

Michael Chekhov

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Lecture at Labor Stage
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THE PRESENT STATE OF THE THEATRE - HOW TO HELP IT

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Othello

RUSSIAN THEATRE DURING WORLD WAR I:

Let me tell you about the theatre in Russia at the start of World War I. It was almost the main function of the theatre at that time to serve the army, and all of us were acting wherever possible in the front line. At the same time, we were acting in different factories, making speeches to workers and soldiers and engaging in every kind of activity we could develop from the theatre. I noticed that neither the soldiers nor the workers were very interested in the plays in which we were trying to show them the war itself. They wanted to see things which were not at all connected with the war. The same was true in the factories when we spoke to the workers; they always tried to lead us, by means of their questions, away from the theme of the war. That is all I wanted to add to the theme of how we can serve the war effort.¹

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THE PRESENT STATE OF THE THEATRE:

Now for the theme itself. If I speak of things which are not just what you want to hear, you may stop me because I am not sure whether it is just the theme. If one loves the theatre and has a vision about it, then there are two things which occur in one's mind. One is a very frank and free and perhaps not pleasant criticism of the theatre in its present state, and the other is how can it be helped. If I am able to speak about both things at the same time, I will.

First, the pain or criticism which I have while looking at the theatre is that the mainspring of the theatre, the actor and the director, are slaves of the circumstances of the present theatre. I doubt that we actors and directors are doing things which we believe in, or are able to do. From all sides, in different disguises and masks, we hear only one thing - you are not allowed to do this, you are not allowed to do that, it will not be accepted, that is not right, you cannot do this or that. Mostly we hear such words, but do nothing for the theatre and in the theatre.

TIME FOR PREPARATION OF THE PART:

First of all, I can only speak in general terms about this because I am not competent in it, but the idea will be clear. We are not allowed to rehearse and explore the play more than four or five weeks. If that is what we actors and

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directors want, then I have simply to be silent, but I am sure that this is one of the most killing things in the theatre at the present time. I cannot believe, being myself an actor, that I can really create a part in five weeks. I can deceive myself, and the majority of us do deceive ourselves by accepting this condition to prepare a part in five weeks. I deceive myself and my audience by thinking that the creative process can be accomplished in five weeks. Just what can be done in five weeks? We can remember all our old habits and clichés, and re-shift them in a new position, but there is no creativeness, and we don't even try to create a new character because instinctively we know that in five weeks no human being can create anything.

TIME FOR CREATING THE CHARACTER:

You may say that for modern characters, which are created by modern playwrights, there is no need to work more than five weeks because the characters are so familiar to us, so near to us. That is a great mistake. No character is near to us until we have changed ourselves to become the character, and in five weeks we cannot change ourselves to the extent that we can say something new, interesting, and revealing to the audience while performing this modern, "as-if" well-known character.

This is a kind of photograph. If in five weeks we

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portray one of the characters of the modern playwright, we make a photographic picture from the author's book, and in the majority of cases, as far as I can see, the author has always done a better picture than we because he has taken time for his creation. The author has been dreaming about it, he got angry, he got happy, but he got this character without being told he had five weeks, then stop! But we assume we have to take this photographic picture and then think we have added something to the author's words. I don't think we have added, and sometimes I think we have spoiled it.

SHAKESPEARE'S CHARACTERS:

In Shakespeare's plays - if Macbeth or any other character can be created in five weeks, I don't believe in Shakespeare. The actor may be very good, but then Shakespeare must be very bad. If Shakespeare cannot open in the actor's soul new things which the actor did not know before he took the part, then Shakespeare is nothing and the actor is nothing. Shakespeare's plays are things which have to be discovered in each century, in each time, in each new day which we experience anew. Shakespeare is like a bombshell which has not yet exploded.

Every one of us actors can discover in Shakespeare things which will be new for Shakespeare and for us as actors.

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How Othello loves Desdemona - I don't know whether in five weeks we can get the idea of this. We can know how we love or loved, but none of us are Othellos, and why Othello being in love, and being jealous speaks such words as he speaks, that is the problem. It is not enough to take our own ability to love a girl, and Othello's words, and put them artificially together and appear before the audience on the stage. That is chaos. Either we must not take this part at all, or we have to find Othello's love, which is not at all like ours. To find Othello's love one has to work not five weeks, but for I don't know how many weeks, then Othello's words will become the actor's words, and he will not be able to act Othello without these words. But if we really try to penetrate into the imaginary actor's mind who has prepared Othello's part in five weeks and speaks these words of Othello's, I think we will discover that in the actor's mind he is saying, "To hell with these words - I can express it much better in my own way."

This is point one: by circumstance we are not allowed to work more than five weeks. I don't believe in it, and I don't believe the theatre can ever develop in the right way without breaking this barrier. Of course, this is the problem of Unions, etc., and here I am not competent to speak, although I know that all such things are important in considering the question of a time limit for our work.

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Then the Box Office has a mighty hand - all these people with the psychology of Box Office people - this is the thing which really kills the actors' efforts, but they change our psychology, and they take our money. We begin to believe in the Box Office, and the Box Office begins to be for us an authority and that is much more dangerous than to try to prepare Othello in five weeks. It means to become more and more blind and to say that it is right that the play must have a success and that we must earn money by it - for whom, we don't know. We must have a good Box Office, and then everything will be all right, but nothing is really all right.

THE STAR SYSTEM:

Now for point two: the star system in our theatre. This is another dangerous point. No one can say that there are not stars or that there should not be. Quite the opposite. There are stars because there are so many gifted actors, and they must be there, but around these stars there is again a certain kind of unspoken agreement. The modern star is an isolationist. The psychology of the modern star is, "Don't disturb me." And the psychology of all of us surrounding the star is, "If I do something, the audience will perhaps laugh." This psychology is wrong for both sides. For the stars because they degenerate in their psychology and their art, being alone in the desert, as it were, and it spoils the psychology of those of us who are around them because we think

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it is our proper work to serve the stars.

I don't think that everyone who enters the stage is a potential star. If our business on the stage is only to enter and say, "The carriage is waiting," even this sentence and appearance gives the actor the right to appear in a proper, correct way and to be present on the stage, just as the star himself is. In all cases - not only in such an extreme case where the person has only to say one word - in all cases, every actor has the right to have a sufficient amount of rehearsals, and the director's attention, and the audience's attention, and to be able to be in full harmony with all the partners on the stage, including the star himself.

ENSEMBLE OR GROUP FEELING:

The ensemble, or the group feeling as we may call it, is one of the most essential and inspiring things for us as actors. If we don't have this feeling and this joy of being together and creating together, then I must say that we have not yet got the opportunity to enjoy and to develop our profession to the fullest extent. Because the theatre is a profession, and perhaps the only one, except for the orchestra, where everyone has to be in harmony with everyone else. If this possibility is not given - now imagine for a moment how wrong our psychology becomes and has become. We think that the star has the right, the psychological right, to be there alone and that we have no right to be connected

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with the star and with everyone else. This poison which we have already taken in our brain, and begin to believe in, this business of isolating the actors - on the one hand the star, and on the other hand one of the slaves or servants who has to be humble because he is not a star - when we begin to believe in this theatre, we are already blinding ourselves.

THE ACTOR'S PROFESSION:

If we want to develop our profession and our art, which is a great one, perhaps the greatest one because the instrument which we are playing on is we ourselves, with our thoughts, our feelings, our will impulses, our emotions - our joy, pain, love, forgotten tragedies and coming tragedies - it cannot be found anywhere else. Even the violin, which is such a gentle and subtle thing, is not what we are. So our profession can be the greatest one I believe, but certain wrong ideas and psychological mistakes must be killed. One of them, which I have mentioned before, is that we have to act for the Box Office in five weeks of rehearsal, and the second is that we have to be isolated and serve the star, who is also isolated.

THE POWER OF THE CRITICS:

The third point is that, in the modern theatre, we are not allowed to meet and to face the audience. Between us

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and the audience is a row of chairs filled with critics, and they give the command to the audience: what they have to see tomorrow in the theatre, and the audience believes in them. They don't permit the audience to have its personal opinion of things which it is going to see tomorrow. If so-and-so has written that it is bad, the poor audience thinks that it is bad. The audience is kept from us by the critics, and we cannot face the audience because the audience is not brave enough to have its own opinion. And what can we do on the stage? The audience is there, and we are here, and we know that nothing will be taken from the stage, and we don't get anything from the audience - neither inspiration, love, or confidence - nothing because the audience has received the order from the critics how to react to the performance.

We actors know only too well that things which we feel at least in the depth of our soul and consciousness, "My God, how bad it is," how destructive for the present audience it is, and ^{yet} the thing is accepted. I don't need to speak much about it because it is so obvious, but this is the third point which seems to me to be more than danger - danger can be avoided, this is already a fact. Each newspaper every day kills us. If the critic writes about a bad thing which is good, and a good thing which is bad, it is just the same thing. So there is nothing to be happy about if the bad thing is praised, and the Box Office gets the benefit from

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it. So the whole effect is a killing one.

That the audience believes in the critics is detrimental and cannot be cured so easily, but we begin to believe in them. If the critic says it is good or bad, we begin to believe it, and this is our mental disease. We must cure ourselves and find ourselves and be brave enough to say that it is bad, but we must also be able to say that it is good and be happy in saying so because we believe it. Of course, there are many things which enter into this situation. We depend upon them - we have our ambitions, our families, our difficulties to consider, and this makes the critics stronger, and we have to listen to them, and obey them more than we would like to.

THE THEATRE OF THE FUTURE:

These three things: 1. Lack of time for rehearsal and preparation, and the Box Office problem; 2. The star and the isolationist psychology; 3. The critics - these three things are rooted very deeply in our modern cultural life and cannot be changed overnight, of course. But still it seems to me that they can be changed, and it is my personal belief that they will be changed. But how?

The only way I see is a long way, but still a way. It is to find in time such a group of actors, or groups of actors, who will, first of all, go through this pain of realizing how it is with them and the theatre. Through thinking

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about it, through realizing such facts as I have mentioned, and others, through the pain because without pain nothing will come of it. Through pain and despair, if this group of actors will unite themselves and try to work as a group for the ideal performances, ideal from every point of view, everyone could have an ideal and almost each ideal would be all right if the group of actors will work towards it. Then show their performance.

If we have no money and no one will give it to us, then show the performance in a small room, in a cafeteria, without costumes or make-up, simply to show this tremendous desire to overcome these difficulties, these voices around us which tell us we are not allowed. If this strong spirit will be there and will be shown and maintained as long as it is necessary - and maybe it will be very long - if this new life and spirit which must come from the pain on the one hand, and the inspiration of showing the theatre of the future on the other hand - if this will be done by a group of actors, pioneers, then I believe in everything. Then it is just the same for me, whether it will happen tomorrow or in ten years, or in twenty years, or in fifty years. I will be dead then, and will not see this great event - it does not matter. It is not important who will see it, it is important to know that it will be there, and the actor will become the actor with all the rights which the actor has, and will create the theatre which it is worthwhile to create.