

Michael Chekhov

February 7, 1938

AESTHETIC CONSCIENCE
PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE (IN OBJECTS, SETTINGS, ETC.)
ATMOSPHERE
STYLE

I would like to say something about Terry's plays [Alibaba and The Forty Thieves and The Golden Princess]. One thing is absolutely and instinctively right. This is a kind of freedom your actors have. It is so necessary for each rehearsal, and sometimes we lose this because of wrong behaviour of the director. (I do this very often). Sometimes something is going on inside of me which disturbs me and the actors quite subconsciously, and then I see we lose the freedom. I know this very well from my own experience. I must point out that this freedom which is in Terry's play will bring you fruits.

AESTHETIC CONSCIENCE:

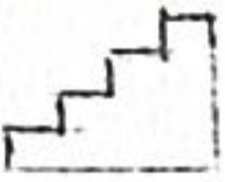
But, I would suggest to Terry to be aware of two kinds of mistakes which actors often make. Sometimes the aesthetic conscience is lost. For instance, in the Robber scene this morning. It was very nicely done, but the voices were bad. It is something which must not be done under any circumstances. The whole beautiful, simple idea of the robbers overcoming Kassim, was killed through the ugly sounds on the ear. If it remains unnoticeable, then it grows and we will do more such unpleasant things which will be so disturbing. The director must always point out that this is unaesthetic.

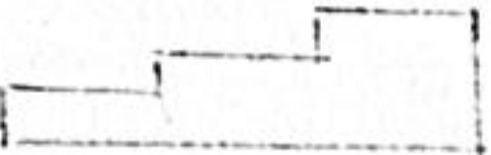
PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE: IN OBJECTS, SETTINGS, ETC.

Today I want to speak with you theoretically about the psychological gesture, and then really to apply it. This talk today will be the transition to tomorrow's review of old settings. We shall prepare the point of view from which we have to judge the settings, on the basis of psychological gesture.

We have spoken about psychological gesture as something which is organic, bound together with the human body and human psychology, but is to be found everywhere, not only in the human body. In nature, in the living things, and in dead things. In everything, and everywhere an artist can find or create psychological gestures which are not in immediate connection to the human body.

For instance, this stick has a gesture. The length, thickness and color of this stick makes a certain impression on the human soul, and this soul, if it is an actor's or artist's, reacts on all these impressions, and this reaction can be made or molded as if it is psychological gesture. If I am concentrating on the stick with the desire to find the gesture of this stick, it really gives me the impression that the gesture is made by the means of the stick's form, shape, color, position, etc. If so, then we have to think of the following part of our art which is the impression made by settings in the theatre.

If everything for an artist's mind makes a psychological gesture, that means that the artist can combine the things around him so that all these things will make a certain gesture. For instance, if the actor has to take a  staircase he can take this staircase and put it on the stage, and this staircase is something which makes a gesture. A gesture up, or if necessary, down; it depends on many things. This staircase is the part of the setting in which we are going to act, and this staircase has a certain amount of activity - certain qualities. It is hard, and it is persistent, it makes a certain effort, the gesture is lying in it, and so on. The gesture is there in this staircase.

Imagine that we have to perform something which we consider has a gesture which has quite different qualities from that. We have to find these qualities inside of us as actors, as far as it concerns us as actors, but we have also to find the same gesture in the setting around us. For instance, we can take the following form of the staircase  and you will see that there is quite a different psychology in this staircase, and the psychology of the whole stage which surrounds the actors is always something which is one thing; one harmonious whole with the actor.


Therefore, it is not a matter of indifference what

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kind of setting the actor has. The surrounding can help him to act, or hinder him; and not only the actor but the audience, which is much more important. If the setting as a composition of certain gestures around the actor, is disharmony with the creative idea, then the audience will subconsciously do the following thing: I am following the actor's acting but something will make me unhappy - as audience I do not know what it is, but perhaps it is the chair which has too high a back. Perhaps the gesture of the whole scene requires that the chair will be low, with a low back. Then it will make harmony with the actor's acting, and the audience will feel much more receptive because of this small subconscious thing. Therefore, the question of the gestures of settings around the actor is not something outward, but it belongs to the psychology of the actor's acting, in which surrounding I develop my actor's gesture.

Now, how to find or to create the psychological gesture in things around us. We have to do it inwardly and outwardly. We must not say, for instance, that the triangle,

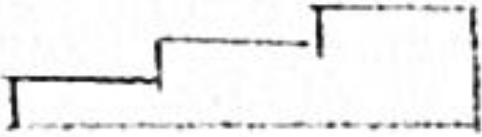
 which makes a certain gesture, has a certain gesture - it is not enough. We have to do this gesture inwardly, then we have the right to say the triangle has a certain gesture. Again, it is the same principle which lies as a ground under everything in our school. Everything must

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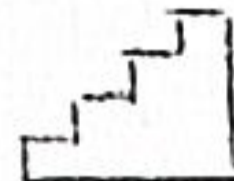
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be done. In all our exercises there is always a certain point which can be done. Even when the director gives his actors certain new pictures to imagine, they must follow actively, not receive just passively. There will be a great difference in the future work. If you do it by taking the imagination passively, you are not only not preparing yourselves as actors, but quite the opposite, you are consuming certain power which you could use later.

When I receive the description of a scene passively, then I get a certain satisfaction as actor, which is bad. Now I am only a spectator, or the person who has to be entertained, and I have to a certain extent finished with what has been told me, it is digested, and I have nothing more to do with it. Therefore, it is so important in our rehearsals to get the habit of taking all things actively, doing them inside. Again, we look at the triangle and we understand that the gesture of triangle is, for instance, up. It is nothing for us; we have to do this inside, then we will understand this gesture. The triangle wants something and we must want the same thing.

Will you please, inwardly, do this gesture. Do it in different directions, for example, up or down, which is quite different. Will you please do this staircase 


then this one

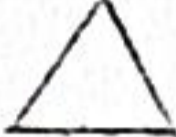





You can feel the psychology of these

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different staircases. Now this triangle  and this

triangle  Do you feel the psychology of these triangles? Two different characters, two different beings.

Then this triangle  Now, compare the psychology between the triangles  and this staircase 

Give them your life, or rather take from them something which gives you a certain kind of life.

If we are able to awaken in us the gesture which lies behind different things in nature, or artificial things (such as the staircase), we will be able to understand what it really means to have scenery around the actor. Gradually, in time, we will develop a certain instinct, a real artistic instinct to be able to say the setting is right, or the setting is wrong, it must be done so because of this gesture.

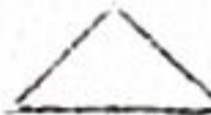

The inner gesture, which we continuously have to do as actors, will be our new instinct, which will lead us as the future theatre, as only a really good and creative principle can lead a group or a person.

To be led by something which is on the principle the same nature as the profession, means the most beautiful thing. And the psychological gesture is our profession, because from a certain point of view we do nothing but psychological gesture in our speech, costumes, colors, radiations,

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lighting, etc. Then, if we are able to awaken that, we awaken our souls - the point from which our whole profession starts.

It requires quite careful and long concentrated work and exercise, which really cannot be done in the work, but in private life. When you are walking on the street, for instance, the trees can teach us so much about this gesture. Will you choose a tree or one branch of the tree and try to create the gesture. You will find in this gesture, or in that gesture, all these things we have spoken of: activity, direction, intensity, quality, time, space. Everywhere. For instance, the time of this one triangle  is different from the other triangle  and the space, the imaginary space, is quite different.

If we take a stone or a crystal - we must know that all moving things have a gesture - it must not always be static things. Moving things are doing the gesture too, and perhaps much more obviously. For instance, colors are doing gestures with individual interpretations, but certain colors make certain impressions. Red is always more active than blue. But what does this mean? It means the gesture of red is in a certain way active, and the gesture of blue is passive. The color makes the gesture. Music also is full of gesture. Speech, as you know from Miss Crowther, is full of gestures; and the whole purpose is to awaken our speech so

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that it becomes gesture. An arpeggio scale. Do this gesture. Now contrast with the chromatic scale. Now, do you feel the tremendous difference?

We do not hear the gesture, we do not see the gesture. We do not even guess that this whole structure makes a tremendous gesture. If you take it in you can act, you can speak, or move - there is a whole story to act, describe, move in this. We are blind to this gesture because we do not need it in our everyday life, or in our profession now. Our profession is contracting, undeveloped and shrunken. But if our profession is to be developed, then it must be developed in this way, so that we may be specialists for reading, hearing, seeing everywhere psychological gesture. Then we will be able to awaken certain powers in our creative nature which cannot be awakened without this specializing in the gesture.

For instance, in music it is quite clear and obvious that each sentence can be taken as a gesture. For our imagination it is the same. Our images, if they are passive they are bloodless - very pale and very gestureless. What does it really mean to imagine actively? It means to do gestures in our imagination, or by means of our imagination. If we imagine we are donkeys, passively, it does not give us anything for the depth of our creative souls. We must do something that awakens certain depth of power. Now imagine we are the

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donkeys in Terry's fairy tale - we are actively doing gestures with our imagination.

We will take another example in literature. Each writer, each playwright, has gestures. I do not mean that he describes this or that - no, it is how he writes. It is well known that one writes by doing strong and temperamental gestures; by saying some words and omitting others - he molds with gestures which are strong and powerful, and another writes - how he combines the words, not the content - so that it is soft and feminine, only by the kind of writing. There is nothing in the whole world which is not doing a certain gesture for a real artist who is walking through this world creatively. That means that if an artist is a really creative traveller he travels by giving gestures to everything, and taking gestures from everything and everybody.

There is a certain realm or region where chaos reigns. There is always chaos somewhere, and the whole world, for an artist, falls into two realms, two worlds. One is what is usually called the cosmos, something which has form, which is created, and the other is chaos, which is not yet created. The artist always walks between or through these two worlds. What does it mean to be an artist? To make cosmos out of chaos. An artist always finds where the chaos is and makes a cosmos of this psychologically, physically, spiritually.

What does it mean? It means that the artist ap-

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proaches chaos with the ability to make gestures - psychological gestures, and then chaos at once becomes obedient to his creative spirit and mind. As an example, if we approach this chaos, with the idea of making a gesture out of it we will find so many gestures. But you must make an effort to grasp it, to solidify or mold it. For instance, out of chaos you take some part and mold a gesture out of it by being able to see the gestures. There are, of course in the cosmos certain substances which are absolutely chaotic. The white of an egg is absolute chaos. From the point of view of chemistry there is no organization there - it does not really exist as a form. It is only chaos. This is a true physical example. It would be much more interesting for us to have psychological examples of chaos.

Tomorrow we will look on these settings from the point of view of the gesture, which is created out of this material which we can consider as chaos. . . Material, wood, etc., what kind of gestures will be made from it? It is for us chaos, out of which we are going to create certain psychological gestures for the setting.

ATMOSPHERE:

We shall continue the exercises for atmosphere which we did on Friday. The atmosphere is much more flexible than we think, or better to say than we have experienced. So

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far, we have worked mainly with things like the famous cathedral atmosphere which remains unchangeable. You have done this cathedral atmosphere very well. Other atmospheres such as The Fishing Scenes were well done sometimes, but they were inclined to be heavy and perhaps a bit clumsy, but they were not badly done.

Please do not confuse the two things. The atmosphere was well done. It is sometimes necessary to keep the same atmosphere for a long time. It is not a bad thing. It must be done. But, I want to point out that the nature of the atmosphere has a certain flexibility which we have not developed yet in our group. We must be able to change the atmosphere as flexibly as we change our gestures. For this aim I think we have to do certain exercises. I have noticed during our recent rehearsals ^{of} Mr. Shdanoff's play and Henry's play, that sometimes the atmosphere with which we start the scene comes quite naturally, and then remains behind because the action goes on, but the atmosphere is not flexible enough and simply disappears. You must develop the ability to follow the events so that the atmosphere follows them as easily as you follow them as actors by doing objectives, gestures, etc. The atmosphere must be flexible enough to be able to change when each new event occurs on the stage from your own action. Therefore, we shall do some exercises.

Now, I will tell you what kind of atmosphere you

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have to take. I will tell you what happens and you have to see this new event or change, and to follow it with the atmosphere. Then another change which must be followed with the atmosphere. It must rise quite naturally, as the action arises. For example, the door opens - I have to act without knowing why I have to act. If I have this ability of keeping and spreading the atmosphere, it will follow my action.

Take the atmosphere as we have done it last time: The sitting room in the widow's house, and the strange girl. (Now create the atmosphere as if you were acting.) This strange girl with the paper flower in her hair, ^{repeating "Mother,"} and the widow saying, "Whose Mother?". Quiet, suspicious atmosphere. Scandal is here. The atmosphere of expectation that perhaps this is a scandal. The whole room knows that the son is a strange person and anything can be expected. Therefore, everybody thinks there is some strange connection between the son who has been living abroad, and the beggar girl. This feeling comes to the surface when she says, "Mother".

Now follow the atmosphere of the events I will describe to you: The girl looks in the eyes of the general's widow, who sees that there are tears in the girl's eyes. She looks so strangely at the general's widow that we guess she is not looking at her, but is looking at something beautiful which is beyond her. She is looking at somebody who is not there. She says, "My mother." The widow asks her in

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a whisper, "Whose mother?". Then the servant enters the room with quite a different atmosphere and breaks the atmosphere. In great excitement he announces, "Madam, your son has come back - he is here and is coming in a few minutes." The girl stops crying - her face is burning and her eyes are flaming. Now it is clear that the son and she are in some way connected. We hear his footsteps below - he is getting nearer and nearer and as he gets nearer his steps quicken, and then slow down before the door. The door is opened - he is here. The mother gets up and says, "Stop. Before you embrace me my son, tell me, who is this girl." Pause. The son answers, "She is my wife."

Now the atmosphere is changed. There is chaos in the atmosphere. Everybody begins to move and speak chaotically. Do not do it, but do it in your imagination and radiate the atmosphere, through your group feeling in your imagination. Now, quite unexpectedly you hear strange steps, as if somebody is running through the rooms, and it is strange because no one walks through this house like that. The man in spectacles appears. No one knows him. He introduces himself quite freely. His piercing nature pushes everybody back, and everybody feels he has to give space (psychologically) otherwise he will be hurt by this active, piercing person. He tells the story of how the son has married this strange girl. He knows everything in a very cynical

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way, without any really romantic explanation.

Criticism:

The atmosphere was not strong enough, and the change almost unnoticeable, but it does not matter, for we will exercise this doing gestures with atmosphere, and in time we will get this ability, not only to follow the events, but to guess at once what kind of atmosphere belongs to this event, to that moment. Please remember this idea of flexibility of the atmosphere, and the possibility to act on everything with the atmosphere. There are no situations where the atmosphere cannot be created. It can be created always - sometimes with more effort and penetrating into the situation. It is sometimes difficult to find the atmosphere, especially in comedy, but it is always possible and always necessary.

STYLE:

Question: Why is it more difficult in comedy?

Answer: The nature of comedy is the succession of events, and drama the succession of moods. The real approach to comedy and drama from the point of view of the director is that in drama it ^[atmosphere - mood] is much more important for the director. When the director is going to direct tragedy, he must be more careful with the inner psychological gesture. When he is going to direct comedy he must try to create the gesture of events. In comedy the action is much more important than in

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drama. For instance, in a dramatic scene she enters and he enters, and at that moment a chair falls down. In drama it is more important what she is thinking when he appears, and why he says these words, why the chair falls down - each symbol is important. It is quite a different approach for the director, although in both comedy and drama the actor has to act fully both the inner and outer events.