

Michael Chekhov

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IMPROVISATION TECHNIQUE
CLICHÉS
INCORPORATION OF CHARACTER'S INNER LIFE
RHYTHM - INNER ACTION OF THE PAUSE

Vakhtangov

IMPROVISATION:

Improvisation is quite a different psychology from that of exercising certain things in scenes. You must not confuse the two things. Improvisation means that on a certain given ground, and with certain given conditions, you have to fill each moment as full as possible with your creative psychology. In your improvisations I have seen sometimes that in doing Hamlet, for instance, you don't fill the spaces. Perhaps you do not have the right idea about improvisation, and are trying to follow a line from one given point to another without responsibility for the middle point, but that is improvisation.

Between the words when Ophelia says, "What means this, my lord?" and Hamlet's answer, it doesn't only mean to speak these two sentences, but around these two things the whole aura must be improvised. Hamlet may improvise for fifteen seconds - which is an eternity on the stage - and then he will answer. This is improvisation. We are given certain grounds to coax the improvisation - but quite a different thing is being done by you when you work with the new students. You are giving them texts to study, without telling them what it means to have atmosphere, radiation, etc., etc. The actor must always have

M. Chekhov

November 15, 1937

a ground for his improvisation. Repeat the Hamlet scene on the basis of atmosphere.

Criticism:

You move very interestingly sometimes, but the words are coming from another world, as if they are hanging in the air without any connection to the scene or to the persons. Each sentence was in another world, in another play. There was only chaos in the sounds. Let us recall the exercise in which we throw the ball and catch it and at the same time speaking the words or the sentence. This is what we need when speaking - we must catch it. This is our weak point. You have filled each psychological space between the speeches much better, and this is the right idea for improvisation, but there are several moments which you must pay special attention to... Repeat the scene.

Criticism:

There were some very good points and some bad ones, and from this we can study what it really means to be under the influence or pressure or hypnotism of clichés. You don't notice that many clichés are leading you astray. For instance, you have the feeling that in portraying a king and his court you must be stiff. This is absolutely wrong. It must be a certain ceremony or ritual, but it has nothing to do with stiffness inside. For instance, Paul became a real person and I

8041
M. Chekhov

211
November 15, 1937

could not take my eyes off him. Everybody must be just as free.

CLICHÉS

Try to understand whether it is a cliché or not - clichés are oppressing many of you. Because of these clichés, and lack of contact, some of you gave beautiful suggestions which were not taken by the others and they fell down without being developed. To use such suggestions is one of the most important things in improvisations. When the king fainted and yet shouted, you could have used this unusual thing. He had broken another cliché, but the suggestion was not taken up by the crowd.

All clichés are always absolutely obvious. The language of clichés is to be obvious. Paula was interesting because she was creative, while Blair gave a look to John which was more attractive than the whole entrance of the court. If you are fresh and can do new movements, the audience will follow you.

Another fine point; the player-actors on the stage were acting absolutely slow and low, and the reaction on the crowd was a very obvious one. This arises from a cliché. When Hamlet spoke to the players, telling them what kind of actors they must be, how they must act fully and with temperament, you must take something from this soliloquy to use as players in the scene. How many things were given as suggestions, and yet

M. Chekhov

November 15, 1937

the crowd of waiting women was absolutely stiff and without connection to each other; without originality or ingenuity, and all because of these clichés. For instance, the Queen stopped as if to speak to Hamlet - this could have been a great moment for the whole crowd.

We must always find the human side of each ceremonial action. For instance, in the recent coronation, the most interesting things in the ritual were the human things which occurred. But on the stage we always show the most uninteresting thing - the ritual. The ritual will be given by the director but the human beings must be there.

Vakhtangov's idea was to perform Hamlet showing King Claudius as a lustful person - not a king at all, but as a man in a bad sense, clothed in king's raiments.

INNER LIFE OF THE CHARACTER'S IMAGE:

Incorporation of images with fire: Let us take the scene in which King Claudius exclaims - "O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven." Penetrate into the inner image of the character and try to incorporate it, laying stress on the inner life of the image. Move slightly if your imagination requires it while you are rehearsing and speaking. Don't be silent. It is never necessary to distort the sound of the voice if it is not needed for characterization. You don't need to strain or distort the voice.

M. Chekhov

November 15, 1937

Criticism:

It is much better in the sense that it is penetrating and that it has been rehearsed - no helpless movements - rehearsed. Even the words are better, although they were sometimes inaudible still.

Let us take another scene, this time for the inner action of the pause - through the radiation of the pause as a ground, do the scene, "Nothing, my lord."

Criticism:

Much better again. At times the radiation could be increased, or the inner way can be more complicated. The fire was still the weakest point. It is much better after one week, and this shows us that our subconscious life continues the exercise. If you have done the exercise for the first time with full activity and pleasure, the subconscious work goes on, but if you have done the exercise in a weak way and without fire, this does not happen. Therefore, it is important to give a stimulus to our subconscious or superconscious life, and then we will get the result later on. It is wrong to expect results at once - the impulse must be given.

RHYTHM - INNER ACTION OF THE PAUSE:

Between the question and the answer lies a pause.

This was very poor today, so let us do an exercise with balloons. The whole secret lies not in how the question was asked; it depends upon the pattern you will do with your psychology. The

5141
M. Chekhov

November 15, 1937

harmony may be established in all these points around, therefore there is full freedom. Today you will answer the question of your partner this way, and tomorrow another way, and if you are able to improvise rhythmically you will never be lost, and neither will your partner. It is enough just to look at each other and you will know the hundreds of ways open to you. Everything is possible - this is the beauty of the inner rhythm. You can speak a sentence in legato and be answered in stacatto, and reply again in legato. In naturalism nothing is free, you are bound with so many clichés - only rhythm gives you full freedom. Actors don't understand this, and they cling to these naturalistic things and think they are free, but they are not. Rhythm is freedom.