

Michael Chekhov

October 14, 1937

THE PAUSE  
IMPROVISATION  
CHARACTERIZATION  
CENTER

The Peace Festival (Hauptmann)  
Stanislavsky

THE PAUSE: New Students:

When I produced Hamlet in Russia, I asked the actor to speak the soliloquy as if it were a pause, and it was the most beautiful thing - most convincing.<sup>1</sup> When the actor lost this fine psychology it became just an intellectual thing. It is a great thing not only to be able to justify a pause, but to act and speak as if it is a pause. The pause is the strongest moment of radiation, because when we move, half of our radiation is incorporated into the movement, but the trick of speaking only as radiation, this is a very fine thing.

IMPROVISATION: Old Students:

Let us improvise on the ability to develop the pause. The scene is based on Hauptmann's Feast of Peace [Festival of Peace]. It takes place in a Scandinavian country - it is winter - Christmas Eve. The house has three floors. On the ground floor we see people sitting around the Christmas tree; quite a banal atmosphere - banal furniture, etc. Cold and windy outside; windows are frozen and it is not possible to look through them.

The group consists of an old mother and her two sons, an old lady friend of the mother's and her daughter. The daugh-



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ter is the bride of one of the sons; she and her mother and husband occupy the second floor of the house. On the third floor there lives an old servant, alone. There are many rooms; one of the rooms is the room of the master of the house, who is no longer there. It looks very strange and gives the impression that somebody has recently left the room. Everything lies about so that it gives the impression that the person is there, but when we look attentively, we see that there is so much dust that the person must have left the place very long ago, and nobody has touched anything since: it is quite living and quite dead at the same time.

The father of the household was a very strange person - a genius, but with so many gifts and possibilities that nothing was developed, and he could do nothing in his whole life because he has always done this and that. Everything enticed him, but he was never a specialist in anything. Without any technique, without any profession or skillfulness, his whole life he spent creating something as half-philosopher, half-poet, half-inventor.

At times he was an excellent father of the family, and at other times he would be strange and rude - he had no balance. It was very difficult for his family to live with him, and then something happened between the two sons. They had always been antagonistic towards one another, but on this particular occasion one of them struck the other. The father left the house and disappeared, and from that time on they had not heard from



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him. During the two years they had grown accustomed to his being away. One of the sons became betrothed, and brought his bride to live there.

The old servant was a very strange old man who was like a dog to the father; he was absolutely dependent on the father; they were very closely bound. After the father left the house something happened to the old servant; he almost went mad, like a dog.

It is Christmas Eve, they are sitting around the tree, very banal, very ordinary people. The curtain goes up on an insignificant pause. At the same time they hear a knock at the window; they hear a knock and they realize that it is the father outside. Out of this grows a very long pause, which continues up to the moment when the father actually enters the door, which meant he had to go around the house and the garden before he entered. The exercise is based on these two pauses. If you are able to speak in the pause, then do so, but if you are able to do the whole sketch without any words it will be better, more artistic. Try to find such a psychology that you don't need words.

Criticism:

It was not original enough, although the pause was held very well. Your psychology was not original enough. After Paul's entrance as the father it was more interesting. Don't



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make artificial situations; if you don't get the inspiration let it be simple - that is much better than to lie and make artificial things. Now repeat the scene and underline two things: the first pause is out of the action which has happened before the curtain goes up, and the second pause is out of the knocking itself.

Criticism:

It was much better. For instance, when watching Beatrice in the scene I felt I knew her whole life. This is real artistic work, not to have to explain everything in general in the real artistic sense. On the other hand Paula did some pantomime with her mother - it would have been better to act as if you did not need the words, not because you could not speak, but because you wanted to give a sign without words. In this case it was pantomime to illustrate the words, but you could have said the same words if you had wanted to. Neither does it mean that you must speak in a whisper - the pause can be a very long one in which you may be getting angry, you can shout and yet not break the pause if you have the psychology of the pause. What is always bad is the use of pantomime.

To improve the scene there can be added objectives, justification, feeling of truth, atmosphere, etc., all the means we have at our disposal can be added, and then the individual psychology will blossom. They were all too timid - they can be more free within the pause which they had created.



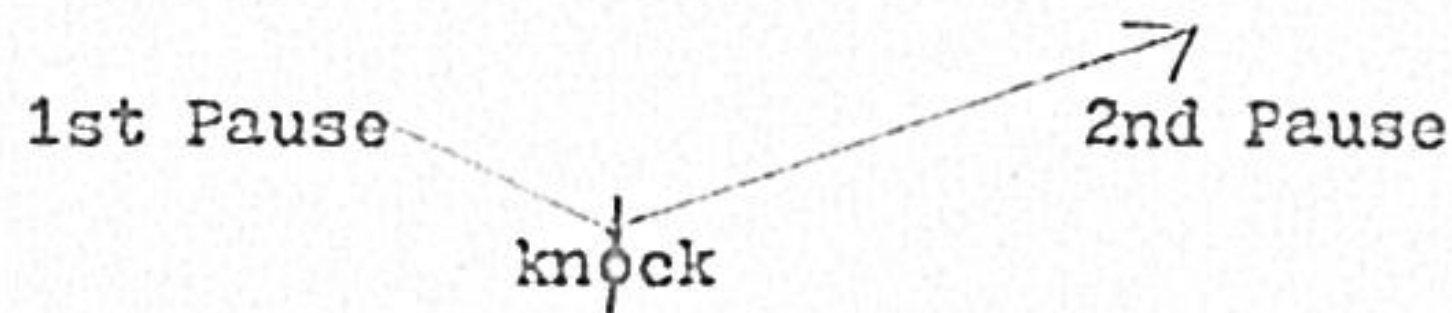
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I do not want to repeat the same improvisation too often. I would rather give you other moments in the plays, but let us do it once more.

Criticism:

It was not too strong, because your actor's psychology is not yet awakened. It is very important for the actor to have his psychology awakened. If he gets some impression from outside, and if he has developed his psychology, he has many, many ways in which to react. This is necessary for the actor, and it comes with time and with experience. Each time you did the scene it was better and better. As actors you must be absolutely attentive to all things which will arise inside you as well as around you. It is important to pay attention to both the inner and the outer world. Sometimes the pause was weak. With the first cast today there seemed to be many dialogues without words, but this time it was not so full of "as if" words. At moments it was full of inaudible words, and at times there was a subconscious repetition of the first scene.



We must compare what we are now doing - such fine things we are trying to do --by remembering the moment during the Golden Steed, at the very beginning of our work together,



when you were asked to laugh - how very rough and rude it was!

Let us take another scene from the same Hauptmann story: the father has come into the house and has been received back by the family. He is almost mad, and gradually he has brought great unhappiness into the house because he is old, and strange, and nervous, and despotic. There are more scandals with the sons, and the son and his bride are disturbed - everyone is unhappy. After a very rude scene of quarreling - a very great scandal - the father has gone to his room where he is very ill and he takes drugs. The son packs his things to go away with his bride. The house is disordered. It seems that the father is going to die. The family wants him to die; they have begun to hate him but they are not able to confess this, and therefore they do not speak about anything.

It is late at night. The unhappy family is waiting for something - the death of the father. This is the pause we will perform. After a long time the old servant appears in tears and with hate - everyone knows that the father is dead. The first pause is the result of the troubled quarreling, and when the servant enters with his distorted face, then begins something new out of this pause - relief.

Criticism:

The moment of the changing of the pause - the moment of the servant's entrance - can be heightened more, so that it



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is better theatre in the good sense. It must be a more crucial moment.

INNER ACTION:

I must tell you that it makes me very happy to see actor's souls in you - to be able to do something from inside when almost nothing is given - to find the ways out of your own activity, out of your own creative spirit, that means something!

Stanislavsky tried many means to explain to us as actors what the inner action means - and this is it. This is the beginning of real inner action, when really nothing has happened for our eyes except some movements, and absolutely nothing for our ears, but it was inner action. Stanislavsky came to the idea of his method because he liked so much this inner action, and he had a very fine feeling for these inner events, so he created these objectives and other things to call up the inner action when it is not necessary to do anything, and the audience will be fascinated as a result of it.

IMPROVISATION:

On the basis of characters: a very comic, light-hearted theme. A young graduate student has passed his examination and is very happy. He has come home at 5 o'clock in the afternoon; he is full of energy and activity, but he does not know what to do because everything is finished. Imagine that he has received a letter and he finds out that it is from a fifteen year old girl, who has decided that he loves her;



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she asks him to come into the garden at eight o'clock when her grandmother will be sleeping, and her mother will be away; she will be alone and will meet him there. He has no watch so he must rely on his feeling of time. He decides to drink a little beer. He begins to drink and he becomes so drunk that he cannot see.

It is hot and everything is very stupid and he is in a tragic mood, and then he remembers that it is eight o'clock and he has to do something, but he is not sure what. He takes his hat and goes half-consciously to the garden where the girl meets him. He is not able to understand the situation - he is absolutely out of control. He sees her and then loses her, and then sees her again. He has no idea of what has happened, but he wants to get rid of his tragic mood.

During the first part of the sketch the girl thinks that he is performing a drunk man and she thinks how talented he is. The performance was so beautiful and so long. Gradually she begins to understand that it is something too long. then she is unhappy - he falls asleep and her heart is broken.

CENTER:

In the style of vaudeville and on the ground of characters. His center is walking around him everywhere - he is chasing his center. Her center is a yard or two before her - she is streaming, chasing her center which is always before her, quite light and sparking. Her center gets nearer and nearer to



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her when the tragedy begins, and then it goes quite deep, and finally she drags it behind her. We will use this drunk business but it must be absolutely aesthetic - performing being absolutely drunk, but aesthetically. Exercise the playing with the center as an exercise for the characters.

**Criticism:**

It was absolutely un-naturalistic - a drunk man would never do such things, but yet Terence has done them and convinced us that he was drunk. Catherine has made a mistake because she has used things which are too near to clichés. You can use more play with the center which you are chasing. It would make you free from these ordinary things. The dropping center was better because it was more your characterization. Such things as slapping Terence's backside are right; if you have such impulses you must do them, even if they are rude. You can perhaps find more variety in your actions - you would find this in rehearsing.

In the first stage he is terribly afraid of her because he does not see her, but he hears her voice. In the second stage he explains to this being who is near him that he has got a letter from a very stupid girl. This is the first moment when she guesses that something is wrong. Then he recognizes her and tries to save the situation. He remembers that she has made a mistake in spelling in the letter and he tries to teach her.