

Michael Chekhov

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LIFE AND DEATH IN OUR ART
TEMPO

LIFE AND DEATH IN OUR ART:

Why have I begun to speak about this theme which seems to be so abstract? It only seems to be abstract, because in the real professional life of the artist it is not abstract. When we take or develop this feeling for death and life concretely, then it will be a tool in our art. That is why I began to speak to you about this theme. I have mentioned some exercises which can be endlessly increased, and we must do this. We must find all these possibilities of exercising our sensitivity for these two worlds.

I have spoken about this because the connection between life and death is such that if there is no life in our work then death comes, and this is the danger. When we are not making an effort to increase life, then we are submitting to death. This is the danger in our profession, and in our age. We must not think that if we are aware of the life in us it is enough, and will remain. Not at all, it will go down, and down and death will take our work, and turn it into different kinds of clichés and everything except what we hope to have. This is one thing which I want to mention today - if not life, then death, and not something in between. Therefore, we must be very, very careful with our life.

Now to be concrete, I have started to speak about this theme because I have noticed that all our work in the

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Studio had gradually become a special style, which I have seen in some other cases, but which is clearly to be seen in our work during rehearsals. Our work is getting slower and slower. For instance, each cue in The Golden Steed is becoming slower and slower. If we don't stop this kind of dying we will be dead in two months. It is a very fine point, but this death comes through all possible doors and crevices, and takes our activity and pulls us down. All our rehearsals are becoming slower; sometimes we have one like the last rehearsal of The Fishing Scene which was very lively, and we felt at once that it was inspiring and stimulating. It was the exception, but it must be the rule.

I have asked you many times not to fall into this minute of rest, or sleep, or not to have a little pause before you start; each time I say the sentence "Please, more activity," it is nothing more than an effort to overcome this death. If we will remember that we are able as human beings to take this "vitamin" - a psychological vitamin - then we will escape many things which are pushing us down.

Some rehearsals are very difficult because of this death sitting among us, but it is sometimes very easy to recognize it, and throw it away. For instance, all the clichés we have spoken about are nothing more than the production of this death. If we will overcome this we will give our cues on the stage full of life; our objectives can be full of life, or

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they can be only an illusion. When we are taking an objective and trying to fulfill it, lacking life, we are doing something which is only an illusion because it is death. The tempo of our life in the Studio is now very low, because of this influence, and we must overcome it by making an effort to awaken life in ourselves.

TEMPO:

We must not confuse this degree of life which is in us with tempo, which is something else. We must not think of tempo as being more alive, or of having more life when we want tempo. They are two different things. A young man who is full of life and an old man who is dying can both be in quick or slow tempo. Therefore, we will speak about tempo which is a certain quality of a piece of art, and not only a time measurement, or speed.

Exercise:

Look at the tree outside and compare its living quality to the roof of the building outside; one shows the process of life, the other is subservient to death. Listen to the bird, and then see it as a dead thing. Now try to move around freely, feeling that the life is increasing or dying in you. We are trying the approach to life as specialists because we need it very much, because we have seen that our Studio work is going down because of this loss of life.

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We will postpone the work on tempo. It is sometimes wiser not to bring this question into the play too soon, because I have noticed that when actors try for tempo too early they fall into the danger of quicker or slower, without having any idea as to why we want to get tempo, or what tempo really is. We have a special way of rehearsing with tempo and this sometimes leads to a very slow rehearsal. But we must distinguish between rehearsal which is slow because we are exploring something, and another kind of slow rehearsal which happens because we are taken by this kind of death. There is a great difference - is it invisible death which is sitting upon us, or are we exploring something? Your director will help you by explaining that you are exploring something, and therefore you are slow.

If we try to explore quickly we will not be able to do it, because our actor's nature is much deeper than this superficial tempo. I have seen this in the European theatre - especially in France. - where they are so quick to move, but it is just another kind of death. This wrong idea of tempo is very dangerous, and it will open up another kind of death. Therefore, we must sometimes rehearse very slowly for exploration, but not because this death has come to us, because that is the finish.