

IMPRESSIONS OF MICHAEL CHEKHOV, THE ACTOR,
AND RECOLLECTIONS OF THE CHEKHOV THEATRE STUDIO

by
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(This article was written at the request of the Central State Archives of Literature and Art of the U.S.S.R. in Moscow, to be placed in the Michael Chekhov Archives housed there. Material for a comprehensive book, in which Michael Chekhov's career in the theatre in Russia, Europe, England, and America will be fully documented, is at present being prepared by the Central Archives.)

My first meeting with Michael Chekhov took place in New York in February, 1935, when, in company with Beatrice Straight, my fellow student in the theatre, I saw him perform as Khlestakov in Gogol's Revisor (The Inspector General). As I had heard very little about his Moscow Art Players Company, the plays they were performing, or of Michael Chekhov himself - except that he was one of Russia's greatest actors - I did not know what to expect. What I saw could only be likened to watching a brilliant, many-faceted star in orbit. The artistic range of Chekhov's performance was so far beyond anything that I - or, for that matter, the greater part of the audience - could ever have expected to see, even in our most vivid imaginings.

In attempting to describe Michael Chekhov's acting, I return again to the image of a star - radiating, scintillating, and at times strangely disturbing. He revealed so much of the psychology of the character that we, the audience, were left astonished, fascinated, and somehow vaguely disquieted. We had observed the acting of an artist who, because of his originality, ardent temperament, and brilliant technique, had shown us an

extra dimension. We had, in fact, been given a glimpse of genius on the stage.

As Khlostakov, Michael Chokhev showed us a character that was the archetype of all that is mindless, flippant and sly, one living by his wits, and yet able to move us to sympathy as we followed his frantic, feckless attempts to save his skin. And all of it acted in Russian, of which we know nothing. Chokhev moved with the lightness, grace and agility of a ballet dancer, flying over the stage, leaping onto the table, pirouetting and spinning like a little child's top. It was a performance of such audacity and originality, the like of which few of us had ever seen, and one which we were certainly not likely to forget. Only later did we learn that Chokhev had experienced great difficulty with his heart during these performances.

The character of Khlostakov was followed, in a later performance, by that of Fraser in The Dalman, by Henning Berger, a ^{Scandinavian-}~~American~~ playwright. There we saw Chokhev as a grotesque figure in a loose, baggy jacket, speaking in a shrill, accusing voice, flapping around the stage like some strange, ugly bird - a character both repellent and pathetic. The audience was fascinated by the complexity of Chokhev's characterization, and the originality and virtuosity of his acting.

There followed another example of incredible versatility in Chokhev's performance of the varied characters chosen from the sketches of Anton Chokhev - in particular that of the bumbling old man in "I Forgot." Some years later I was to see him acting, in English, another of his uncle's sketches - that of the old Sexton in "The Witch." In it he gave us a

haunting picture of the anguish of a lonely, impotent old man, yearning for the love of his beautiful, lusty young wife, vividly portrayed by Beatrice Straight. On still another occasion I saw him in scenes from Hamlet, - a role he loved and probed so profoundly, and one for which he had received unprecedented praise and many honors in Russia. "Hamlet is the highest point of tragic style," he told us as he gave us glimpses of his brilliant, penetrating interpretation of the psychology of that heroic, tortured character. In portraying Hamlet, he showed us "the greatness of the human spirit in its struggle with adversity." And again, when he performed scenes from Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan the Terrible, he revealed to us the frightful, distorted depths in that character's inner life. The extraordinary aspect of my recollections is that they are as vivid today as though the incidents had happened yesterday, instead of forty years ago. None of the images has been dulled or tarnished by the passage of time.

I was fortunate to have been one of Michael Chekhov's students at the Chekhov ^{Theatre} Studio at Dartington Hall in England, and in America, and I later became a teacher and one of his assistants. But the association I valued most was that of being his confidante and private secretary from 1935 to 1942, during which time I recorded in shorthand all his lessons and lectures, and worked with him on the first English version of his book, To the Actor: on the Technique of Acting .

From the first, Chekhov showed an extraordinary facility in acquiring, in a remarkably short time, the subtleties of the English language.

Words and phrases seemed to come to him effortlessly, as he needed them, and within little more than a year he was able to lecture to his students with fluency and style. These lessons and lectures, recorded verbatim by me in shorthand notes, form the basis for my manuscript, entitled "The Actor Is the Theatre."

To be Michael Chokhov's student was to learn not only the finest traditions of the theatre art, but to be inspired by his vision of a theatre of the future, in which the actor would be the most important element. Believing, as he did, that "the actor is the theatre," he was convinced of the need for a new technique of acting. In his words, "How the actor will act, that is our mystery, our talent, our individuality. How is the mystery of art."

A passion for truth permeated everything that Chokhov did, everything he taught his students, and from him we learned standards and principles which profoundly affected our attitude towards life. His concern for the artistic, moral, and spiritual development of his actors was always paramount. He never allowed his Method to become arbitrary, but kept it alive by the flexibility of his creative ideas. His students, in turn, provided him with the opportunity to experiment with his theories for a new acting technique.

Only the highest standards were acceptable to Michael Chokhov, because of his conception of the theatre as an art. He taught us to strive for that when we "crossed the threshold" into the world of his ideal theatre. "Get the Right Feelings Through the Right Means" was his motto for the

Chokhov Theatre Studio. He loved us, and we, his students, loved and respected him. Together we worked for six years to perfect his Method and to create a professional acting company, The Chokhov Theatre Players, which appeared on Broadway and later became a travelling repertory company, true to Michael Chokhov's vision of the theatre of the future.

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