

Michael Chekhov

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ATTITUDE OF STUDENTS TOWARD WORK
IN ENGLAND, FRANCE, RUSSIA

Talk to Students:

You must allow me to speak very frankly to you because I find that the situation now is very serious. For instance, today we have seen the pupils of the Jooss Dance School, and we have seen some results of their work. We have seen that they are able to show some results because they are working. Let us ask ourselves frankly and honestly: are we working in our school? Perhaps a few of us, but others not at all. I know when a pupil works and when he does not work. You were so happy to see how the dance pupils work and dance. I have seen how happy you were, but why are you so quiet about your own work?

Ask yourselves if you are able to be more concentrated now. I feel that you are at the same stage as when you first came. In seven weeks, an actor should know what it means to develop this psychological technique. We are not able to be actors by moving. Are we able to concentrate? Are we able to imagine? No. Are we able to be attentive during the lessons? No. Tell me what we have done during these seven weeks. For instance, I have never seen so many lazy, yawning pupils in my life.

I will not compare you with the Russian theatre because they love the theatre more than any other nationality.

M. Chekhov

November 30, 1936

for our school. I ask myself what our pupils have done all this time. They have interest for other things, but not for our work. We have had to do the same work again and again because some pupils do not have enough energy to remember where they were standing during the last rehearsal. Then I see between you and me a gap. I have no more interest to work with you because you have no interest to work with me.

During all this time I thought that you could see that our aim is not to create a theatre which will be like any other or some music hall. You should be able to understand that we can work together only by being absolutely with your whole heart and soul. This is my aim, and it is why I came to this school. But I don't see this. Nobody had taken this aim seriously. I am entirely alone among you. I feel that nobody wishes to have this aim. For me this is not only a great tragedy, but a great practical problem as well. I have never been able to work without an aim or idea. Now I have lost it. Day after day I lose my power - I am empty.

The only question is work. Sometimes workers are compelled and forced to work. We are intelligent people, and are not forced to work, but we do nothing. Why? This is a social question. If we are students of our school and we wish to be real social people, we must work and create something for the culture, for society, which we are able to do. If I belong to a Fascist or Communist organization, it is nothing

M. Chekhov

November 30, 1936

because it is less than an idea - it is nothing. But to be part of our society, that is the important thing.

I am lost for the moment. I don't know what I shall do. After this first term I must decide something. What have I decided? I know that some - perhaps five persons - are working. That is clear for me. What shall I think about the others? They have not shown me anything. They have given me no answer to my efforts to give them my whole life. I have devoted my whole life to finding something for actors, and now you young actors don't want it. You must tell me honestly that you do not wish to do it.

It is a very strange psychology for me but please tell me what I shall do. You must understand me because I am no longer able to be silent. I have to speak to you about this because I have to find whether we will have one aim and one language, or whether we have to go to different sides. I am not able to work as it is.

This is a very serious question, and it is not just an attempt to persuade you that you must change your minds and be more serious and have a right to live here. I don't think that anywhere else we could have such beauty and such possibility to work. We have so much time - we can be free from all such things as making a living. But we have to answer for this, and our answer is laziness and yawning!

Sometimes at home I wonder what has happened, and

M. Chekhov

November 30, 1936

I wonder if I am crazy. We are living here and taking all these good things, and giving nothing back. What will Dartington Hall and the Elmhirst family think of this response to their good will, their good understanding? We have a group of people who are very nice, but they are nothing as students. They are making no progress, and in three years we will be at the same place as we are now. We will not be able to proceed with our psychology, with anything. Even our gaiety is empty.

When I see Mr. and Mrs. Elmhirst each day, I feel that I am guilty before them. I have promised to show some results because I know that results can be achieved in seven weeks. But now what shall I say to them? A very nice group, but they are not yet students of the school - I don't speak about actors - they are not yet students of the school.

If you could only compare the work in other countries. In Russia, for instance, I have told you how they are able to work. If you could see only one day in a theatre school in Russia, you would be so ashamed that perhaps you would understand what it means to work, to devote your whole life to one aim. I think perhaps many of you are not quite sure why you came here. You may have other aims. It would be better, then, to go away because this is only spoiling the atmosphere for the workers.

During the Revolution in Russia, during the first time that I was working with workers in different factories,

M. Chekhov

November 30, 1936

it was touching to see how these people, who had no education or knowledge and who had been depressed for centuries, how they tried to work. For hours and hours, after working in their factories, they came and tried to do this with open ears and eyes and souls. Hours and hours we have been sitting on the floor trying to find this, and they have been so tired but they could work until late at night, then a little sleep, and off to the factory, then again and again they came back.¹

We must really try to do something in our life.

This is nothing - you can live years and years, and you will live doing nothing and will die without any idea of why you lived or why you die. Just a mist, a fog, but not an idea. When you will die, you will ask yourself, what have I done? Nothing. This is a great tragedy, not only for me, but for you, too. You don't realize it, but it is a great tragedy.

Other young people in Russia and elsewhere - not workers but students from the universities - they work in the same ways with a purpose. When I tell you to please be crazy about your part, you must believe me that if they are students of a school, they are really crazy; they are full of life, full of ideas, full of the future. And, therefore, having seen all this and having worked so many years in Russia as a director and teacher, I can say that I found in each walk of life always activity and an answer, and we made good progress.

Here is the first time I have met people who don't

M. Chekhov

November 30, 1936

want anything, who are hidden, closed, and cool. I don't know how to work because I feel there is something lacking. I am able to give only my whole knowledge, my whole soul, and my ideal, which I had hoped would be your ideal. If not, then better nothing. Only to get some money and give some work and be very happy and glad - I am not able to do this.

You must decide this question for yourselves. We must understand each other - you must understand me as a friend because you are grown-up people, and I am not a young man, and we must speak frankly and decide whether we are building the work together or not. I am not able to work in any other way, except with full energy and a clear ideal.²