

JFFC

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MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S TENTH CLASS FOR PROFESSIONAL ACTORS

"CRITICISM OF SCENE BY PETER FRYE"

THE ACTOR'S USE OF OUR METHOD
RADIATION
PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE
THE SPINE
LAUGHTER - OBJECTIVITY
SIGNIFICANCE

Chaliapin
Don Quixote
Romeo and Juliet
Shakespeare
Goethe
Dr. Rudolf Steiner

THE ACTOR'S USE OF OUR METHOD:

Michael Chekhov:

I must say that I was very impressed by the scene. I don't wish to analyze, but in view of our work here I will try. First of all, I will try to analyze from the point of view we have spoken about. It was very interesting, to my mind, because there were four definite levels: 1. The person who speaks - the character. 2. Events about which the character speaks. 3. The atmosphere covering everything. 4. The mood of the person. The impression of these changeable and subtly interwoven things - this we seldom see. There was the atmosphere which didn't belong to the character, and the different mood of the character changed several times, although the atmosphere remained the same all the time. May I ask whether you did any work according to the Method?

Peter Frye:

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I tried to use certain things. I tried to find the psychological gesture of the man, and to work with it. I gave him a center. It helped me tremendously to find different things to do with myself during the long narrative period. I tried to find colors and qualities.

Michael Chekhov:

There was behind this little performance much more than was shown. You knew and felt much more, and gave us just a suggestion, which is always better than to show everything and try to pretend that there is more. It was in good taste, and rich enough by just touching upon it. If you had ever seen Chaliapin, you would realize that that was his ability - always to indicate, but not to show everything he had. That always makes a most fascinating impression, and keeps us spellbound.

Let us take another example - if you enter a cathedral and see different priests celebrating the mass, you will see that the whole secret is whether the priest knows more than he does, whether he believes and knows the spiritual events more than he is going to show - then it is strong. But when he does everything completely and fully, but nothing more, then you feel that he does not know what he is doing. I remember seeing a priest in Italy who was christening a child. The priest was happy and somewhere in his own soul he felt that

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he was not a priest at all, but was making a certain business and joking a little to justify this strange ceremony. He tried to persuade us, by means of these little jokes, that there was something more than he showed.

It can be taken as an absolute rule so that the part has to be elaborated with such care, and long intensity, so that as actors we will always be richer than the play requires. You will see that with "stars," what pleases the audience is that behind them there is something more which is so attractive and fascinating, and we can always develop this quality by digging deeper into the part.

RADIATION:

There was another positive thing in this scene, and that was a very strong radiation. What was good about it was that the actor did not do anything outwardly to help it in the wrong way. You withdrew to such an extent that the outer means of expression became almost a pause. You could make it still more covered, and it would be a complete pause in outer action. In the real pause, the radiation becomes stronger than at any other time. May I ask whether you had in mind to perform a Russian character? If you had not spoken some words to indicate this, I would have guessed that it was a Russian character. It was not a Russian actor, but an American actor producing a Russian character. A most beautiful contradiction. It was a fine thing.

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Question: I felt that at the beginning, the actor was a little too glib, and the scene went along a little too smoothly for the man's feelings. Looking for the archetype, I felt that you did not have in mind the archetype of a person who has had this child. In my own experience, I saw my best friend die, and when I went to explain what had happened, the words came out, but in a way I was inarticulate. It was not so easily narrated. I felt the load on this man's shoulders, but somehow he explained it a little too easily. The inarticulateness of the eulogy was beautifully done in comparison with the beginning, which was just a little too glib.

Michael Chekhov: The actor managed the psychological gesture and the outer gesture very well. It was hidden and yet there.

Question: I think Peter should do another piece of work in which the problems are such that he gives of himself completely.

Michael Chekhov: It is very good for us because it gives us so much to discuss.

PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE:

Peter Frye: I worked out the psychological gesture for myself, and then I didn't know whether to make it physical or not. I like the idea of it.

Question: As I understand it, the psychological gesture is for the actor to work upon when he is working out a part. He uses it to help himself find the character. Does that mean that he incorporates the gesture into his performance?

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Michael Chekhov: No. The psychological gesture is your own secret. It is the basis on which you stand, but how you act is quite a different thing. If you act without the psychological gesture, it may seem that you can act freely, without paying attention to the fact that it is shown outwardly or not. In almost all cases the psychological gesture must not be shown outwardly, because then it has more charm, more power.

Peter Frye: But you do have the choice of making it a physical gesture and showing it.

Question: It still is the gesture which the actor finds for the character, which he can put into a physical gesture which will give him inspiration. Yet in its outward physical form the gesture might be a very crazy one, although for the actor it gives him a feeling of the character. But the audience might not like it at all.

Michael Chekhov: About the psychological gesture. For instance, if you look at different persons in your everyday life, you will see that each person has a psychological gesture, although the person does not know what it is. When we are acting on the stage, we cannot rely upon this natural kind of psychological gesture which every human being has. We have to create the psychological gesture, because the character is not the real being, until we give it life. Therefore, it is necessary because it is just what happens in the psychological life of everyone of us. You will see that the simpler the character

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of the person is, the more primitive the psychological gesture is. For instance, the political agitator of a very cheap kind would produce a very crude gesture. In another example, the Englishman is a person filled with will which he has to cover even from himself. You can very often see a typical English gesture when an Englishman puts his fist in his palm. Very often, they use the same gesture. Italian people have a similar gesture, but up in the air, because they are much lighter. The gestures of Latvians and Lithuanians are very small and short.

Question: I don't believe in a psychological gesture in a psychological sense. The actor's desire is much richer and more emotional than just to convey an idea. In the case of the psychological gesture, you might choose a gesture which is more native to you as an actor, rather than the psychological gesture of the character.

Michael Chekhov: This decision should take place between the director and the actor - to share the information regarding the gesture and then the subconscious power will choose the gesture which ^{will} satisfy both. This talk which we are having about the gesture is a good example of how it should be done between the director and the actor.

Peter Frye: I found an entirely different gesture for myself, and perhaps I was too biased by my own gesture.

Question: I agree with the criticism that has been made about

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Peter's scene. I criticize an actor on what he chooses to do.

Answer: If you are the director, you have to criticize.

Question: I would like to clear up the question of the difference between the actor's gesture, which grows out of the psychological gesture. For instance, in the part of Julie in Liliom, I thought there might be a great deal of feeling but with the inability to speak - a certain quality of shyness. As I understand it, the gesture is purely for the understanding of the part, so that everything the character does or speaks is colored by it. It is not something which can be used on the stage, but, on the other hand, there might be a part in which the character can very well use the psychological gesture. So it depends a great deal on the part itself. The gesture can sometimes be incorporated into the acting, but mostly it is a gesture which one experiences and keeps in mind when one performs.

Answer: Yes. For instance, Don Quixote can use his strong gesture because he is such a primitive character, and to underline this quality he can use the gesture, and he would be looked upon as a child with white hair. It all depends on the character.

THE SPINE:

Question: Will the psychological gesture lead us to the spine?

Answer: Yes. The spine holds the whole part, but sometimes

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we have the idea that the spine is stiff. The psychological gesture is always flexible. Everything will come together at one point. It is also very important to penetrate into the psychology of some person from the point of view of race or nationality, by listening to what the language conveys. For instance, let us take two extreme nationalities - English and Russian. In every sense they are opposite, and now look at the word they have for expressing oneself. The English is "I", and the Russian "Ya" - "ah" is opening everything, while "ee" is a very thin thing like an arrow. The Russian starts timidly, and then goes out into the whole universe, while the Englishman is quite the opposite, he looks around and then makes everything for himself...

For instance, if we read Romeo and Juliet, and listen to Romeo's speeches you will hear what sounds he uses, and then you will realize that Juliet uses quite different sounds. So you can even underline certain sounds which the character uses, and it can be turned into the psychological gesture. Of course, we find this only in such a genius as Shakespeare or Goethe - unconsciously, of course. You can underline certain sounds and you will see which character speaks them. But this is connected with speech, and in the speech method of Dr. Rudolf Steiner he explains this and it is very simply shown how the character arises out of the sounds.

Everything can be used for exploring and finding out

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what the psychological gesture of the character is. If we are observing someone walking - how they walk, what gestures they make - there is a psychological gesture hidden. We have to imagine the character on the stage - what sounds he speaks, what kind of voice he has, how he walks, what kind of pause he makes, etc. If we imagine all these things, then we will discover the psychological gesture of the character.

Peter Frye: You spoke in one class about the feeling of ease of an actor whose control of his actor's technique was so great that, while playing a very tragic scene, he was able to turn aside and make a witty remark. I used to have the other idea, that I had to be involved to the extent of breaking chairs, etc. When I was working on this part, which I adapted from a very sentimental story, and it was very sentimental at first, I was tremendously relieved. Since then I have tried to work at it, and although I feel myself to be in control of the character I have created, and I am observing it and taking everything in my stride, I still keep performing and sending out my character. At the same time, I don't feel easy or good or open, and I am wondering if that control takes that toll.

Answer: It seems to me that you have not to control the first character interpretation, if in the first character you were crying and acting very fully. It was another character. You can have control over the first character just as over the

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second. But it seems to me that in the process you have changed the character. My impression is that it is this holding back one hundred percent in the wrong way, which makes you tired. It is the manner of acting more than the style. If you are getting tired, then it is a sign that one little thing is wrong. But it was so slight, and so overwhelmed by good things, that it was no great fault. Such getting tired as you have described today comes always from.--Go on with the sketch.

LAUGHTER - OBJECTIVITY:

When we are laughing, we always step one step higher than we were before, because the ability to laugh is based, in the human psychology, on a previous life and previous experience which we have overcome. We are now higher than this previous experience. For instance, there are some things which offend one for one's whole life, and one is never able to overcome it. Suddenly the person feels that it no longer touches him, and that he has grown up one more step inwardly, and is now above this thing or things. This step higher means that we are able to laugh more than before, and the opposite is true that when we are able to laugh we are able to overcome certain weaknesses in our character, such as to be offended, etc.

To be able to laugh means to get a more objective point of view of oneself. If I laugh at others, it is not

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very beneficial for me, but if I laugh at myself, it means I am growing. The actor must have this ability. The more we can look objectively upon ourselves, the more our artistic abilities are flourishing, because the thing which keeps us contracted at times is our selfishness and our concern with ourselves; then we are slaves to our own personalities.

TWO STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS:

It is necessary to have two consciousnesses as Goethe had - one was always observing him, and the other was Goethe himself. The more we can do this, the more we develop the ability to laugh, and quite the opposite, if we are only laughing, without this other consciousness, we go on down to giggling, which gives nothing except that the brain becomes weak and the heart empty. To save laughter from this almost idiotic state of mind, we have to be tragic at the moment we begin to laugh, so that sorrow, at the moment we are laughing, makes the most human combination. Giggling kills our creative process and abilities, and we have to destroy it with seriousness which must be there simultaneously.

The tragic attitude towards life must be developed by a very simple means. One has to look upon certain tragic events in life - simply concentrate on them, and see what they mean. For instance, what does it mean that Japan has attacked America with this sly business. If we really look at it and absolutely concentrate on it, we shall become tragic, because

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it is tragic. The ability to laugh we can also develop by trying to look at things which don't seem to be funny. For example, take a button and look at it long enough, and you will feel that you are going to laugh - it is a terribly humorous thing. These two abilities - to laugh about the button and to be saved from giggling by looking at Japan's behaviour - and both are necessary for the actor.

SIGNIFICANCE:

Everything on the stage must be significant - even if we are playing the most naturalistic play - everything must be done significantly. The actor must have inside him the feeling of significance at all times. I appeal to your instinctive feeling of significance because it is so near to the actor and so simple and will give to the actor, first of all, a very good style. Each of us can be significant only in his own individual way, and if we find the significance which suits us individually, then this significance will creep into our acting and will give us our own individual fine style. Another benefit will be that the audience will always follow us because if it sees something which is significantly expressed inwardly by the actor, the audience will follow him, and be with him, and help him.

Another important benefit is that when we develop this ability of significance, we shall lose the necessity to overcome the space in the theatre. Space will lose its wrong

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meaning for us almost immediately. For instance, if I look significantly to the left, the person sitting in the most remote part of the theatre will see, because even if they cannot actually see, the impression will be there, and the imagination of the audience has immediately grasped it because of this significance which they have seen. The smallest movement with the eye and face, or that the actor was pale or blushed, perhaps the audience could not actually see, but because it was done with significance, it seemed to be there. This significance is in the actor instinctively. Animals move marvelously because of this instinct, even the little insect moves with natural pleasure. Just so, our instinctive significance must be awakened by simple exercises, and it will give great pleasure to the actor while he is on the stage.

Exercise:

Sitting as you are, move your right hand and try to make it significant for yourself. That is the whole secret. We will experience our whole bodies differently because of this significance which is just as instinctive to us as is the animal's movement to it. Now look to the left significantly, and back again. Now look up and down in one movement, expressing this significance. It is the best means to attract the audience's attention. We are always looking for the audience's attention while on the stage, and when the audience does not look at us we are ill. Sometimes we try to use other means

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to attract the audience and waste our time, whereas we can use significance and the audience will look at us at once.

Exercise:

Now let us make a quick movement and preserve the significance. While we are doing these exercises, we must overcome one thing, which is the tendency to become a little stiff and tense. Drop this and let it be a purely psychological state. On the one hand it may make one stiff, and on the other hand the significance can be so light, easy, and true that it carries us too far away and is too much, then immediately it breaks like a soap bubble. So we must find the correct type of significance without it becoming too bodily or too spiritual. Once I was scolding a person in my private life, and I made a very banal movement. I saw that the other person was so impressed by this action, because I was doing it significantly, and I lost the whole meaning of the thing! Now do an exercise by looking at each other significantly, and then lowering the eyes. Sometimes by ignoring a thing you make it significant, and sometimes we stress insignificant things to such an extent that they become significant in the wrong way.