

Michael Chekhov

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First Lecture on the History of the Theatre

Given by Miss Georgette Boner¹

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TIME

THE PERFORMANCE IS LIKE A SYMPHONY

JUGGLER PSYCHOLOGY

FORM

TIME:

Try to recall in your imagination quietly and quickly what we have done yesterday in The Golden Steed, when we started with the words of the crowd. The crowd is a figure in the play which brings the feeling of time. The metrical beat gives a feeling of time - that is the nature of our psychology, and the nature of the beat. We have this psychological feeling for time. You have to imagine the figure of the guard as someone who brings the feeling of time. If you will see and imagine the figure like that - where the space is the earth itself and the mountain is the path to heaven. Everything in a fairy tale is the whole world, and the time is eternity. The crowd is coming as if from far far away, and then nearer and nearer. The farther away you are, the more indifferent is your influence - the nearer, the more your body influences. The nearest point when the guard meets Antin, he has a very bad destiny for him. Time and destiny are incorporated in the figure of the guard. This is a good example to show how abstract ideas can be shown through artistic means. The guard gives for the audience a feeling that the time is nearer and nearer.

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The beauty of the theatre is that we have so many means to give body to abstract ideas. As an artist, the guard must know that he is time and fate. During his acting, the audience will feel this without knowing it and that is the purpose of the theatre. If you will imagine the figure of the guard from this point of view, you will find the possibility to incorporate it.

The crowd echoes the words, "King," "for the Princess," "To rise," "Princess from her glass coffin," several times. We must keep the atmosphere during all this work. It is difficult, but it is part of our psychological gymnastics. The crowd has the feeling of listening like beings ready to be led, and this will give the feeling that something big is to come. The crowd must echo this feeling of time. The mood will come nearer and nearer to the heroic, but it starts far, far away in eternity. The evil in the play is overwhelming the good power, and then the good power throws away the evil. This is the gesture throughout the play, and we must see this gesture everywhere in it. The real art has nothing to do with symbolic things * it has to do with life. Everything is real.

THE PERFORMANCE IS LIKE A SYMPHONY:

Our scenic rhythm, or melody, must be given by every means in our power - by lighting, settings, costumes, with all the things we have. If we wish to echo or to play

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the music, the melody of the evil theme, we must start it from the very beginning and show it with all our means. Not only evil has the echo but good as well. This must be a full orchestra. You must develop the future performance from themes which are appearing like a symphony.

In this part of the play we are preparing the scene for the Copper Steed, and everyone speaking must have something of the deep passionate feeling of this mood. The crowd is, as yet, unawakened personalities - they are moving as things rather than people.

When you are doing a technical rehearsal, it means that we must explore all the possibilities of the thing we are doing and catch all the possibilities which arise. If we do this, then the technical work will merge with the real work and that is a very important thing. You must always be aware of what you are doing. It may be better tomorrow, but every day it must be right. Inspiration can come or not, but you must work with understanding of what you are doing. You must repeat things again and again, and then it will become organic; and you will be able to feel it more and more.

We must distinguish more accurately between good and evil when we are speaking - they are like opposite keys on the piano. The White Old Man and the two brothers and Antin are all parts of a triangle, and are all necessary to each other. From the moment the Copper Rider is seen, we are on

the upward wave until after the moment the Princess has raised her hand; this is the highest moment, the climax, after which it goes down. Remember that this is the passionate period of the play. The gestures and speech must show this. After the climax and we come down, the gesture is that we have lost everything and there is a feeling of despair in our words. In this moment when the Copper Rider goes down, the White Old Man is defeated for the moment.

The stick and the chair exercises: Let us clarify certain points in these exercises about which there seems some confusion.

1. In the chair exercise, the idea is that I have my body, and when I have the chair in my hands, I try to understand the qualities of the chair and move my hands like a chair [as part of the chair].

2. In another moment the chair and I are apart [separated], but I move like a chair. This is another exercise.

3. Then I have to create an image - a man like a chair.

There is nothing wrong with the exercises except that you must realize that they are different.

You have spoken about being "chairlike," having the chair in your hands. You have to move yourself, having the chair in your hands, and be a composition with the chair, having the qualities of the chair in your being. This is our exercise. It is another thing to be in harmony with the chair, not being the chair.

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It seems to me that we are not speaking about different things but about the same things, only there are different divisions. I don't think it is necessary to divide the exercises by having the chair and being the chair, and then being the chair without actually having it. It is the same exercise.

Let us say that having the right relationship to the chair is the second point, and the third point is when you assume the character of the chair so that anyone looking at you would say he is like a chair. I have never felt that we must do an exercise without feeling the qualities of the chair in our body. There are no rules about these qualities, only that you must assume the qualities of the object. You are limited by the problem, that is true, but that is the character of the exercise.

JUGGLER PSYCHOLOGY:

In these exercises we want only to reach the psychology "as if" I am a juggler - "as if" I can do things skillfully. It means that my soul will believe that my body is skillful and, as a result, will be more artistic. A real juggler can undoubtedly change the quality of the object. Our idea of the juggler is to do the exercises having the quality of the exercise and the "as if" we are skillful psychology.

I think this exercise will break down some special walls which have been built up in our everyday psychology.

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We must only have the feeling as if we are jugglers - it is not possible for us to be real jugglers. A real juggler is a person who is very skillful and who knows what he is doing. This exercise is primarily designed for us to feel the true quality of things - the articles, the objects we are using on the stage. That is why we came to these exercises. You will use the objects well because you have already assumed their qualities.

The Golden Steed:

We must be able to grasp the atmosphere, the mood, at once, as if with our hands. In a single moment you should be able to get into the atmosphere, create it, concentrate on it, and remember it. It must be done and can be done at once. Tragedy or comedy can be done at once - really in one moment.

We must perform so that nobody will know what the source of the right feeling is - whether it is the costumes, the lighting, or the mise en scene. They must become one, and they will become one if we take all the outward things and turn them inward and be affected by them. Then all the inside things must be brought out. Inside-out, as it were.

FORM:

Then it must be clear why we are doing the fine things we have tried to do. Because this is us, these are our feelings, emotions, and everything - like an unformed

power - like an embryo. The actor's soul is full of emotions which the future actor feels as a child. He wishes to project these feelings if he is really a born actor. It is like a sea with waves. If, for instance, I am a tragic actor and I wish to speak a soliloquy and I begin with power, I am not able to speak and my whole temperament is behind me, and I am finished because I tried to push my whole wish to be a tragic actor at once, and this is not possible. Then I feel that something must be done for me in order to help me to do this. This is form, and when an actor gets this feeling for form, then he is able to pour into this form all his temperament, his wishes, his tears, his laughter, everything he has. When the director gives the actor a movement or a gesture, it only means that the director gives a form for this rough ocean of passions, temperament, and feelings. It gives shape for the actor's impulses. It means that each thing you are given must be understood only as a shape into which you must pour your feelings, and this is the right way to understand the work on the play. It is wrong when the actor feels that with his temperament he wants to act without any form, and someone comes and tells him the form in which the whole soliloquy must be spoken.

Direction is extremely important because each actor has in his subconscious depths something which disturbs him. We must understand this black part of our nature and decide that we will take each form which will be given us as a

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beautiful thing which forms all our fiery content and our actor's raw material.

Try to take all suggestions like that - as a form into which you must pour your temperament and feelings. It will be wrong if you take the form and fail to fill it with your emotions - the form can stand alone and empty, and this is as great a mistake as to try to push out all your emotions without any form. Each form gives you the possibility to fill it with your feelings.