

Michael Chekhov

March 16, 1935

THREE LESSONS GIVEN TO BEATRICE STRAIGHT AND
DEIRDRE HURST BY MICHAEL CHEKHOV

New York, March, 1935

These three lessons were given by Michael Chekhov in March, 1935 to Beatrice Straight and Deirdre Hurst during the time that he was appearing in New York with his Moscow Art Theatre company. The lessons were given in Russian as Chekhov knew no English at that time. Mme. Tamara Daykarhanova acted as interpreter, and Deirdre Hurst took shorthand notes of the lessons.

FIRST LESSON¹

SCENIC TIME
THE IMAGINATION
THE ACTOR AND THE PART
EXPRESSING THE IMAGE
CONCENTRATION
MOVEMENT - THE CENTER
COMPOSITION - HARMONY
THE WORD - THE VOICE

SCENIC TIME:

Improvisation Exercise:

You are awaiting the arrival of someone whom you love very much. Show your extreme happiness, then the growth of the fear that perhaps he will not come, and then your unhappiness when you realize that he is not coming. All this takes place in a period of two minutes.

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1. The actor must develop for himself a sense of time, which has nothing to do with the actual clock.
2. In order to make the tempo quicker, you must break up your scene into more "beats." It is not necessary to increase the tempo of the "beats" themselves, but there must be more of them.
3. Give yourself problems in timing for fifteen minutes, for ten minutes, or for half an hour, in order to develop a sense of scenic time, which has nothing to do with the actual time.
4. The actor who possesses this feeling of time on the stage will never hurry, and suffer from it. He will be always outwardly and inwardly free and at ease. The inner and outer freedom is the only condition. Your own stage timing, not life timing, is the open door to the great expression possibilities.
5. Tempo on the stage depends not on the watch, but on our feelings, our soul, and our moods. Therefore, it can be increased with the increasing of the emotions - of the feelings.

THE IMAGINATION:

First visualize something in your imagination - a fantasy, for instance. Establish the situation in your imagination - see a very clear design of everything you will do - see every detail clearly, and then do it.

Your imagination must be trained in this way. If you will train your imagination, when you take a part, you will be able to foresee everything in your brilliant imagination, and then you can just go and do it. That is the ideal thing, and you can reach it by certain exercises.

If an actor starts to rehearse and does not visualize something, his imagination is not working. This is the worst

thing an actor can do. You must detail something which is foreseen by your imagination. The actor must visualize the whole part in his imagination.

THE ACTOR AND THE PART:

An example from life: Two people who have never met before meet each other. They sense that in both their destinies something uncommon has to happen. On the other hand, you may know that your paths will never meet. Just so with the actor. Here is a part, and you meet with it, and you feel there is something uncommon between you and the part, which makes it right for you. There are other parts which you may want to play, but no matter how hard you try, they will never be right for you - your destinies will go parallel. You can help to overcome this by exercises. Whether you are physically fitted for the part or not is another question.

EXPRESSING THE IMAGE:

Exercise:

Visualize quickly and clearly, and then instantly register physically, mentally, and facially a feeling of "I don't want..." In your imagination you must, for one instant, visualize yourself and the whole situation in every detail, and then express it instantly - like a statue. The same with "Beautiful" - you must visualize yourself as you would look seeing something beautiful, and do it immediately. Like a

sculptor would mold a statue in clay. You are the clay. Again with "I beg you," and "I am running away." you must see it first.

The problem is to develop your imagination so that you will react instantly to every problem. This is not because you cannot do it, but because your imagination has not been trained this way. Our imagination is not flexible enough - this only comes through training. It is a difficult thing to make one's imagination so flexible that instantly you will be able to make us see what you have visualized.

CONCENTRATION:

This is the basic thing in life; without it you can do nothing on the stage. You cannot have too much concentration, and if you have the ideal concentration, it is a magical thing. What you feel you see - what you see you feel.

Some elementary exercises for the imagination. Someone gives you a word, and you have to see this word as an image in your imagination, and instantly you must react to it. Don't detail it, but grasp it as you saw it in the first instant. Any word will do. This is a very important moment - the first thing you see in your imagination. After that there is the work of putting details on this image, but that requires other exercises. Form the words in your mind, and keep them there.

MOVEMENT - THE CENTER:

All movements of the legs, arms, and body start from the one place - high in the chest between the breastbone. Feel as if you are a pair of scissors and that your legs and arms move in one piece from that center in your chest. You must always retain this feeling of center, no matter what age the character, or what part you are playing. This center is organically right. If you have to play an old part, start from this center, and you will know where you are to be old. (It is the same principle as with Madame Daykarhanova's make-up.)

Exercise:

Walk around, moving the arms, doing anything you like but always retaining this feeling of center.

COMPOSITION - HARMONY:

This is a most important thing on the stage. Composition is something which is organically right, just as the center of movement is right. Composition is the feeling of complete harmony. To achieve it we must sense each other, love each other, and have complete friendship for each other.

Exercise:

Feeling the center of the body, move toward each other quite freely. When satisfied with a harmonious position, hold it as a pose.

THE WORD - THE VOICE:

Your voice does not come from your diaphragm, throat, or lips, but out of you and in front of you. You must visualize a spot in front of you where your voice is.

Exercise:

Say a sentence beautifully, then harshly, and make the difference not with intonation, tone, or stress, but in the quality of feeling in the voice; for instance, "Mary had a little lamb." Then the word "Mary," then send your voice to different places. First near to you, and then farther away, by degrees, trying each time to reach just that spot and nowhere else.

Review:

Your imagination must come through your whole body. Unless it does so, it is of no use.

Exercise:

Do the exercise of visualizing a word and then reacting to it instantly - like a statue. For example, "I am running." First to see it and then do it like a statue and hold. Then find out the difference between what you did and what you saw. Try to imagine it much more clearly and then do it again. Study every detail of it in your mental image, and then very carefully copy it in your own body. Ask yourself

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if it "clicks" exactly with what you saw in your vision.
Other examples, "I order," and "I submit."

This mental image must be absolutely clear-cut,
not blurred. When you make this mental image, it is like a
mold into which you must fit yourself. When you achieve this
exact copy, you will feel a great sense of happiness. The
imagination will conquer the body. It is wrong for the body
to conquer the imagination.

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