

THE FUTURE OF THE CHEKHOV THEATRE STUDIO

New York, December 11, 1941

Statement made to the members of the
Chekhov Theatre Studio and the Chekhov
Theatre Players by Michael Chekhov.¹

The things I have to tell you are the result of my long observation and careful thoughts about our work and life together. I have come to a certain firm decision which I am going to tell you and to explain the reasons for it.

Our present group has come to a crisis - that means to the point where things cannot remain as they are and have either to go down and perish or to achieve new, higher standards.

The general opinion of unprejudiced people around us almost unanimously acknowledges our slow and steady growth, and the results of our efforts. But although I have also stated it on several occasions, I must tell you that I am not quite in agreement with this opinion. The progress which we all see seems to me purely accidental. Our successes and failures - I don't mean on Broadway but in our everyday work and series of performances - have no other grounds than accidental moods, circumstances, personal psychological states, etc. The common, usual habit of acting is what gives the impression that our actors are developing, but there is no definite aim and no artistic principles; no methodical self-training in our group.

For years now I have tried to use the means of encouraging, praising, repeating, reminding you of the aims, explaining the significance of technique and methodical work, given repeated hints of the connections which our theatre should have to the present grave state of the life of humanity and its culture. Even jokingly I have given one or the other member of our group hints which, if properly understood, would lead this or that member to think whether he was going the way I had in mind for the Chekhov Theatre Studio. But I must say now that it has not helped at all, or at least very little.

The aim of the theatre which I mean to develop is much more far-reaching than this or that particular performance or success or failure on Broadway. The aim I have so often spoken about is to create, by a common effort, a new cultural factor, first in your own country and then in other countries. I have spoken very often about you as "pioneers," hoping that you would once understand this appeal of mine and decide to clarify in your own minds the aim I have mentioned above. But it has not happened.

Let me take a few examples. The group - the members of which consider themselves to be able to deny completely the main principles of artistic technique, or to deny part of it - show clearly that they are pursuing their own personal aims, regardless of what is being aimed at, or what are the efforts of those who have the burden of the artistic leadership to carry.

For every one of us - unless we close our eyes on purpose - it is clear that such terms as "atmosphere,"

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"objective," "radiation," "activity," "group feelings," "significance," "feeling of ease," etc. etc., as well as the method of speech and Eurhythmy, together with all other exercises and principles represented by our Method, all these things remain only empty words and never seem to me to become real and concrete means of developing new qualities of acting.

For everyone it becomes immediately clear that our performances - if they are not kept up again and again by tremendous effort on the part of the directors and teachers - are inclined to become lower and lower in standard, whereby they decline with much more intensity than they rise.

These, and many other facts of greater and smaller dimensions, show clearly that there is no ground, no basis upon which our work stands. There is no spine for our existence, neither in clear understanding of the aim, nor in assuming the proper technique of acting. The Method which our theatre represents, and the idea of becoming a pioneering group which will bring a new value into the cultural life, is the only thing which can solve the crisis in the positive sense.

I have been hoping and trusting, ^{waiting} working, even pleading, stressing the positive side, and sometimes even hiding from you the true picture which has grown up in my mind. From now on this kind of leadership must be rejected by me, and this for your own sake, for the sake of the Chekhov Theatre Studio, and for my sake as well. Things must be spoken out clearly and the choice made by all of you, or by you individually, knowing that my way is chosen and cannot be changed.

I shall find the energy to work only if I shall be able to have a group of people who will be willing to go along the lines I have drafted, who will consider themselves as students, as long as they have not really acquired the technique of acting which has already been given to them, and that which has still to be given - which is perhaps more important than anything which has been given up until now. With the present attitude of the group towards practical work, I have no hope ever to approach this second more important and significant part of the work.

The present group is living under the illusion that they know the aim and can manage the technique. Those people who want to create the theatre along these right lines, must not only agree with it in principle but must decide to work upon the Method, upon each point of the Method, work upon the speech technique and Eurhythmy, and all the things which the Chekhov Theatre Studio represents, and for which daily practice will be required.

No longer can the individual haphazard approach be tolerated, in the sense that so and so many members of the group deny those principles and rely upon their accidental capacity for achievement. The psychology must be changed to a more professional one. As, for instance, that of the student of music, mathematics, architecture, or any branch of science, in which the pupil realized that he would only appear humorous if he went to the classroom for so many years and did nothing but deny the fundamental principles of the teaching and wasted

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his time in producing amateurish pieces of work on his own, just as it happens, accidentally, day after day. Such psychology has been common in the theatre, but we cannot make any use of it.

Under the present circumstances I can no longer pretend that I am doing the work which is objectively valuable. I cannot see the students and the actors of the Chekhov Theatre Studio organization losing their time day after day and forcing me to waste my time. Whatever successes or failures the Chekhov Theatre Studio may have had in the past, it was always a gamble. What is needed now is a far-reaching aim and the concentrated energy to achieve it practically.

I know only too well that in whatever words I try to express myself now, I will not change the minds of people who have not yet arrived at such an approach to the problem. I no longer speak with the desire to persuade you, or to plead with you, my only aim is to say that a new phase has begun, and it must be decided inside of yourselves whether you are ripe enough and willing to start this new phase, sacrificing many things for this aim and for practical work day after day.

Often I have heard it said that many sacrifices have been made by members of our group. I don't doubt that such sacrifices have taken place, but I doubt whether it is clear enough to some of our people that if they choose between two attractive things and drop one for the sake of the other, it is not a sacrifice. They follow the thing which attracts them most and satisfy themselves by choosing the best and most

attractive. I doubt whether in all cases it has been a real sacrifice, which is marked by the fact that the person does what he finds right and good, and does it in spite of certain unpleasant results for himself.

The sacrifice about which I speak in this new phase is the sacrifice of one's whole energy for the work, for studying the Method, the speech, the Eurhythmy, in spite of unpleasant, tiring, and, at first, boring experiences which may overwhelm one. I think this must be the psychology of the student of music, architecture or science, when the student begins to hate his scales and exercises, although he knows that without them he cannot hope to become anything but amateur.

Some of you may express the doubt whether this is the right time to speak about such things, when the whole of humanity is swamped by bigger and really tragic events. In this case I shall answer that just because it is so, we have no more time to flounder vaguely and to maintain the psychology of an accidental, amateurish approach to our work. If this is not the right moment, then the theatre, as such, has no right to exist at all. After the war, constructive cultural work will flourish with tremendous power, with new activity and impulse. Shall the theatre at this time of growth remain behind?

There is, of course, a great difference between your psychology and mine. You, as young people, feel naturally that eternity lies before you, whereas I feel that my time is limited.

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You are right in your feelings, and I am right in mine. Neither of us has to change this kind of feeling for the urgency of life, but apart from both of us, you and I have one thing in common, which is our sound intellect. Surely we can meet in shaping certain common aims, principles, and ways of achieving them practically, without living in illusions.

Our intellects must tell us that we are, young and old alike, living in the same historical moment, and neither the war time nor the post-war time will reckon with our different psychologies. The cultural demands of humanity places its requirements before young and old equally. Your psychology of having indefinite time before you, and my psychology of having only a little time can both be very useful, inspiring, and instigating if we shall understand and agree upon things in our minds. This is what I call to keep pace with the times.

The aims and principles of the Chekhov Theatre Studio, as I am sure you understand, cannot depend upon any group of people. The Chekhov Theatre Studio shall exist in this or that form, maintaining the principles in which it finds its justification for existence. My effort to appeal to the group by creating a so-called "nucleus" or Advisory Committee, has to my mind failed even before starting to function. I recognize my mistake in having forcibly elected people to such a Committee. I do not see any further necessity for such a forcibly-formed organization. A kind of Advisory Committee will arise soundly, and organically, only from the group of

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people who are able to accept for themselves all the artistic principles and aims I have spoken of before. If the new phase of the Chekhov Theatre Studio will occur, starting from tomorrow or in one year's time, or whenever it is, it will crystalize out of itself such a Committee in the future. I would prefer to wait for this moment rather than to live also in this other illusion.

One more thing must be known, and the connection found to it, by everyone who will want to join the Chekhov Theatre Studio, now or in the future. This new phase of the work is the question of the repertory. As long as I am representing the artistic side of the work, I cannot help feeling that our main source of artistic material must be Shakespeare. As I have often told you, there is no other author who has found the words, emotions, and situations worthy of our present life. The prejudice concerning Shakespeare, which is so widely spread among the general public, may be a great handicap for popular success at first, but there is no other way than to fight such prejudice, because as soon as the audience sees our productions of Shakespeare, they recognize them in spite of the influence of short-sighted, stiff-minded, authoratative people.

What the present audience needs is Shakespeare. What the present audience thinks it needs is quite a different thing - it is light, easily digested, cheap, amusing performances. Surely there are enough theatres capable of doing this so that we do not need to increase their number by our efforts. I cannot force myself to satisfy such false needs -

there is no other way for me than to follow my belief as it lives in my mind.

I would never deny any modern play if it could be worthy of our times, but as long as such a play does not exist, I cannot be so lavish as to waste the time of the members of the theatre which I am hoping to shape in accordance with our time. There are, of course, some great masters whose standards are close to Shakespeare, and I am sure we will take them into our repertory, too. Besides, if I have any vision about the future theatre at all, I do see the glory of the theatre which has taken the great and honorable task of reviving Shakespeare and rediscovering his endless significance and beauty, starting its work at the time when Shakespeare is so denied.

This point makes it clear again that a new standard of acting, and a new understanding and appreciation of what the cultural aims of such a theatre as ours should be, are needed for presenting such a great repertory.

To conclude these words I would say: look beyond our theatre, and you will see the tough nut of Broadway. Look inside of our group, and you will see what precarious ways we are taking, hoping to crack this tough nut. If you will do so, you will understand why I say that the time for compromise for myself and my theatre has gone forever.

My gratitude to the Elmhirst family for their confidence and the financial sacrifices they have made, hoping to get greater results than individual performances and accidental

successes, can be expressed only by holding fast to the principle of a practical and painstaking approach to the ideal, in a quick tempo similar to that of our life today. If such a group of people will not be found, I will be the first to ask Beatrice and those who help us, to stop their support.

If you want to consider my words at all, I should like to ask you to make your decisions most carefully and sincerely because another period of illusions cannot be accepted, and the whole thing will fall apart immediately if the problem is taken superficially. In this case, it would be better to stop our work now, than to wait for another such crisis.