form, the more we anticipate the new Lear.

Now comes the last process - we have the division in the middle part of the play. The last part is when this new being comes down and takes what he has paid for - his new part - takes it and saves it. The whole last part of the play shows how Lear takes Cordelia, who was the object of his main crime, into his being, merges with her and takes her with him, and she takes him with her in the moment of death at the end of the play. When they are both dead - the new King Lear and Cordelia absorbed into him, - and the curtains fall, we see these two bodies lying there.

When the curtain is down, if it is a real performance, and real actors and real audience - after the curtain is down, then comes the last moment of relief. Then we understand the play and what has happened. Then we understand what the whole tragedy has been for. And the last act of this marvelous, cosmic scheme has been fulfilled - now it is completed.

If you see how we can apply such an abstract law to each play and to King Lear in particular. To be able to live with this idea and be inspired by it, we have to develop in ourselves as actors, the ability to move constantly and with qualities. It seems to be so simple to exercise this thing,

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but is just the "button" we have to have, and all these exercises will make in the end the figure which is dressed. These exercises are the way to understand, to experience so that when you think of King Lear in the first stage, in the second stage, etc., you have to cry, you have to laugh, and you will feel that it has nothing to do with the abstract thing, it is the life itself, it is the play itself on the stage, it is what we are going to act. It is the only thing which is worthwhile to act, and through such exercises we will get this ability to live this kind of life on the stage.

For instance, you can take another thing - two groups, Lear, the Fool, etc., and Goneril, Regan, Edmund. The higher one group goes up so the other group goes up, and we see Goneril and Regan and Edmund sacrificed for lifting up the other group. The same thing is applied to the other side of the play. The last moment, for instance. Imagine after the curtain is down, we have two groups of dead people - Goneril, Regan, and Edmund together, and Lear, the Fool, and Cordelia - dead. The curtain goes down.

Imagine yourself sitting in the audience. Will you experience the deaths in the same way? Of course not. Let us say that Edmund has died. Our impression will be that he disappears in nothingness. He no longer exists because he is dead. Lear is dead, but he exists more than ever before. When we saw him on the stage, he existed, but when he dies, he

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exists still more strongly. We will never part from him - he becomes part of us - he goes on living.

MOVEMENTS IN SPEECH:

Therefore, whatever facet or aspect of the play we take and apply one of the laws to it, we will immediately discover what to act and how to act with which means. Of course, we will encounter the problem of speech in the sense that the speech has to become movement. Imagine that we are going to move our Lear, but the speech does not move. Imagine how impossible it will be for us - we have to move the whole body, and if the speech does not have this ability to move, then we are lost.

Exercise:

When I say "move," begin the movement inwardly and continue it until I say, "Take your body," then move in reality until you have finished the form, then stop and continue moving inwardly. The exercise may seem to be contradictory because I tell you to start the movement, but it is not so. This movement is constant, and we are producing it constantly, but we are not always concentrated on it or conscious of it. Why do we become actors? Because we feel this desire to move in certain qualities - laughing, sad, quiet - that is what causes us to act. This movement is constant from our childhood and will follow us to our physical

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death. But in exercising we pay attention to it and are conscious of it. When we stop the exercise, we may forget it, but it never stops.

If we know that our profession always streams from us, whatever we are doing - the nature goes on. Goethe, who had the ability to live constantly both lives - one is the life which forgets and lives as if he never was an artist of the highest degree. The simple, little Goethe forgets the big one. Once he was in a small restaurant, and he saw a girl in a red dress and fell in love with her. The other Goethe observed this little Goethe who fell in love with the servant girl and was moving constantly creating upon it because of this fact which was his ability not to forget this constant moving to live the two lives at once.

Therefore, we are always moving when we are inspired, we pay attention to it, or when we concentrate on it. So do not think that the movement can be started - it was started before we were born and is going on and will go on and will not stop after we are dead. The question is to pay attention to it and that is why the exercise is needed - to develop the ability to pay attention to things which do exist. So we do not need to create anything. We are moving, or we would not be here, but to get the ability to pay attention when we wish, that is the purpose of training.

Exercise:

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Move five steps forward in your imagination without stopping. The archetype is the constant movement of something which is the idea of the movement. Now let us imagine that we have not exercised this ability of constant movement, and we take five steps forward - it is nothing - it is not connected with anything. But if we connect with this constant aspect of five steps forward, we will never make them into dry, realistic things - it will be music and form and everything in these five steps because we know what it means - five steps. We know the archetype.

THE ARCHETYPE:

Let us say that King Lear is an old man. What does it mean from the point of view of constant movement - old? Try to get to the archetype and know the whole idea of "old." How many things will spark in your imagination about this - you will get the feeling of being on the edge - past - firm - wise - looking forward because of the age - hundreds of images - the archetype of "to be old" gives inspiration for so many things. When you will get this constant movement of "to be old," constantly to be on the edge, to have a past, etc. - then you will appear on the stage as Lear and all these things will be like a cloud around you. Without making unnecessary physical adjustments you will be made into an old man by the powers you have awakened because you have penetrated through this constant movement of qualities to the archetype, and

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there is the world of inspiration - only the archetype can inspire.

This constant movement included everything that the human being gets from God and the devil. Constant movement - the world of qualities - and the world of the archetype.

Where does this line live? Everywhere and nowhere - the line of form lies either in the vibrations of the air or in the muscles. It can be described as the body - it lives in our ear or eye, but the full line does not live in our ear or eye, it lives everywhere and all places are filled with it. That means the world of the archetype. If you imagine a dog and try to imagine all the dogs in the world as one constant dog, you will get the archetype. When you get the archetype, you will experience something like pleasure going on inside you. The archetype of the human being is so difficult, but you will see that it is something very dark and very light at the same time. The darkness and the light and in both directions - between the devil and God, we are constantly moving and striving. When we are able, this constant movement with qualities, to get the archetype, we will be the best actors in the world. There is nothing more pleasant than to get a little contact with the archetype - it is a blessing - it is artistic bliss. We have sparks of it, but there is no limit. You can get more and more if you will devote yourselves as artists to this work.

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All things in art have their origin somewhere else, and they finish somewhere else. Therefore, we need "preparation" to find contact with the "other sphere" - then the piece of art itself - then into the other world - sustaining.

If, as actors, we really believe in this big stream, it will carry everything through us, and we will never have to resort to substituting it with our small, personal pseudo-power. If we are able to believe in this big stream and its power, we will get rid of tension which comes when we think we must do everything ourselves. This power, this constant stream which flows through the artist and never stops.

When it flows through our being, it concerns our bodily means of expression. It has certain channels through which it flows with a special ease. One of them is our eyes. If we don't know this organically, very often we force the whole face and parts of our body because we don't train our consciousness about our eyes. If the actor forgets about his eyes, he has to express the power with his hand or finger, but the eyes are somehow dead. Very often you see this on the stage - but actor is doing everything he can with his power, but his eyes are dead. Often the actor is forced, by the instinct of self-preservation, to get this power which he can have through the eyes. If he would do it through the

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power of the eyes he could be relaxed yet strong. It is a treacherous point because the eyes can become too conscious, but once you have got over this danger, you will discover that a great economy of power will be produced in your actor's means of expression. The eyes will become one of the strongest means of expressing your feelings.

Exercise:

Point your arm and use your eyes and say, "Go away." Then say, "Come here." Then, with the eyes raised, say, "Don't come near me."

When we allow this stream of movement to lead us, we are inspired, and on the other hand we must be able to manage and direct this stream of movement. When the stream is there, we must pay attention to this ability to direct it, to send it out in the direction or form we desire. We can use it instinctively, but sometimes while relying upon our instinct, we lose the power and the ability to direct it and don't know what we are doing because the power of inspiration is there, but we are not there and our will is not there, and we are not directing this thing. Then the actor feels he wants to act better, but he does not know how. This is often the case when the actor does not direct this power, but it flows through him, and he is obviously enjoying it. However, the ability to direct this power can be developed like anything else. We must always distinguish exercises from acting.

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We must do our exercises in the classroom but never consciously on the stage.

The more we become used to using this stream, the richer we will become as artists. By this means we can uncover our talent. When we learn to direct this stream according to our will and taste, we will discover the many jewels that are lying in us. The art begins only with the individual. If we do not develop ourselves, we become more and more "in general" on the stage. Then we begin to get certain clichés. The first thing to direct our attention to is national differences, and the easiest thing to produce is national clichés, but this is not art; it is even less. It becomes more and more "in general" until we have only four or five clichés.

When we become more and more individual, we do not lose our national characteristics, but we use them in an individual way. For example, a crowd gathers and you see that there are no individuals - they died out and a mob moves on the street or on the stage. It has been said that if we tried to make a crowd out of great individuals, it would never become a crowd unless they sacrifice their individualities to become a crowd. So the more equal we become, whether through nationality or a crowd, the less we become individuals and artists.

The things I have suggested to you today appeal to our individuality and not to our nationality, which is always

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there. When you say, looking out of the corner of your eye, "How strange!" you cannot say it only in a national manner if you really direct this power, because only individuals can direct this individuality which is so precious to us.

Exercise:

Choose different directions in which to say, "How strange it is," and you will see that you have many varieties since you direct this power in certain ways. It is such a strong key to our own individualities if we are trying to direct this constant big stream.

THE LEAP:

There is another very interesting process of development in the world which is very often used by nature which is the so-called "leap." It seems that something goes along on its development and then it breaks and another thing, quite different, appears. For instance, the butterfly - there is the egg, then the larva. It seems there is no transition between the egg and the larva, and this again makes a strange leap into the cocoon and from there into the butterfly.

Another example is found in the plant and its flowers. We have the following development - the stem, the leaves, then more stem, then more leaves, and then unexpectedly the flower, without any transition. With the butterfly we cannot find the transition between the egg and the larva. With the flower it

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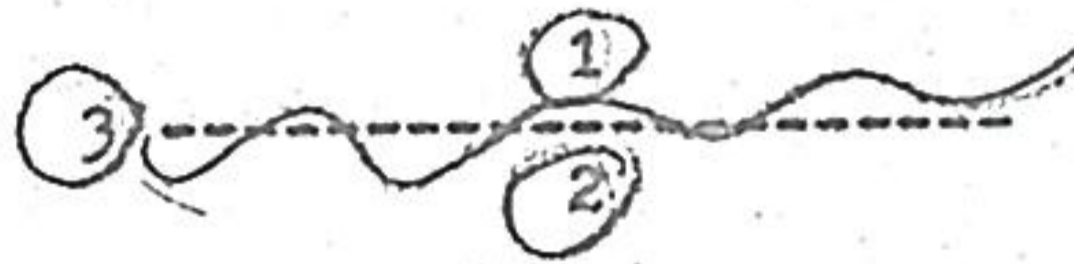
is different. It starts with the stem and then comes certain leaves - they begin to develop and change their shape and dimensions. They then reach a certain climax and begin to diminish until they get two leaves - the top pair of leaves are polar opposites to the lowest leaves. They must disappear to be able to produce the next higher stage which is the flower. In the butterfly we do not see the moment of disappearance while in the plant we see development, climax, and disappearance. That means that something has to be sacrificed to disappear in order to be able to produce a higher thing.

What does this mean for us? It means that on the stage we can and must make leaps. One line is always an unbroken line, while another develops into another thing. Another kind of creative activity is the leap - to be able to sacrifice the previous thing, to entirely annihilate it, and even to get a new one. If you are speaking as a character on the stage, and you hear shouting in the street, you break your sentence and look out at what has happened. You cannot do both things at once. So to make a leap we must sacrifice one thing in order to be able to make a new thing. This means that we are instinctively making bridges and transitions subconsciously so that they disappear entirely from the eyes and ears of the audience, and we then get the leap. Just as with the plant the leaves must disappear, but the inner line goes on, otherwise there would be no flower.

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So we can say: 1. Here is everything we see and hear and preserve. 2. There is the hidden part which nobody sees or perceives. 3. Actually the continuation is there but hidden.



BRIDGES AND TRANSITIONS:

We have to be able to make instantaneous invisible bridges and transitions. There is a special kind of bridges and transitions which are there but which are hidden. It means that we have to learn to act and to make our bridges and transitions so that nobody will see them, and then we will be able to master leaps on the stage. We have to sharpen our inner psychological mind's eye so that nothing will seem empty to us while we are acting. If we will get this ability to make bridges and transitions, we will gain an assurance that even when we are seemingly making a leap we are still going on with our activity and making these bridges and transitions. Then we will get so many things which will otherwise become a growing danger of emptiness on the stage.

How much emptiness the average actor carries with him on the stage, and they try to fill it by making unnecessary gestures. There is nothing going on, although the actor tries to deceive us that something is going on. It is the inability to create these leaps. If I start something and then pause, it can be a leap. If I am not able to invisibly

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bridge this pause, then the audience will get a headache because the audience begins to work for the actor. To exercise these leaps we must sharpen our eyes and look at these quasi-leaps. This is again the same approach to the inner rhythmical line if we are able, in moments of leaps or emptiness, to bridge.

One way is to make visible or audible bridges and transitions, and another way is to make bridges and transitions in our consciousness. To be able to produce only visible and audible bridges and transitions is annoying and tiring, whereas if we are not able to make any bridges, we are not actors at all. Both poles are equally dangerous if used for long. How to avoid this emptiness is to follow the same stream, the same divine activity which never started and will never stop. If we are brave enough and fearless enough to rely only upon this stream of movement, there will be many beautiful things possible for us in acting.

Exercise:

Imagine there is an accident on the street and someone has been run over. The crowd is around the person. The process of dying is going on. When the person is dead, go on with your inner transition. Act it inside of you.

RHYTHMICAL WAVES:

Another example from King Lear. A real piece of art

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is always coming in waves - appearance and disappearance - appearance and disappearance - to a greater or lesser degree. King Lear can be started with disappearance - the curtain goes up, people are there, but nothing happens outwardly because it is the leap which has been started before the curtain. We are waiting for the appearance of King Lear, just as with the plant we are waiting for the flower. Although nothing goes on outwardly, the actors on the stage can act this appearance. Then the actual occurrence happens on the stage - music and noise and the play begins to be outward. Then again the wave comes down.

After he commits the three great crimes, with Cordelia, with the crown and with Kent - after this climax is finished what happens? The two sisters are speaking - taken profoundly and rhythmically, it is the nature of the scene, the inner way in which the two sisters are speaking. From the rhythmical point of view, if we make these things equal - Gloucester and Kent are speaking very outwardly and openly as is their way - then trumpets, and King Lear appears. It is nothing except one blank thing because it is not the nature of the scene. The nature of the scene has not yet been discovered rhythmically, in the sense of leaps. Leap - King Lear - nothing - leap - the storm - nothing - Gloucester loses his eye - etc.

The whole play is built like that but to be able

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to produce it, the actors have to be part of this great stream which flows through the actor. Then you will see that the rhythmical line is one of beautiful waves. For instance, before King Lear appears, everyone holds his breath - the King appears and speaks his first words, at which time the gesture goes down, etc. etc.

As in nature, there are these leaps - of expansion and contraction. Breathing is the same - the transitions must be there or we would take air and never expel it. It is the heartbeat of the play - the breath of the play. Each organism has its own heartbeat, and the stage performance as a living being has to have its rhythmical process of heartbeat, otherwise it is a motionless line. The most inartistic thing in the whole world is a straight line. So the heartbeat is the first elementary thing - up and down, in and out, contraction and expansion, all these things can become the heartbeat or breathing of the performance.