

2481
Michael Chekhov

October 30, 1937

ARCHETYPE
HUMOR \

Anton Chekhov (humor, archetype)
Maupassant
Shakespeare

ARCHETYPE: Old Students:

Improvisation. The dull, insignificant family scene can be taken on the basis of the archetype. There is an archetype even in such small things, because nothing on earth is without its archetype. We must take it as an axiom. If the man in everyday life is not able to see the archetype for everything, that is quite understandable, but for us as artists we must be able to penetrate through everything to the archetype. [Anton] Chekhov and Maupassant have written such stories because they lived in the archetype of such things.

Therefore, I want you to develop only one thing - this small commonplace, middle class family in whose midst grows the awful boredom and futility of it all. It is the archetype of this world that we have to produce. The improvisation is only to find this psychology, and if you are able to carry it to the moment of the quarrel, that will be good. The purpose is to penetrate into the archetype. Try to intensify these small feelings until the moment of the quarrel.

Criticism:

The characters were quite dreadful all the time, with the exception of the last fight - instead of being dreadful you

M. Chekhov

October 30, 1937

tried to speak to each other, and you spoiled it. The reason the scene is so slow is because the archetype is not quite open to you; the more it is open the quicker you will go on. It is understandable that it goes so slowly because the character of the theme is that of these hidden things, but what you must pay attention to is to open the way for the archetypal, commonplace life.

Try to find some pictures in the world around us which will help us to enter into this archetypal sphere. (The following were among suggestions given by members of the group:) Cardboard: Colorless fish: Dust that drifts: A newspaper. Nest of mosquitos at night: Smell of cabbage: Worn-out shoes: Imitation Christmas tree: Old coffee stains on a tablecloth: Paper flowers in a glass case: A dirty china cup: A potted aspidistra.

We must take all these things and digest them. In each archetype must sound hundreds of others. For instance, the image of the mosquitos may be quite tragic. We have found some pictures but they are not well elaborated. In spite of this let us divide in groups and try to exercise this improvisation, by trying to hear the voices and suggestions from the archetype.

HUMOR: Criticism:

The more the scene comes from the archetype the more

M. Chekhov

October 30, 1937

charming this dreadful scene becomes, while the more naturalistic it is the less charm it has, and the more pained our audience will be. Right now you are between these two things. Sometimes it is very interesting, and sometimes it is not. You must feel where it comes from - you must not confuse the two things. There is a great danger for the scene to become naturalistic, with such a theme which is so near to naturalism. Therefore, the exercise is very difficult but very useful.

To be able to awaken the artistic approach to the archetype, even in this theme which is full of the poison of everyday life, that is our task. Try to make notes inside yourself as to what is archetypal, and what is not. You will make some naturalistic mistakes, but with time the feeling of truth will give you some archetypes. If you have no feeling of humor it means that you are still too naturalistic. When you can laugh at this sketch, you will be in the realm of the archetype. Several of you were full of humor. Without humor you will not be able to accept this in your own life. Dr. Steiner says that humor is the ability to be over something.

The ideal thing would be if you could complete this exercise, being absolutely full of humor. Anton Chekhov was a great specialist in discovering the secrets of the archetype.¹ He was always laughing at things in which no one could join him. Nobody could accompany the poor man in his humor. He was very much at home in the world of the archetype, but he never

M. Chekhov

October 30, 1937

allowed himself to do small things (which perhaps many of us do), when alone in a room. He never did such small things when alone, and he wrote that the real human being must never do futile things, even when he is alone for one second. As a result, he got this tremendous power to exercise the archetype, and was clairvoyant for these things; and, therefore, he was full of humor when he saw such small things which other people cannot see, and because they were not above this level it was quite normal and nothing to laugh at. He was above this world, and yet at the same time he was absolutely suffering about them but not in them, only above them. He was suffering about them, therefore, he wrote so many sketches which were called "laughter through tears," because he was suffering but laughing at the same time.

Anton Chekhov had the ability to look at the person, and to know his future. A very strange ability, not being clairvoyant, but as an artist he knew the future of the person. When, as an artist, he looked at the person, he knew everything. Once he was sitting in a box at the theatre when some people entered it. He was sitting there in what was absolutely a usual atmosphere for everybody in the theatre. They greeted one another and said some insignificant words, when it was observed that Chekhov was sitting very quietly with an unhappy look on his face. When someone asked him about it, he told them that

M. Chekhov

October 30, 1937

one of the young men present would commit suicide in a few days, and he did. Chekhov was able to foresee, through these small things, coming events which nobody else noticed. They were indications for him of other big things in the future. For him certain kinds of archetypes were open so far that he could see the archetype through a small thing. This is absolutely an artistic ability - he was not at all concerned with religion or occultism and even denied such things, but as an artist he had this ability which we may call his ability to be artistically clairvoyant, through his connection with certain archetypes.

Therefore we see how significant it is for the artist to be able to penetrate into the archetypal world. Shakespeare's realm was quite different, and in his kind of archetypes he was "clairvoyant." But we must do this quite consciously, and not rely upon the gifts in our nature. We must develop the ability to penetrate into the world of the archetype whenever we choose. Chekhov, Maupassant, and Shakespeare have done nothing to develop this - Chekhov's development was only that he wrote what he must write, from morning until evening, on so much paper that it could flood the whole world. This was his idea of development, without any special method. But now this special kind of development is given. With the new social life, and the new political life and everything, a person must strive for some results which he can get. This is the sign of the new times. To get with effort a method and a clear brain and to make the

0881
M. Chekhov

0881
October 30, 1937

way for our ideal which we want as professional people - not in general but having a quite clear and definite Method, one of the points of which is how to penetrate into the archetypal world. If we were Chekhov, or Maupassant, or Shakespeare we could say, if it is given to me very good; but we must say, it must be taken by me.