

Michael Chekhov

(afternoon) March 8, 1938

STUDENTS' SHAKESPEARE SCENES - CRITICISM

CRITICISM OF NEW STUDENTS' SHAKESPEARE SCENES:

In general I must say that I was very pleased at the progress which you have made - progress which is not accidental. There were some results from the suggestions given you last time. It was very conscientious work, which I appreciate very much in our school. This is the first and main pleasure which I have had from this performance. The second thing was the whole style and atmosphere of the work - it was absolutely the kind I have always dreamed of finding in schools when the profession is taken seriously. This is the fundamental basis of our whole future creative life.

There are many other theatre schools where the pupils are not taught to be artists - they think they must be unbridled in their private lives. This is usual all over Europe and the results are very bad. Such kind of serious but free work as we have seen today is more than important. Perhaps you don't know this because you may not have seen the other type of actor who is growing up in these unbridled schools, but I have. I have seen them and I know how unhappy they are later on because they find only the possibility to develop the not quite artistic qualities of their natures. You have shown just the opposite - very pure things and serious qualities. It is so serious and so promising. You have given me much happiness.

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About the settings, costumes and make-up, I will try to say something in a few words. I thank you very much for your attempt to do such settings. Each setting was full of meaning. There was some reason for everything and this was very comforting and promising for me.

Woody: Merchant of Venice - Shylock:

What do you think about your setting - such things as absolutely distorted forms and such things in black and white? If you do this then you have to have tremendous power to justify it, and it was not justified, therefore, it was an intellectual frame for something which was not there. If you are able to fill the room with the same strange psychology that is expressed in the settings and costumes, then they are justified. I am not against this stylized thing, but you must know the tremendous power which there must be in order to justify it. This is one thing.

Now the second point. When you take a costume you must always remember that no matter how expressive the costume is, if the costume hides and kills your body, then it takes away the main power of your expressive body. We get accustomed to the costume in a few seconds, and then we want to see the life within this costume which we cannot because if it is overpowering the human body, it is merely an experiment. Let us compare the beautiful angel figure of Daphne lying there, with Woody's body which is sometimes very

expressive, and I was longing to see it, but it was lost in the costume. Better to start with life and finish with form, as it were. Not take the form and find that the life is lost, the body and the emotional life, everything, are lost in it.

Other settings made some psychological gestures more or less good but all of them were beautiful and justified. The costume must always be justified by the actor.

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Perhaps it would be good to give personal suggestions how to go on, how to develop not only the scenes but the whole life. First, I want to cling to the word - if you do something, do it fully. Through the whole work with you I have suffered because there are some powers in you which are always restraining you. You are afraid if you are fully doing something, that you will lose your nobility. But the actor who is not fully on the stage is not a noble person - he is one who offends. How to get these feelings?

Woody:

To my mind Woody consists of many, many parts and this something which consists of many different parts and qualities is so compressed, so bound, he gives the impression that he has humor but he will not show it - he is like an electric sign which flashes on and off but must burn all

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the time. I want to see Woody full on the stage. He must be open all the time. He must be entirely angry when he is angry - all his qualities must be taken consciously by him and distributed through the whole inner sense. In other words, you must get variety.

There are some actors who are able to perform only two or three qualities and they must develop these two or three qualities because they have nothing more. They can be very good actors, but they are a special type. There is another type - everything is there - comedy, tragedy, love, hate - they must know it and must develop each facet of their nature separately, concentratedly, and become more and more varied. If you will not have this interest for your natures as actors with many different sides and qualities you will never develop yourselves. You may take the objective very strongly and correctly but if you keep this mixture without separating your various qualities, the objective will be like boiling water in the kettle. But we want more than this - we want steam and perhaps the tea! You must understand that you can develop your qualities separately one after another, or simultaneously, so that you become more and more varied. This is the contact which you must have with yourself. Woody is covered with nice things which we love but we must see all the qualities. This advice must be taken personally.

Hurd: Othello:

Hurd as an actor is born for performing big, strong things and this is his beauty and his difficulty. If he tries to perform small usual everyday things, then he is not interesting because everybody can do this. He is interesting as an individual if he is able to develop dimensions in his voice, in his emotion, in his appearance, in his presence, in his disappearance, his dialogues, soliloquies, everything. He is an actor of certain dimensions, and he must get these dimensions.

What is Hurd's difficulty? Technical difficulties. You need to develop your voice, not because it is bad, but for your dimension it must be more than good, it must be perfect. You must be able to take it and use it for every kind of inner dimension. If you try to get these dimensions by having an undeveloped voice, and movements, then you will always make the impression that we do not believe in you - unjustified. Because there is a great gap between your technique and your abilities to express and your natural desire to be great - but your figure and your legs are not obedient.

From the great gaps in your technique and your natural desire to do these movements, your nature requires you to be big, but your equipment and body is not big enough. Your nature requires one thing but your technique is far, far behind. Therefore, what I told you last time - your voice and feet and legs are betraying you. There are two possibil-

ities. Instead of developing a technique, the actor who is born for big dimensions begins to bow before this lack of technique and he becomes smaller and smaller, because instinctively his nature wants to get in harmony with the means of expression, and instead of lifting up the technical things, he begins to adjust to his weakness. Instead of being developed to the sky, they must go down.

Taken from this point of view the objectives, the gestures, etc. will mean quite another thing. You will understand the Method quite differently. If you know how to take the gesture for your development you will get the Method. For instance, Woody's way is to do small things on the stage. Hurd will always be behind Woody in doing these small tricks, these details. Woody must elaborate every detail - his dimension is quite a different one from Hurd's. The Method exists for each of us in quite a different way.

Sam: Othello:

At the present time there are two worlds for you and it is necessary that they should become one - one world consists of fools around you, and you think you can believe them, and in the other world you believe everyone, and you are so attractive that everyone is attracted to you. When on the stage you try to make your voice cry, then you think we are fools, and that we will believe that you are really crying. Never think that the audience can be belied. You

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can never fool us into believing that you can do something more interesting than what you have done. You can think it is possible to do on the stage things which are not justified, which are not true and are not justified by the inner life. It is a mistake to think that you are surrounded by a world that will believe in such pretensions, but in the other world you have a personality which is full of beautiful qualities and we want to see these on the stage as well as in your life.

Why should we have a good friend whom we love in his private life, but when he is on the stage we must accept an artificial figure? This is again the question of a deep personal talk with oneself. You will find that your real actor is not pretending but is living fully in his creative imagination - in the world which exists in his full life, in his heart, in his imagination, in his will and not only in his skin. The skin can do nothing, but it can be transparent for everything. You must hate this part of you which pretends. When you will really hate yourself you will come to me and say that you must leave the school, and I will say to you that now you will begin to be an actor. But until you reach this point you will not be able to be the actor we want - you must hate yourself tremendously, then all the false things will fall away, and you will show us your own beautiful qualities.

I tell you this only because I love you very much, and know that you are a very serious, deep person, so I give you my suggestions in this heart form. If you will hate me

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for it I will be very sorry, but please allow me to tell you. Your special task was to get form inwardly and outwardly and I see tremendous success in this. You have already made progress in this respect, and this gives me the right to say what I have. I know that you can work and that you can get things very strong and clear - you have shown this in your attempt to get inner and outer forms. You are able to go on very quickly, quite the opposite to Dennis, who must go on slowly. You must hate yourself today, and want to play all the parts tomorrow. Your way is to develop very quickly, and you can do it, therefore, I have spoken to you as I have.

Dennis:

Your way is quite a different one. You must work very actively, but the results will come much later. You must not be in a hurry. You have tremendous power as a human being to get the result you want. I will not suggest anything to you except that you go on working with this tremendous power and be patient in looking for results. Your nature is such a one that it will show some day, quite a different person, quite a different actor. You are absolutely in a chrysalis, but, if you break it as Sam must break his nature, the butterfly will die. The butterfly is already waiting to be free, and someone must come and break the thing which is too hard. Go on as you are because this is the right way for

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you, and you have a good instinct for it.

Mary Lou: Desdemona:

You are extremely hidden. You act so well in your everyday life that you are not hidden, and you belie us. You are absolutely closed and on top of this you are acting this "as if" open nature. Your difficulty is that as an actress you are not on the level where you are open to us. Your real gift, your artistic nature, in which I absolutely believe, is absolutely hidden. You must make a dreadful and strong effort, not in everyday life, but on the stage, to show us the deepest and most profound depths of your creative nature. I have told Hurd that he is an actor of big dimension, and that the method will help him to master these dimensions. For you the Method is something which will lead you to your own depths. You must take our exercises on imagination so that if you imagine something, you have really to say, "No, it is not enough, I must know deeper what is behind this imagination. There is the moment where I begin to laugh, or to cry, being alone." You must discover in yourself something which is able to cry and to laugh, and ~~there~~ sits your actress.

You are such a clever actress in everyday life, you don't know yourself how clever you are, but you must not act to belie us - you must act to show us your depths. Once you told me that you did not know what "fire" was, but you have it. You are like a small, beautiful volcano in the form of

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a girl, but you have never shown it. If you think you can go through our profession by pretending and by keeping all your jewels inside you, you are mistaken. No, why? The stage, in our interpretation, is worthy of showing the best things you have - not other stages perhaps - I would close myself entirely, and I did close myself for many years when working in Germany and other countries, because the surroundings were so unworthy of something more precious.¹ When I was acting in Germany, the actors sat around reading newspapers, waiting for their cues, telling dreadful stories and indecent jokes - in such surroundings, of course, I couldn't act, I did not want to act. That is not the art - it is not the theatre even if one earns one's money and that is all. But in such a theatre as ours I can give everything. That is my desire - my life - I have kept everything I have and here is the place where I must give everything, and I will give all I have.

You must say to yourself that this is the place where you must show your deepest feelings, your last love, your warmest warmth - everything here because you will never find another such place. There is no such other place on the whole earth - it is quite obvious, and your reaction to this place must be that you must open everything that is good in you - you can do it here and nowhere else. But you must give it. You must have this desire to give the best here because

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if tomorrow the war comes then we will not be able to give anything. Each day after another here gives us the possibility to give and we must do this.

You can call me a fool if you like but I see your fire, and I know that you are a beautiful actress, but you must do something quite personal with yourself. Perhaps when you are alone you sometimes touch this depth, but at this very intimate moment say to yourself, "Perhaps this is the moment about which he has spoken to me" - then bring this to the stage. You cannot do it at once, but if you will appreciate this wonderful place and all its possibilities and everything which waits for you here, then it must come. Then will come the moment when you know that something has happened to you on the stage, perhaps no one has noticed it, but a certain small miracle has happened. This is the moment when you will be born as an actress.

Daphne: Juliet in Romeo and Juliet - with Blair as Romeo:

You must not take the Method yet. You must grow like a flower and nothing more and the Method and the technique will come later on. You must go on quite freely, and act as you like. In the fairy tales and other plays, please do whatever you like and nothing more. That is the best thing for you. Our directors must not mention the Method to you, but must let you act as you like. Go on quite free.

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Valerie:

The Method itself will tell you what you can do with it. You must take the method and listen to what is going on inside of you when you are really trying to take it.