

Michael Chekhov

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IMPROVISATION
ATMOSPHERE
OBJECTIVE
CENTER
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ARCHETYPE
NATURALISTIC ACTING vs ART
Anton Chekhov sketch
Sulerzhitsky

IMPROVISATION: Old and New Students:

The sketch requires many people and is complicated psychologically. The scene is in a fantastic machine factory. You will find a certain kind of expressive movement which can be continued by another one, as if some products are being prepared. Every movement you do will be as workers. The conditions are: 1. The movements you will invent must start from the center in your chest. 2. The whole scene is based on the objective. 3. Atmosphere. It is a very tense exercise and you must not be in a hurry, but must always be conscious that you are doing three things - the movement out of the center, the objectives, and the atmosphere.

The scene takes place in a factory, and there are three groups of workers. One group prepares the raw material, another group creates the product, and the third group gets it and boxes it. The conditions for the movements are that everything is absolutely tense and exact. It is very difficult work and it takes place in very hot air, so that you are able to work for five minutes, not more, then rest for thirty seconds. These are the outward conditions.

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The psychological conditions are: this is the day in which the destiny of the workers must be decided. The revolution is near and this is the last moment. The workers will either start the revolution or they will subdue it. This day is known among the police and the workers - everybody knows this day. This is the crucial day - if the workers succeed then it will be all right, otherwise it will be suppressed.

We do not know who starts this revolutionary idea, but there are certain elements. In this part of the factory two workers were sent to a secret meeting. They have returned, and they brought with them the exact hour and moment when everybody must stop work, leave the factory, and go into the streets. If something disturbs the plan the police will come and stop it. The objective of these two persons is that in having such a difficult task, they have to tell all the workers the exact hour and minute. In the thirty seconds pause it is not allowed to walk or to be too free, and many foremen are standing about.

There is another difficulty because there are two spies in the group, and nobody knows who they are. If the two workers are able to tell everyone the exact hour, and the two spies who are among them are not able to find out, then at the right moment the work must be stopped, and everyone will leave the factory. But if the two spies know - and their objective is to find out the hour and time - if they really find out

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they must give a sign that they know, and then everything will be finished. The objective of the workers is to find out who the spies are, so that they can catch them, and isolate them.

These are the possibilities in the sketch: 1. The objective of the workers is to find out what the hour is, and to find who the spies are. 2. The objective of the spies is to find out the hour, and to prevent the start of the revolution. If the spies succeed they must come to the piano and make a dreadful noise on it.

You must really carry through your objectives. The atmosphere is very simple, very tense, very serious, very dangerous. It is an exercise for three things; atmosphere, objective and moving from the center. You must justify everything.

PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE:

Lessons with Old Students:

Let us repeat the improvisation on the three levels. First of all, the beings on the highest level must rehearse their gesture until they know it; then they will give it to the second level, who will in turn work on it and elaborate it; and when it is quite clear, they will pass it on to the lowest level. Don't be vague in your psychology. It must be quite clear and sound that you are elaborating this or that gesture. This means that you must not be in a mist, because the higher the level of the being, the clearer is the consciousness; therefore, you must be absolutely clear in your mind and your gestures. The exercise

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is the same as any other improvisation, but this time we are exercising the psychological gesture.

THE ARCHETYPE:

Criticism:

Such an exercise will awaken in our artistic feelings an understanding of what the psychological gesture is; it will also give you an idea of what the archetypes are, because this is absolutely an archetypal story. It will also help you to establish contact and will give you an idea about rhythm, which is a problem we will touch on in time. The exercise was well done, but it was all too timid. We are not yet free to read in each other's souls what we want and to find our own answer to it; therefore we are very much bound. This freedom will come in time. But imagine such a group, such a theatre, such actors who are able not only to act naturalistic themes, but also such things as this. Such a group has a possibility to create everything. All sorts of creative ideas are in the hands of such a group. This is what I want so much. We shall try to repeat such exercises, in different forms. In the future we will be much more free and brave, but this is the approach to the psychological gesture, and to the archetype.

IMPROVISATION:

The theme is from a strange novel by Anton Chekhov. The scene is set in the home of an elderly professor, who lives with his wife, two daughters, two sons, and an old lady who has

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lived with them for many years. It is evening - everyone is happy. They have finished the evening meal and are sitting quietly...nothing happens...then they go to bed. But the professor cannot sleep. After a certain time he feels something is wrong. Something disturbs him. It is already late, but he gets up...finally he goes into the sitting room and there he meets his son, who also has been disturbed. It is as if something must happen - some great misfortune. They sit down but don't speak about it. It is obvious, and yet not obvious, and gradually they feel that this atmosphere spreads through the whole house; and one after another the members of the family enter the room. They are unhappy and depressed. They listen for sounds or signs of trouble, but everything seems to be all right. Somewhere, far away, a dog barks, and the feeling of great unhappiness oppresses them so that they are very unhappy. They open the curtains as day breaks. In this atmosphere the professor begins to speak. He tells his family a very strange soliloquy, the meaning of which is:

Do you know that my whole long life - I am now an old man - my whole long life and my hundreds of lectures and books, all these have meant nothing for humanity. My whole life has been an empty story, in spite of the fact that I have been busy every moment. As an undergraduate I worked for my degree, and ever since then I have worked, but I see that it was nothing.

Nobody is able to contradict him or tell him yes or no. With this feeling of "nothing" about them, the family is

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not able to look into each other's eyes, and gradually, with different excuses, they leave the room. Each one of them is standing before this psychological problem, and no one is able to explain what has happened. Nothing...nothing...nothing. Emptiness. Life without any sense. The exercise is to be based on the atmosphere, which grows from the comfort of the family circle to the strange heaviness and final soliloquy. The objective for everyone is: "I want to understand what has happened." The characters are the professor, John; daughters, Beatrice and Catherine; sons, Henry and Paul; old lady, Paula; wife, Gavin.

NATURALISTIC ACTING vs ART:

Criticism:

This was a very good example for pointing out the most dreadful kind of naturalism. There was nothing of art. You were floundering from small real things to smaller real things and not for one moment did you have the artistic view of the whole. You had no idea of the whole sketch, although it was given you as a whole theme. I asked you not to make it too long or too short, in order that in your souls you would have the feeling of the whole, and what you were going to create. I also asked you to finish it with the feeling that this was the end of a performance. Contrary to this, it was endlessly long, everything was small, and nothing happened but unnecessary things and movements. You were absolutely natural-

istic people, without knowing what you were going to do. You had no future and no past. You were sitting alone, and your bodies were the end and limit of your world. As a result, you could only do something with your hair, or with your pockets, or with something near to you. You were limited by your voices and your bodies, and were not artists. There was nothing of the feeling of ensemble about it.

We must be above the thing we are going to do or improvise, and as artists we must get a feeling for the beginning and end. You must have felt that your audience was suffering under this long, endless development of nothing. You were so long in the room before the strange night began that it was quite clear that you had no ideas of the main point of the play, which was quite clear: the creation of the atmosphere of this strange night. But you never got to it because of so many unnecessary small things.

Please try to remember and you will see that, in spite of all this "as if" acting, it was lying from beginning to end. You have spoken with quite unnatural movements and voices. Small streams of lies were always walking inside you. It was naturalism which was not even truthful. You have spoken and you moved because you felt that there were so many holes and gaps which you had to fill, instead of remembering that there is the possibility to create out of inspiration if you are open and if you believe.

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But you have shut all the doors and tried through your personal means to fill all the holes and gaps with something. You must understand once and forever that this is hopeless. If you think you can deceive the audience with such things and belie the holes and gaps, you will never do this. The gaps only become bigger at the moment you try to find some personal, unnecessary thing to put into them.

You were asked only to speak out of atmosphere; you have spoken out of nothing. It came from the intellect because you felt you must do something. All the words were empty and unnecessary, both as content and sound, and, as a result, you have spoken so that no one in the audience could either understand or hear you. We did not believe in your voices or your words.

This exercise was very useful because it shows us quite the opposite pole from the one we are trying to reach. We must be open for inspiration in simple things as well as in heroic things. We are only a point through which everything passes, and from which we must send everything out. In this exercise we have seen quite the opposite. Everything was shown. You disappeared inside yourselves, and we got the impression that nobody was there. You were led by a half-conscious fear of the emptiness around you, and you were not brave enough to say to this fear, "Go away, I know what to do. I have my objective and I have the atmosphere. Go away!"

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In every direction, this sketch was wrong; and it is very good to realize this and to know that the means you have been given are the only way. If you will not take them, you will always fall into this dreadful situation. You will not find other means to act and be on the stage; there are no other means. It is a hopeless attempt to try to find something else, to put small things into the holes which are before you. Don't be afraid. You have the means.

You have the feeling of life, for instance. Why have we exercised this power to enter the stage with life, to be present, and radiate it? Why must we radiate? Because otherwise you will disappear inside yourselves. You have been given speech exercises, but you have done quite opposite things, with the result that you disappeared. You can radiate the atmosphere, but you have not done so.

Why have we tried to establish the feeling of contact and ensemble? There were moments on the part of Paula and John which could have been saved, but you passed them by. Everyone was blind to those suggestions. You didn't take them because the feeling of ensemble was not there; and, of course, they could not continue, and they died at once.

John had absolutely no feeling of time on the stage, which is something quite different from time on a watch. If it was reality, it was too short, and if art, it was much too long. John is very egotistical on the stage and when he is

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directing. Today he understood at once that he was a leading person in the sketch, and that is quite right; but as a leading person, he should have even more feeling of ensemble. Being so egotistical he must be able to take and to give; then his egotism will serve him. If as an actor you are only an egotist, you will become a soloist and will always be alone; and if you are weak, you will be lost. You must use the means of opening the actor's heart.

In the mistakes you have made today I have seen again the mistakes we have made as pupils of Stanislavsky. We started to make such improvisations with Sulzerzhitsky. I remember a scene in a hairdresser's shop when we tried for hours and hours and hours to do all the naturalistic things connected with it. And then finally some of us understood that this was not art - it was less than photography.

Please don't lose this opportunity to spend no less than an hour to analyze, from beginning to end, what has happened with this sketch; and then you will get a real lesson from it. It was bad. But what was bad? How to correct it? What knowledge can you get? If you will not do this, we will have to create such mistakes again and again until you realize what has happened. Perhaps you do not follow me with your imagination when I tell you these themes. You may be taking them with the intellect. Please follow me with your imaginations, and really act in your imagination and find out the

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most important moments which speak to your actor's being.