

Michael Chekhov

November 6, 1937

IMAGINATION
INCORPORATION OF OUTER AND INNER IMAGES
WILL

King Lear

Joan of Arc

Chaliapin

Hamlet (Chekhov's interpretation of the role)

IMAGINATION:

Let us continue with the scene from King Lear:

"Nothing, my lord..."

When you shout, it does not mean that you are strong, and when you whisper, it does not mean that you are weak. In your work yesterday you confused these two things, and in trying to do the tragic moments in King Lear you were sometimes weak in your spirit. You must be conscious of this fact. Everything you do must be done consciously, and then the subconscious radiation will be at your disposal.

INCORPORATION OF THE OUTER AND INNER IMAGES:

In this exercise the image must inflame you at once - your actor's nature must react to it at once. In this exercise it is not good to sit for hours before your image - it must inflame you at once. Let us take John's interpretation as an example. He has not penetrated into the fire itself, although he has given us a feeling of the outer form. The purpose of this exercise lies in the ability to imagine the inner fire and not the outer. Until this exercise we have always made this

M. Chekhov

November 6, 1937

mistake: we have always incorporated the outer appearance; but this exercise marks a new stage, and I want you now to imitate the fire, the soul, the life of the image, and not the outer qualities.

Is it a question of an exact incorporation, or is it your imagination which leads you? You must not be stiff from the exact incorporation of your image. If you see your image jumping up, it is enough to let it jump up anyhow.

Sometimes I have a feeling that I have already told you many things, but perhaps I am wrong, so always ask me. The fact that such important questions are now being asked shows the progress we have made since last term.

It is not important to incorporate each small movement as if it were a film. Imagine that you have seen a very small movement in your image, but you feel that it is everything for you. You can then build everything around this one movement. Perhaps the smallest movement can tell you so much about the character that you will take this small thing and rehearse it many times until it will color the whole scene. You need not stop for all the details in telling the whole story, but you must fix on some detail which is speaking for the whole. You must have the ability to incorporate the figure, the passions, and the feelings. They must not be divided in this exercise.

Remember the story of Chaliapin: When asked how he first approached his images, he said he wept for them. He sees

M. Chekhov

November 6, 1937

and cries. For him seeing means at once something. He never divides - if necessary, he rehearses many technical things - but by imagining, he sees and feels at once.

If you want to, you can have a vague idea of the form which it will take; or if you have a detail which is dear to you, then you must concentrate on that point, and it will be speaking. For instance, say you are preparing the part of Joan of Arc. There may be three or four Joans in your imagination. You will not be able to see only one Hamlet or one King Lear or one Joan, because the characters are so rich. You, as an actor, are not the same as the images - more or less near, perhaps, but none of the images is exactly like Joan. What have you to do? First of all, you must unite the images, and here it is very important to know that the images in the world of our imagination are quite different beings from us. We are formed and shaped and already finished. We exist as we are and are unable to make our necks longer, our bodies shorter, etc., but our images are able to do this. They are able to do everything with themselves under our influence, consciously or subconsciously, in our dreams, etc. They are able to do everything outwardly and inwardly.

Therefore, to work with many images - and this happens to every actor sooner or later - we must know how to merge them together. There are two ways; one is wrong, another is right. Imagine you see St. Joan with big eyes and a very thin

M. Chekhov

November 6, 1937

body, and you see another image with very small eyes and a fat, peasant body. You like the eyes of one and the body of another. What can you do? If you take the eyes and put them on the face of the other image, you are wrong because you will have an instinctive feeling that they are images which are finished and accomplished.

This is the point. We must not take part of one image and part of another, and merge them together. The actor must find a unity between the characters. Try not to destroy one of them or take different parts of them, but in each image you must see the things you like. Then take another image and look at it and accept what you like in it. Here you accept the figure, and there the eyes, and there the hands, and there the temperament and feelings, and there the voice. You have only to walk between these images, accepting this and that, and the wonder will happen. They will merge of themselves, and only this way is justified. You must let them find their own way of combining themselves, and appearing before you in your imagination as a new character which embraces all the qualities which you like.

Now there is another problem. Sometimes the actor cannot incorporate the image he sees. Here is the actor and there the character. Imagine the character as if the actor is going to act it. This is different to the problem of seeing another character like Joan of Arc in three or four pictures,

M. Chekhov

November 6, 1937

because then you are not concerned with who will act it. Now you are going to act it; therefore you must imagine the character as if you are acting, and you will see with much suffering that the character loses some qualities because you as an actor are not able to incorporate them.

By acting, we spoil something in the world of the imagination. This is the tragedy of creating by means of human beings. But each artist has experienced this suffering because he has tried to create what he sees; but when he tries to give shape and form to the things he has seen in his creative imagination, he loses much and he suffers.

You must imagine yourself acting the character, and you will see that gradually the character will begin to adjust itself to you. The character itself begins to adjust to you, not that you rudely take parts of it. It will, itself, adjust. But the actor has to adjust himself to the character simultaneously with the work that the character does. Here the actor is allowed to do much more rude work with himself. For instance, you see Joan's center flying before her. The actor must do rude work in order to incorporate this. Or the image may be tall, whereas the actor is not; but the actor must try to become taller through the means of his invisible body, in which he becomes taller. In this invisible body the actor can feel this person who is taller. And the character will soon respond and will change itself in accordance with the success of the actor's

M. Chekhov

November 6, 1937

work. If you are successful, it will remain tall, but if you fail, it will become small.

This simultaneous work is the only way to adjust the character and the actor: through adjusting your invisible body and by being inflamed through the imagination in the inner and outer sense. It is possible for the human being to see his images absolutely clearly and objectively, moving before him with absolutely clear form.

Very often it is possible to imagine the whole pattern as a will pattern, without knowing the face and body of the character. It can be incorporated in a psychological gesture quite freely. You can postpone the work on the actual image and can work in the archetype for some time. Perhaps your subconscious may be working on something and does not want to be disturbed. Some actors feel the will line more, others the feelings. Let us take the example of Chaliapin, who weeps for his images. The actor must find his own way. The advice I give must be taken individually, and you must use it in accordance with your own instincts; then it will be useful to you.

When I am given a part, I always see images - immediately. When I started to work on the role of Hamlet - even the idea that I might work on it - I felt at once the will pattern; later I saw him standing before me, but I could not adjust him to me.¹ He was always insisting on some things which I could not do. Some conflict was there all the time. I saw

M. Chekhov

November 6, 1937

the color of his skin and everything, but I started with the will. Without shape or form, but a certain will was there. I felt first the soul of the image; and then when I lifted my eyes, it was before me in its outer appearance; but the image sent me first his soul. It is absolutely trembling and living, this soul of an image. Therefore it is a mistake to imagine it with outer stiffness and rigidity. Be more attentive to the images' souls - to their fire.