

2041
Michael Chekhov

(afternoon) November 29, 1937

ADVICE TO PLAYWRIGHTS
ACTION AND COUNTER-ACTION IN PLAYS
ATMOSPHERE - WORDS, SENTENCES
RHYTHM IN THE TEXT

I have asked our authors to write their texts in the form of dialogue. If others of our students are interested in trying to write a fairy tale, I would remind them of the necessity to write so that the whole text is represented as an action with counter-action. That means that there must be a certain fight or conflict expressed through the text. When acting on the stage, we always try to find the line in the play which expresses this fight, without which everything is static; and when it is static, it is not theatre art. To act means to have something to act - to have something to reach. To reach something means always to have some difficulties to overcome. This is the idea of the fight in art in general.

ACTION AND COUNTER-ACTION:

To overcome many difficulties, that is what we call action and counter-action; and it is always absolutely obvious in our art on the stage, but not always so obvious for writers and authors of novels. This was my first request to playwrights - to find this action and counter-action.

ATMOSPHERE - WORDS, SENTENCES:

Today I want to give you another suggestion: It is absolutely necessary for the playwright to write his text hav-

2271
M. Chekhov

November 29. 1937

ing always the feeling of atmosphere in which this text is to be acted, because the words written in this way (as we know from Miss Crowther's lessons) sound differently, not only in intellectual content, but as sounds. The sound of the words creates an atmosphere which playwrights very often neglect. This is something which I want you to take into consideration: What kind of words are you combining together? How do they sound as music? Are they able to create the atmosphere of the scene or not? For this aim the playwright must always know what kind of atmosphere he wants to get in the scene. Very often we only have the cool, cold content given by the playwright, without any feeling of atmosphere. Therefore, it is often very difficult to act the scene because there is no approach. The playwright does not collaborate - he gives no approach, only content.

Not only the sound of the words makes the atmosphere (Miss Crowther will give you some examples of how certain sounds coming together build certain atmospheres) - not only the sound of the word is important (I don't speak here of the content because that is the least interesting part of the play) - what is interesting is how you build the sentences in relation to the atmosphere. Ask yourself what is the structure or composition of the sentences and words, from the point of view of atmosphere.

RHYTHM IN THE TEXT:

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Our playwrights must learn to pay attention to such simple things. For instance, let us say the sentence is, "Come with me." Then it is changed to "Come, come with me." The content is the same, but the repetition of the word "come" makes a great difference to the atmosphere. "Come with me, with me who loves you." This is another composition which makes a certain atmosphere. You will find all these laws in the so-called science of rhythms and scansion: iambic, anapest, etc. But this is another thing. If you are going to write a play in verse, then you must follow these laws, but our example is for prose. It may sound like verse because it is rhythmical, but it is not yet verse. By composing such things, you must try to reach the atmosphere.

These two things our playwrights must work for from now on: To get the atmosphere we must use two things - the sound of the word (in the sense of Miss Crowther's lessons) and the composition of the sentences.