

Michael Chekhov

1825
(Evening) October 5, 1939GRADUATION OF SIX STUDENTS - RECIPIENTS OF
ACTOR'S DIPLOMAS AND TEACHER'S CERTIFICATESGRADUATES

Dorothy Whitney Elmhirst
Beatrice Whitney Straight
Alan Harkness
Blair Cutting
Dairdro R Becket Hurst
Peter Kingscote Tunnard

On this very important occasion I feel I must tell you a little story about the efforts I have made for so many years, and the result of all these efforts is just this occasion - it is the reason why we are here today.

First of all, let me speak from my own point of view. About fifteen years ago or even more, when I was in Russia and was working in the Moscow Art Theatre School, I got certain ideas and visions, certain aims about the future theatre, how it should be and could be; and at that time I started my attempts to realize these ideas.

I don't know whether you have a very clear picture about Russia at that time, but I will presume that you have, and that you will understand that at the moment when I tried to express my ideas, addressing myself to actors and students as well, I was surrounded immediately by an army of spies. They were around me everywhere - on the streets, in the theatre, during the rehearsals, and even at the door of my house.

In a very short time there was prepared a list of

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the "sins" which I had committed against the materialistic point of view of the Russian government. But the main point why they could not stand my efforts was that I am a religious person and believe in God and Christ and have studied spiritual knowledge for many years. Such kind of persons in Russia are unbearable. They must be repressed, but it was not very easy for them to discard me from my position in the theatre by saying that I was guilty of spreading certain ideas which are not absolutely flat like a table, and that I did not recognize their propaganda by saying that every communist on the stage was an angel and everyone else a devil.

So our dear Government invented a way - they called me an Italian Fascist and that was sufficient reason to suppress my activity. One morning I saw in all the newspapers articles about myself, in which I was painted in such colors with such expressions and accused of such things! In two or three weeks everywhere and every day such articles appeared, and I came to the situation where I could not appear on the stage because I was a dead person. That is the tactics of the Russian government - to isolate the person so that they are dead.

Very soon after this I received a message from the Kremlin that the order had been given to arrest me, and if I didn't escape in a few days my life would be in danger. Of course, I tried to escape, and as you see I did, but it was

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a little difficult at the time! That was the first act of my attempts to realize and incorporate my ideas and ideals.

Then I went to Germany, where I met Professor Reinhardt and acted in Berlin and Vienna, but I could not develop my pedagogical activities because I had to act all the time. So that was a second attempt, but it was not successful because I was acting and working in the films. So I left Germany at the time when I could have had many good parts, and went to Paris hoping that there I could start to realize all my ideas with a group of young people who would try to follow my suggestions and who wanted my ideas.

But in Paris I met another difficulty which I could not have expected - at this time there was a large colony of Russian refugees there, and these people believed that anyone who came out of Russia must be a Russian spy. I was unfortunate enough to be interpreted as a Russian spy - why otherwise would I have left Russia? And again the same thing happened in the Russian newspapers there - terrible articles about me and my activities and my ideas. So I was crushed again and had to leave France - my little group was left because I could not go on working with them, and they could not defend me.

I went to Latvia and again started a theatre school, invited by the Actors Union of that country, who invited me to do it. But simultaneously came an overnight revolution in

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the government and everything became Nationalistic - they wanted no more foreign influence, especially Russian, their old enemies. So I was simply thrown away from Latvia, and only the intervention of the foreign minister enabled me to leave the country more or less decently, and to get a passport to Italy. There I went and was very ill and felt that everything was finished. But when I got the hope to live and work again, I went to Lithuania where Mr. Jilinsky, as Director of the State Theatre, had invited me to come and lead the school of actors who wanted to follow me. But immediately the newspapers began the same story - foreigner - Russian - and again I was turned out, and with me Mr. Jilinsky because he had invited me.

Then came the invitation to tour America with a Russian group, and four years ago we came to America and here, for the first time, I saw the face of my destiny - a smiling face which resembled the face of Biddy [Beatrice Straight]. Here I met Mr. and Mrs. Elmhirst, and together with Biddy they have changed my destiny. They gave me the real opportunity to realize and incorporate my ideas, with such freedom as I hadn't even dreamed of. I had forgotten what it meant to be free after this long experience, and when they took me to England and opened our school at Dartington, I very often awakened in the morning and asked myself whether I was really free.

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After two and a half years in Dartington under the protection of Mr. and Mrs. Elmhirst and Beatrice, there came another threat - the world war - because of which we decided to move the school here. Now the moment has come, at the end of the three-year course, when I get my first six children. I have been waiting for them for more than fifteen years. That is all I wanted to tell you, and perhaps you will understand what it really means to me - this evening, - when I can give my children this sign of my hopes and efforts at the moment when they are realized.

Now let us turn to the objective point of view of this story I am sure we will have to fight, and I am almost sure that we will have to face great difficulties and criticism, but let us decide that all these difficulties, all these dark and difficult days of our future life, will give us only more energy and more activity to go on, because there is a law in the Nature that all the efforts, sooner or later, are rewarded and no one real and good effort remains fruitless.

I was fighting alone - now I am not alone - you give me great support in the future, and I thank you for it. We will take with gratitude our happy days and will take with great decision our difficult times.

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