

Michael Chekhov

October 7, 1937

ATMOSPHERE,  
THE FEELINGS  
THE INSPIRER  
IMPROVISATION  
SHAKESPEARE - DIMENSION OF THEMES

Romeo & Juliet  
Hamlet  
Alexander Moissi

ATMOSPHERE: New Students:

The scene is one in which a group of people is waiting for the appearance of a very high personage; very formal; great expectation. It is very important, and that is why you are here. Take everything from the atmosphere - play with it as with balls, like a juggler. This is a tremendous power which we must develop through our exercises, in order to fill the space with the atmosphere which we want, even in the biggest theatres.

Another scene is in a dive where the thieves are having a gay time. The police enter, and then leave. The atmospheres are: 1. Gay, without any reserve, unbridled. 2. Very tense. 3. This will grow out of the two other atmospheres.

THE FEELINGS: Old Students:

In doing this feeling exercise, the reason we do not move is because it gives us the possibility to understand what it means to act only psychologically. After we get this good habit we will see how the ability to move will come, and the mise en scene, etc. So many things will come but they must be

M. Chekhov

October 7, 1937

on the ground of this psychological skilfulness.

Balladina: Criticism:

The scene between Balladina and the Saint was done more or less skilfully and technically, but the feelings were weak. We, the audience, were quite cool because the feelings were not strong enough. The way to establish this would be to have a psychological gesture, or contact, or atmosphere; all these things are the ground which we show our inspirer, and without this inspiration we are quite empty.

Repeat the exercise and establish more carefully a more conscious approach to the problem of a certain gesture, certain atmosphere, etc., and by showing such things you will get this other thing. This is a technique which takes many years to get, but it is worth it.

I knew an actor who tried to get something similar to this new technique, and he acted a part which he prepared in this new way with an actor who was very materialistic, and a member of the theatre of today. This second actor told the first actor that he liked his acting tremendously, but he hated him at the same time because he showed a person who was full of feelings, but was without bones, and he wanted flesh and blood and earth on the stage. This is just what we most aim to get rid of with our Method. These are two different approaches, two different ways; one is down into the earth, and the other is up. We are, of course, going up because there

M. Chekhov

October 7, 1937

are unlimited possibilities, while the other way holds only limited possibilities. That is why so many people hate fairy tales, because of this fear of the endlessness in them.

~~THE INSPIRER.~~

Now you must show your inspirer not only your psychological gesture, atmosphere, etc., but concrete mise en scène. Say to your inspirer, "I am standing here as a strange figure," or "I am coming nearer and nearer," or "I am standing alone," - this is something for your inspirer. You will see how, with time, our standard will be higher and higher. Let us remember the picture of the angel standing on the mountain. This is one half of the process. We have to show our inspirer everything, and then he will answer, and the second part of the process is to stand on the stage, to walk, to have a spot light from here or there, to have such a nose, or such eyes, etc. Everything is important, small or large - this is our food on the stage. We may become inspired because of a new costume, and if we are really inspired by such things unconsciously, we can do it consciously. Instead of becoming inspired by the costume sometimes and sometimes not, it must be in our hands, and thereby we are able to find the right settings, gestures, everything. Because it is more harmonious, our inspirer will work at once.

You must anticipate things which you are going to show your inspirer - even tempo. You start your scene slowly, but you know that in a few minutes you will be alive and full of fire. Everything will be all right because you know beforehand,

M. Chekhov

October 7, 1937

and you have shown your inspirer what you are ascending or aspiring to.

It is so important to be conscious of all these things; they are conscious and subconscious always. If you will think back on your previous experience as actors, you will see how many things you have done quite instinctively in the right way, which we now know how to do consciously.

In Balladina, both Alina and Balladina must try to assume the technique of allowing the feelings to flow through. Always start with some ground, something very definite and conscious. We must hear and understand, not with our heads, but with our whole being.

In the improvisation for the Fairy Tale, you were not able to take the problem, the theme, deeply enough. This is a very good experience; it is torturing, but it is good for us because we will get some good results.

IMPROVISATION:

Let us try another improvisation - a very abstract one - but we must go through these corridors. The theme is a legend, but more abstract. There are three kinds of beings; one is very high, the next is lower, and the third is the lowest of the three, but they are all of very high standing. They have decided that they want to create a lot of new beings, and to the highest level of these beings they give the whole idea of the creative process. These beings take the whole plan of creation and elaborate it, and in this elaborated form they

M. Chekhov

October 7, 1937

come to the third level. The third level beings take this elaborated plan and elaborate it with many, many details, and from these details they create some new beings. When these new beings are created they begin to exist more and more, and then life occurs and the beings disappear into the height. This is a whole abstract story which we must incorporate.

The highest level beings give one very expressive psychological gesture to the beings who are standing lower, and they must take this concrete gesture, develop it and after developing it they decide to begin the process of improvisation, and the beings disappear. The mise en scène will be given, and each group of beings must find some gesture which they are going to give to the lower standing ones. They must find it with their ensemble feeling, and it must be elaborated so that we see the theme in a more complicated way. We must find each other so that it will be one great symphony of gestures. At the moment when these beings begin to exist it must be quite clear to the audience that this is the moment when life begins. What the lower standing beings do, after the gesture is given to the next group, depends upon the improvisation, but it must be clear that it is given. The theme is very interesting for gestures.

It is necessary for us to do such an exercise, because it gives certain things to our actor's souls. You must wait, but the whole picture must live. When they give it to

M. Chekhov

October 7, 1937

you then you will take it as the second group. Then you must decide to give it, and the last group will take it. One event must take place after another; when the one group gives, then the other must take. Each group must find the same gesture together - it must be found in unison.

SHAKESPEARE - DIMENSION OF THEMES:

It is not enough to work with themes which are human and psychological - we must have a feeling for symbols, as it were. An invisible child is born out of longing. It must mean something for an actor, otherwise he is only half a being. Why is Shakespeare so dull on the present stage? For instance, when Iago speaks about his reputation, he speaks like a shopkeeper. Is this Shakespeare? Never! It is a shame to speak Shakespeare from the standpoint of a shopkeeper. Each actor must have something on a higher dimension. Even for Shakespeare, each small fairy tale requires that we are friends with some symbols. Romeo and Juliet is not possible to act with the feeling of everyday life, such as we have seen in a recent production in London. Everywhere it is the same. When Romeo with his love and passion acts in this everyday human way, it is a great shame. And they don't know that this is wrong! They think it is Romeo, and the audience looks and hears Shakespeare's beautiful words, but what they do with it is dreadful.

We must find the way to listen for poetry which is real poetry, which belongs to a higher world. It does not matter whether we are religious or not, but as actors, as profes-

M. Chekhov

October 7, 1937

sional persons, we must know what the ghost or spirit of Hamlet's father means.

Once in Moscow I saw such a fat man with a cough, who walked across the stage being quite sure that he was the ghost, very busy with his cough! Later when I saw Moissi [Alexander Moissi] acting I ran away because I was so ill from what I saw - but he ran away when I was acting, although in our private life we were good friends. As professional people we must appreciate the exercises we have done today, in spite of the question as to whether it is religious or not, but as professional people.