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Michael Chekhov

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(Afternoon)

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PERFORMANCES FOR CHILDREN:

A big and interesting task has been given Terence. As artist, director, designer, audience, as everything, he must explore the approach to the problem of creating a performance for children. In our future theatre I hope that one of the most important lines in our repertoire will be performances for children, because children of today need our help so much. They are fed on so many materialistic, undigestible things, so that these poor creatures are growing up and instead of developing themselves, they are becoming, from childhood, more and more contracted, and are unable to find their place in the social life.

Through wrong education, through lack of imagination, lack of fairy tales, these beings are killed. This is murder, what we are doing to our children. It is "legal," but we are killing them. Therefore, if our theatre wants to serve our social life, we must give these creatures the nourishment which they deserve and need. And we can do this through the world of the fairy tale.

I want Terry to approach this subject very seriously. He must discover how our future theatre can play before an

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audience of children. I suggest that he use Mirham's creative powers in playwrighting and designing, and to make this experiment with her concerning how our future theatre will play before an audience of children.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR SOCIAL LIFE:

I hope our future theatre will develop along three main lines:

One line is our response to the social and political life which is a burning question in our life today. We must respond to the social life about us, because art for art's sake is a bubble - nothing. It is a monastery which is not right in our time. There is too much shooting around us and we must respond to it. We must mirror this shooting life, and do everything we can to stop it. We must be Michelangelos in this way, to do everything we can to stop the shooting around us.

Another way we may dare to serve the social life is through our work with the children.

LAUGHTER AND HUMOR: The third way is to make people laugh, to expand the human being. Laughter is like heat, like food, like a deep breath. Without humor the human being is not able to expand.

In these three ways I feel we may, as a theatre, dare to serve the social life of our time, and humanity.

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Beatrice [Beatrice Straight] is going to explore the problem of Joan of Arc. Her ideas for the performance are very attractive and interesting as a director's ideas. Terry must be sure that the people with whom he works have some feeling for children. Deirdre has this love to work with children, and there may be others. Speak to the group and find which ones are interested in this work particularly. This does not mean that you must not take others. You must prepare your work with great care, because the idea must underlie each part and each person who helps you. The idea is to help these children who will bury us after a certain time. If members of the group have suggestions, please bring them to me.

SCENES FROM SHAKESPEARE:

The new students are to work on scenes from The Merchant of Venice, Romeo and Juliet, and Othello. These scenes must be taken from the point of view that they must awaken flaming feelings which we have to discover in ourselves. Therefore I have chosen certain things which can be interpreted as cool or cold, or can also be interpreted in a very flaming way. This is what I want - nothing of coolness or coldness. This kind of interpretation is forbidden for these sketches. If in the future we dare to act Shakespeare, then we will discover this tremendous fire which lies in his creation - which has not only been forgotten, but which was never discovered. Actors seem to think that in order to act Shakespeare, they must be stiff and cold; but there is

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no more fiery material in the dramatic world than Shakespeare's works. Each work is an explosion, but to be able to act his plays we must wait some years. In doing these scenes, try to direct yourselves so that you are performing them. Everything must be justified and very interesting, and must be the incorporation of this hidden fire which is in each character in Shakespeare. Make the performance as rich and full as you can.

GET THE RIGHT FEELINGS THROUGH THE RIGHT MEANS:

We shall start the term with a very dull thing: by going through our exercises to remember them and to find out again what they mean. We will start this work of selecting exercises and special improvisations and certain other things. Our motto for this term will be "GET THE RIGHT FEELINGS THROUGH THE RIGHT MEANS." From this point of view we must work through the whole term. We must look at our exercises from this point of view so that you are able to do them. To know the exercises does not comfort me. You must be able to do them. You must be able to get from our exercises what we call inspired feelings. Just as we must look at Michelangelo's drawings from this point of view.

Don't take things vaguely or in general. Approach Michelangelo's pictures only from the point of view of what feeling is expressed there - titanic feelings in each part of the body. First look at the whole picture, and then at separate parts. Don't allow yourselves to flounder for one moment. We are looking

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for the feelings in each picture. It is not sufficient to feel, "Oh, how beautiful!" Leave this psychology forever. Whenever we work with the feelings they must be, for us, something like a flame. The layman is permitted to have a vague feeling about the pictures - but for us it must be concrete. Then we are professional people. Otherwise we are only people from the street.

You must realize that it is feeling that moulds and creates these tremendous forms. Study some part of one of the pictures and drink it in. Get the result inside of you. Now compare what you have been studying with the photograph of someone you know. Let us say, your auntie's picture. It is the picture of a living person perhaps, and yet it is dead. I implore you to make your bodies an instrument for the feelings. Do not leave them somewhere in your soul and heart. The feelings are everywhere, and must be in your flesh. Then you are an artist. Then you are a small or big Michelangelo! But if you have your feelings "somewhere," your body will hang on you like an old overcoat.

When you really fill your body with feelings, you will find it getting warm inside, as if you are in a warm room. When your body is full of feeling, your body is like an instrument, the muscles of which are speaking one with another. You will get a certain pleasure from strengthening these muscles. They will strengthen themselves with a certain and special pleasure, with a special connection which we don't know in our everyday life. If you will realize this, it will help you

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tremendously.

We have no other instrument than our bodies - without which no amount of make-up, costume, words - even Shakespeare's words - will help us. Try to enjoy the exercises, because the human body likes to be used. When it is not used entirely, it becomes sad, although we are too intellectual to notice it. An artist must be able to use his whole body, his whole voice, his whole instrument. If you will understand this once and forever, you will get so many things from it.

Now let us go back to the Michelangelo figures. By doing these gestures, try to imagine what he felt. He has done all the gestures we see.

The artist must fill his instrument with the feelings he has inside. This is the problem: not to keep the feelings inside. This is not of any value; no one is interested in this. You must express it by every means. If I am a painter, I will express it by colors; if I am an actor, with my body, my voice, my radiating powers. But this would not be possible if my body were not permeated with the feelings. Our bodies must be saturated with the feelings. Otherwise we are not artists.

Again, compare the pictures of Michelangelo with your auntie's photo. If you think of a person who wears the same clothing for many years, you will see that the dress changes itself, not because it is getting older and older, but because with time it acquires the feeling and emotions of the person. One dress is like a clerk, another like a very stupid person, another

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like a very gay person. The dress takes on the character of the person. If you look at clothing hanging on a wall, it will speak to you because often old clothes get our feeling through the months and years. Then how much easier it should be to fill the living body with our feelings - and how necessary it is! It is a natural law. The feelings are not separate from the things and beings they are connected with.

Now listen to some music. We must hear the feelings. The piano is not dead when it is played upon by Mr. Harvey. Imagine that all the things inside and outside are responding to the feelings that Mr. Harvey gives. You must develop this sense for the way feelings permeate and penetrate things like old clothes. For an artist these things are concrete.

The whole tragedy in Ibsen's Brand is built on the things left after the child's death. The mother is not able to leave the things. She is absolutely one with them. The father insists that she give them up. On this psychology - that the feelings and the whole being can be in some things - the whole tragedy is built. When the mother gives up the child's things, then she is as if dead. Then her husband is afraid and feels that he has killed her. The whole tragedy is built on this, which is part of our profession.

To be able to fill everything - and primarily our bodies - with feelings; then we are artists. If not, then what have we to show? Perhaps some of us have beautiful bodies and voices, and some not. What have we to show if we are empty

inside? Only Mr. Tobey's costumes, the credit

for which belongs to Mr. Tobey, and not to us. But we are nothing sitting in these costumes; if we are empty from the point of view of the feelings, we are nothing. This is the most important thing for us to know.

IMPORTANCE OF EXERCISES:

Exercise:

As if you are a sculptor, mould and create a figure that will describe "the last cry." See it in every detail in your imagination. After you have worked on it in your imagination, really carving and moulding every detail, then incorporate it. Then try to draw the line of the whole figure with one movement. This is, in a sense, a psychological gesture or archetype.

Exercise:

Using the hands, express the feeling, "I implore you." To be able to act means to be able to use the instrument which is elaborated like the brain is: by thinking exercises; so the body is also - by acting exercises.

The Actor's March:

Listen to each word that is given to you, and do it at once. Don't collect them in your mind and think you will do them later. Do them as they are said. This is important! By doing the actor's march, we are re-creating our bodies. To a certain extent our bodies are still flexible, and by filling them with certain feelings, we are re-creating them. We must bear this in mind. By walking harmoniously we are re-creating our bodies, and they become more and more harmonious.

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We have not only done the exercise, but we have taken into ourselves another body if, when doing the exercise, we were very concentrated on the idea that by filling our bodies with some feelings, we are re-creating them. I have known two such examples in my life - two persons who have actually re-created their bodies. They were both very awkward, and they wanted so much to be graceful. Through years of work and exercise they became graceful. This is the power of desire, the power of aim, the power of knowing what you want. It is a tremendous power. Two awkward bodies were re-created by this power.

Exercise:

Listen to a musical sentence. Listen to it with your whole body. As we have to express our feelings with our whole body, we also have to hear with our whole body. Try to listen to the music with your palms, with your chests, with your centers. Now turn around and listen to the music with the center of your backs.

The psychological gesture is like the music of a superhuman being.

Some of you move your faces subconsciously. This is good, because they express things of themselves. You must start with your whole being first. The face and the eyes are the last thing. The face is not in our power. It is too fine. It must express and radiate and shine of itself. It is right when it comes as the result of something you are doing.

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The more your body is full of feeling, the more you awaken this natural desire to act: I want to act because I have something to act. This impulse to act is the way back to our first dreams: when we were young and wanted, for the first time, to be actors. This is a precious moment in our lives: how and where, we don't know, but we are full of desire. We must come back to this precious moment; and this is always present when our bodies are filled with feelings. We are again children, filled with the desire to act. This is vdry precious.

The human being is able to recreate his body and voice only from the inside. What a great power it is - our feelings - if we can manage them consciously.

Exercise:

Mr. Harvey will play a sentence, and then we will recreate it into words and speak them. Another sentence on the piano. First listen with your ears, then with your palms, then try consciously to absorb the feelings and fill your body with them. Then hear it with the center of your back, then with your chest, then with your whole body and move towards the music. Then incorporate the sentence of music into words. Anticipate the pleasure of being able to speak with the human voice. It is necessary for the actor to have this pleasure of anticipation, because then we have a creative spirit and with it will awaken the flame we have spoken of. Again incorporate the musical sentence in words.

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Exercise:

Take the sticks and make two rows on the floor with them. The exercise is, again, for the feelings; but this time you must awaken them through your imagination, through imagining the following thing. You are standing on the edge of a cliff. There is a deep chasm and another cliff on the other side. Imagine that you have only to make an effort to be able to fly over the whole space and you are there.

Imagine this several times. Then be led by the feeling which arises from your imagination, and move between the two rows of sticks. Your wings are your feelings. Your feelings are your wings. Imagine again with your whole power, with your developed imagination and concentration. What you are doing is a certain kind of action. You must be quite aware of what you are doing. You are acting this simple action, being inspired and led by the feelings which you get from your imagination.

CONDITIONS: Repeat this exercise. Get the feelings from the imagination, catch them, and then move. Add some conditions, and try to imagine them so that you will get a certain feeling out of these conditions. This time you must do only the first moment when you leave the earth and then the last moment when you touch the earth again. The movements must be very economical. Be brave enough as actors to give in to the feelings.

NUANCES: From the new conditions try to get a certain nuance in the feelings you had before. For instance, each condition

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given to you by the director must speak another feeling, and then the director will be able to lead you. Therefore be very careful with the conditions which are given you. When the actor himself believes, then, in spite of all the movements which we see and hear, it is persuasive because of this inner power of the feeling.

Another nuance in the feelings will arise if you consider yourselves as a group. You must start off together and go at the same time to the other place. This friendly contact will awaken in you another nuance of the feeling. (Gradually you will see that everything we have in our method is a key to opening our feelings.) Try to imagine the whole group flying over the space, then the nuance will arise in you because of the new condition. Never lose the idea of the exercise, because the same exercise can be used for many aims. This time we are appealing to our ability to awaken the feeling with all possible nuances, because we want to awaken them. We must learn to master our own inner life. It makes a great difference to a human being if he is walking alone, or if he is walking in a crowd. Study the fine nuances of feelings created by all the conditions.

Another nuance: When you are flying over the middle of the abyss, you feel that the possibility to fly leaves you; then you make an effort and again are able to fly. Try to experience this nuance in your imagination. Study the feelings which arise, register them, and let them lead you. Study the scale or the gamut of your feelings, and follow them. The meaning of this exercise is to awaken the ability to vary these simple feelings.

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Now add another nuance. You are flying first upwards, very high, making a big arc. Again you lose the ability to fly, and although you fight more and more to regain it, you do not succeed and you fall into a bottomless abyss. You must feel that the falling down takes hours and hours. You lie on the ground, unable to get up.

Another nuance: When you have fallen and are lying on the ground, out of the pause create the words, "Help me!" The position in which you are lying will suggest to you certain feelings out of which you must create the words.

Realize whether you have had feelings, and whether you were brave enough to give your whole being to these feelings and be led by them. This is the purpose of the exercise.

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Our mission is to show the world that the human heart still lives. What the human brain can say has already been said, written, and read. But the human heart has not yet been discovered. Worse than that, it has been trampled under foot. Consider the day when the curtain will go up on our first performance in New York, in London, in Boston. That day will come, and then it will be too late to find the feelings. We must do that work now. Therefore, have the patience to do our simple exercises so that we will awaken the feelings. That is our mission. That is all we have to show to the world.