

Michael Chekhov

January 27, 1938

PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE  
QUALITIES  
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STYLE

PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE:

We shall continue our study of the psychological gesture. I hope you have thought about the psychological gesture and if not, I will ask you to do this. I must insist on you doing this in your free time, as the time we are here together is insufficient, because the psychological gesture although it is very simple, requires time to digest. Without being digested it is quite useless, and then we live in the illusion that we have something, when actually we have not.

Point 1. The first thing to consider in connection with the psychological gesture is that the gesture made by one person influences another person, and also influences the person who has originally made the gesture.

Point 2. The complete human being consists of three main activities: thinking or imagining, feeling, and willing, and they are in certain connection with three parts of our body: head zone, heart zone, and limb zone. We use the psychological gesture for the aim of reviving and evoking our feelings and inner life, and this means using the whole body when doing the gesture.

Point 3. The psychological gesture, whatever it is,

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must be found as a piece of art. It must be chosen and prepared with great love and understanding, and it must have in it certain things about which I am going to speak.

QUALITIES:

First, the psychological gesture must be filled with qualities - we must fill it. This means, that if we are going to do a certain gesture, "I am going to open my whole body, my whole being," I must ask myself what qualities I want to incorporate in this gesture, because the gesture itself can mean nothing or it can mean too much, which is also nothing. It must be something definite, and first of all it must be filled with certain qualities. Will you please do this gesture:

From the center of our chest we are going to move our whole being - we move our arms, our heads, but streams are going through our legs as well. Will you open your whole being by doing this psychological gesture. Now do it with the quality of caution.

Under the term of qualities, we may have really so many things - almost everything - and this makes us absolutely free by using psychological gesture, and gives us great freedom. We open with the gesture which has the quality of caution. This fills our whole body, and of course the soul, at the moment when we are making a gesture. The following points are important:

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If I say to myself, "I must have for this or that part the quality of caution," then the question arises what I shall do if I don't get this quality? I cannot command my soul. I may say to myself, "Now I am full of the feeling of caution," but actually I am not full of it. This is the one thing which in all theatre work causes great suffering. We know what we want but we cannot get it. It is a miracle for us. We cannot command ourselves to be full of love, or full of hatred, but we can always do the gesture. This is in our power, and when we are masters we are able to feel this small secret, which is really a big secret, and if we are able to do a gesture and to fill it, then we are able to command our soul to get the quality of caution.

First of all, it is possible by doing the gesture to fill it with certain qualities. Do it several times and concentrate. (You have to repeat scales many, many times on the piano). We have to do the same, always with the quality of caution. I want you to do the gesture of opening. Repeat always the same. Our arms and body have to be filled with the same quality, and they have to be cautious.

As a result of such exercises repeated many times, and if we are experienced enough in using the gesture, the aim is to evoke in our souls certain emotions and feelings which we need as actors, without torturing ourselves with the uncertainty of whether the feeling will come or not.

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Will you please do the same gesture with the quality "I open my being" with great effort. I take consciously such different things: with effort or with caution. If you exercise this thing you will get gradually certain feelings which you are able to use on the stage if you need them. Don't forget the legs. Don't forget the breath. Have only the illusion that you are making an effort. This illusion is really much better than real effort.

Will you please compare these two different qualities by doing the same gesture first with the quality of caution, then with the quality of effort.

Do the same gesture with the quality of warmth. Remember that all these qualities must live in our bodies, not in our minds. Without this we will fall into the mistake of having beautiful ideas in our minds, but will be unable to do them. The secret of gesture is to overcome this separation between body and mind. The whole body, the whole being must open itself with warmth.

Do you feel or anticipate that your whole body can be filled with this quality? And do you feel that this is really a trick, because we appeal to our body, and we get our soul in it?

Will you then go through the three gestures. First, with the quality of caution. Concentrate. The same gesture with the quality of effort. Pay attention during this lesson, because we are really penetrating into different realms of

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our own psychology. Then, the third gesture of warmth. The whole body, the whole being is full of these qualities. This is the work we are going to do - how to fill our own bodies with the qualities we want.

Now will you please make the same gesture with silver and cold qualities. We have color now. The cliché of our understanding of life. I can open myself being absolutely cold, and this ability to combine things which are sometimes quite far removed and not akin to each other, gives originality. For example, I rob somebody with love in my heart. In other words, combination of contrasts. The complete gesture will help us and give us our own psychology in our own hands, which actors need so badly. I want you to think very much of psychological gesture and try to rehearse it at home. Five or ten minutes will mean a great deal.

#### CONTACT:

I want you to do an exercise on the feeling of contact by throwing the ball to each other. Everybody must follow this movement and do the same inwardly. Alan is throwing the ball, everyone is with me. Therefore, everybody is doing what is going on at the moment. Move by following the gesture of the ball. By throwing the ball I have to say something, and the word must be built from the character of my action. This is a preparation for understanding the psychological gesture - the harmony which takes the whole being into action.

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Be moving the whole time; when the phrase is finished everybody must indicate very clearly that it has stopped.

Exercise:

Throwing the ball with entire class participating in the movement. Please move more all around. Try to create sentences clearer and more definite. I want you very much to make it all more definite, more artistic, more complete, more speaking. Pay attention to contact. Everything must be suggested. It is like a conversation with the audience. Contact in space and with everybody. Try to elaborate more the forms you are sending out. Establish the contact by opening our hearts - take everybody in. Change your psychology: I am not oppressed by the space - quite the opposite, I am master of space. Be quite sure that you are able to do this. Master the feeling of contact.

SUSTAINING:

I was not quite happy about the contact today as there was always something broken. Take the simplest exercise to establish contact. Now to create this. First of all we must have our bodies free - we must not freeze. We must overcome this. If I love my sister it does not mean that both of us are bound. The more we are together, the more free we are. Contact and freedom.

Exercise:

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Try to increase this freedom of contact by taking hands. When you leave your hands, you have to increase the contact. Open your hearts. Take three steps toward center, then three steps back to the original circle. Spread yourselves freely over the whole room. Keep the contact. You can see that this is in connection with our exercise for sustaining.

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Mr. Shdanoff's Play:

I want you to take this in the actor's spirit.

STYLE:

Drama. It must be clear cut and sharp, filled with the content so much that it seems it is going to burst. Have it through inner effort. I want you to get up with the knowledge that we have this sharp staccato form. Get up. Sit down. Repeat. Now repeat and be sharp but not staccato! Try to escape staccato. Now I want you to combine getting up in staccato and sitting down without staccato (but sharp enough not to be legato). Repeat.

Scene:

After church, at the mother's house with governor, bride and groom. The beggar girl is sitting with the mother. She says, "Mother," and the mother says, "Whose mother?" The girl answers, "John's mother." She is shivering and the mother puts her shawl around the girl. Then servant announces the unexpected arrival of the son. The characters are sitting in this long, heavy pause. The sun has gone down.

First cast: Try to be aware of this feeling of staccato and not staccato. We have to take something from our Method and keep it. Everybody wants to know what is happening. Be very active and do the work with them because you will do the same in different combinations. Will you please

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try to find this inner way. Try to develop more and more.

Criticism:

Still too timid - you must not exaggerate but embroider and elaborate, and it will grow.

The servant has been with the family many years and suspects the complications that will arise with the arrival of the son while the beggar girl is in the room.

There will now be a variation in the scene: Instead of the son arriving it will be the spy. He announces that he has not been invited, and seems very confident. This man is a born spy. His whole nature is penetrating and observant. On glancing at the table, for instance, he would be able to see everything on it. It will seem like eternity before there is reality in the entrance of this spy.

Second cast: The silence is artificial - it is not right. Try to get these psychological things truthfully and fully. Rehearse only the part where the spy comes in. You must find some ground; before you have something you do it mechanically. We need our imagination, our inspiration. Everybody is waiting for the son. Repeat.

Criticism:

On the grounds of the psychological gesture; when the son enters the gesture would be one towards him, helping him, while when the spy enters the gesture would be one of

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pushing him away. This is not Chekhov's play or Ibsen's play - it is strong and bursting. Now take with you into your private life all the things which you see are not right - write them down and prepare them for next time so that you will be aware of what is wrong.

Convict Scene: The son resents the spy and says, "Why are you following me and spying into my private life?" The stranger replies, "You have no private life." Here is shown the dynamic, machine-like character of the stranger, the spy.

Make the rehearsal pleasant because the time belongs to you. You have to seek and try everything.

New Scene - Late at night in son's room. The son is sitting in a chair. He is half asleep, half dreaming - a nightmare. The mother appears and does not know whether he is sleeping or not. He awakens suddenly. The mother tries to find the inner approach to him, in her effort to find out why he suffers so much. She asks him why he is up so late. Then there is a break, and the mother drops to her knees beseeching the son to tell her what it is in his life that makes him so unhappy. The son is inwardly like a piece of ice. This is the most unhappy moment of his life.

The servant enters and announces that "Mr. Peters wants to see you." This is the person who has been expected. The son shouts, "Do not let him enter." At this moment the spy

enters and with him is a new character, an engineer. This man is consumed with a dreadful idea that at the moment he commits suicide he will become God. This is his one purpose in life, and he uses everybody and everything for his own ends. He is later used by an evil person, who makes him sign a letter saying that he has been responsible for the death of someone. The evil person actually does the murder, but because he has the signature of this deluded engineer, he goes free.

New Scene: It is the same night. After the mother has gone, the son goes out to see two persons - one is the idealist, and this is their first meeting since the quarrel at the mother's house on the first afternoon. The idealist and the strange engineer live together. They are both very poor and once belonged to the secret [political] organization. The idealist has waited for days in order to speak to the son, and the suspense for him has been terrible.

The engineer is in the room alone as the son enters. He asks the son if he has come to see the idealist, who will be back shortly. The idealist at this moment enters. The son and the idealist confront each other. The idealist says, "Why did you not come before?" The son answers with cynicism, "Were you sure that I would come?" The idealist answers, "Of course." They are burning with the need to speak with one another, and the idealist asks the strange engineer to leave

them alone. He leaves the room very slowly and deliberately, increasing the nervous tension on the part of the idealist. The son says "You struck me for..." Idealist answers, "Of course - you have meant so much in my life." Accumulate these impressions and they will be background when we start the play.

Another new scene: It is the same night. On the floor above the engineer and the idealist, lives the beggar girl. She lives there alone, and after this scene (and it is a long one) the son wants to see her, and asks the idealist to bring her down. She comes but does not know what he wants from her. She is rich in love and at the same time instinctively she is always afraid of the son because, being so pure, she feels that in this strange person there are really two beings - a devil and an angel. He is always struggling with different worlds. One, the social-political world; the other is something which he wants - which he feels is there. Is it God? He does not know. Is it human life in a certain right way? He is seeking for this truth, and when he meets this girl whom he has married, he begins to "hear" her being and he tries to get some solution to the question, "why shall I live?" "What is the meaning of life?" He "hears" the being of this girl, and hopes to get some answer without words. This is one of the moments when he begins to "hear" with his whole being. What will come into him from this girl. He suffers

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tremendously his whole life as a philosopher; as a clever man; as a man who is surrounded by thousands of questions. As he is with her the hope grows in him that he will be free.

They begin to talk to each other, and to tell fairy tales to each other. He hears her, and sees her, not with eyes and ears, but deeper and deeper like a distant sound of music - a singing person. Try to receive her as if you were receiving distant music. She is a tragic figure, and it will be explained in the play what her life background was.

Church scene: Contrast the mother walking down the church steps with dignity and assurance, and her abandonment in grief when asking her son to tell her of the troubles and difficulties in his life. Staccato - legato. In the Church scene there is only will - staccato, and in the scene with the son is feeling - legato. The mother's feeling at the last is that of a flower wilting - something that has no body.