

New York
November 24, 1941

MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S SIXTH CLASS FOR PROFESSIONAL ACTORS

"THE CREATIVE PROCESS - THE INSPIRATION - THE METHOD"

THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND THE IMAGINATION
THE METHOD
OUTER EVENTS AND THE ACTOR'S INNER LIFE
FEELING OF FORM - THE ACTOR'S BODY
CHARACTERIZATION
MOVEMENT AS FORM
FEELING OF EASE

Leo Tolstoy

When scientists today try to calculate the ability of the human heart to pump so much liquid which moves through the big and small channels of the body, they cannot see that it is mechanically impossible to imagine such a pump as our heart. First of all, the human heart, which would be able to move this quantity of blood, must be much bigger and stronger than it is, and the substance of the heart would have to be of quite different material. The whole secret is that the blood moves and the heart follows, but our physiologists are not so well developed in science that they can accept this. They don't think the blood can move of itself, but they believe that the heart moves of itself.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND THE INSPIRATION:

It is just the same with the creative process and the inspiration. It was once true that the creative process and the inspiration came of themselves, but now it is no longer so. Now we have to adjust our organism, physically and mentally, to the process of "in"spiration, and, therefore, the

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

method is needed. A few decades ago, if you suggested to a gifted actor that he study a method, he would tell you that he did not need it because he had inspiration. But living in our present modern life, to cling to the old belief that inspiration comes of itself would be wrong. One of our enemies is the intellect, and the other is not knowing that the technique or method is needed, and this is often the most detrimental thing for us. Because if we deny the method, we cannot assume it, and if we do not know it exists, we cannot assume it either.

THE METHOD:

When we look upon this point which we call the creative process and the inspiration, it is, of course, our last and only aim, and we must look upon this point as though it were the center, and on the periphery there are so many doors through which we had to look. By looking through these doors at the moment of inspiration, what will we get ^{at} the end? We will get only the Method. When we speak about the atmosphere, it is one of the doors which we can open and see there is the creative process, and there is the spark of inspiration. We open another door, which may be the feeling of ease perhaps, then the door of the imagination - all the points of our Method are these doors.

How does one reach the state where it is necessary to look through all these doors? It is a very painful experi-

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

ence which we all have. This necessity, this painful necessity, is there in every one of us to some extent. We know, we feel, we experience that as actors, as artists, as creators, as human beings we are rich in and full of unfulfilled desires, undiscovered thoughts, unexperienced feelings, all of which are looming somewhere before us.

In our everyday life certain intimations of ourselves we can have, although if we were inwardly free, we might live quite a different life, speak quite differently, react to life quite differently. But now try to look at what we are doing on the stage, quite objectively and without self pity. We are psychologically crippled beings - we are so small and narrow-minded while we are representing this or that character. We are almost puppets - if we have, let us say, six feelings in our life - schematically speaking - we bring one of them to the stage. If we have six thoughts in life, we show one of them from the stage, instead of becoming, during the creative process on the stage, enlarged, enriched, spreading beings fulfilling all our creative desires and emotions.

We could free ourselves on the stage and satisfy not only ourselves but the audience also, because they are in the same position - they live lives which are regulated by the clock and they have no real imagination or freedom. On the stage we can find that all the moments can be filled with the most profound, the utmost inner things which we bear in ourselves,

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

but which we cannot experience or express during our everyday life.

Instead of which we become smaller and smaller. For instance, let us take the characters of Hamlet, Ophelia, or Cordelia, they can be for us wide open doors through which we find ourselves, instead of which we become smaller than they and even smaller than we are in everyday life, because if there is no moment of inspiration, no signpost leading to the inspiration, then we are doomed to a crippled existence on the stage.

When one feels he cannot display himself on the stage, then the torture begins, because one feels he is sitting in a psychological prison. Then the necessity arises to see the creative process from all possible doors. So we know that the Method has a number of points of view on the creative process, and that the necessity for this Method is because of the painful experience of not being able to live our life fully enough on the stage, but on the contrary becoming smaller and more contracted.

OUTER EVENTS AND THE INNER LIFE:

We have spoken about the four stages of the creative process, and have illustrated them with a series of charts. Now let us look at the creative process from another point of view. Let us describe it differently. What aspect of the creative process would allow us to live this full life? Ima-

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

agine that there are two possibilities - one is ourselves and the richness which we cannot discover, and another is the wrong kind of play lying there before us. When we modern actors don't know or don't want to know what the creative process is, we do the following thing. We take this wrong kind of play, and instinctively close ourselves and say, "Now I am alone, and I won't show anything of myself, because if I do, I will immediately be out of the style of the present theatre. I have to show my clichés, but not myself, because it is so embarrassing to show myself on the stage."

So I close myself and take the play which is all outside, all external, and I begin to study the text and then, by means of clichés, I begin to try to pronounce the words from the stage. The play remains an outer thing, and the inner part of me remains inner and still more closed. An illusion takes place - a phantom consisting of certain clichés comes out of me, takes hold of me and speaks the words with a dead voice. The play is finished, the phantom has done its work, and I can go home.

But the right way would be to take this wrong play, and turn it into my inner life so that it will become a symbol for my inner new life, which I have to discover within me. It will not be the wrong play then, but will be me expressing myself through the suggestions given by the author. So the outer thing becomes the inner thing, and my inner life

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

becomes an outer thing. I give it to my audience, and I do not keep it inside me. If we try to look upon all the points of our Method, we will see that they are the means of changing our inner life into an outer one. If this idea becomes a living thing in one's mind, it means not only to have the picture.

I must tell you certain ideas and conceptions, if you are to understand my aim. All the points of the Method can be understood from the point of view of transforming the outer thing into the inner life, and changing the inner life into the outer event. To know this means to be able, to a great extent, to manage it and to do it. Leo Tolstoy once said that if you are angry and want to be revenged on someone, instead of trying to preach a moral to oneself you should imagine very concretely, day after day, that you have got the opportunity to revenge yourself, and that your victim is down. The more you realize that you are victorious and your victim is crushed, the more surely this knowledge will bring you the fruit which you don't expect. It is your real desire. You will lose the desire to be revenged, and you will have such compassion for your victim, and the real true man in you will show because you will know what you are aiming at.

If we know what we are aiming at in the Method, we will get it, not only as I suggest it, but you will get it for yourself. Each one of us is a creative individual, and before

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

he gets the Method personally he must imagine himself developed by means of the Method. It has to be your method. You have to conceive of it in quite a different way, and no one else can conceive of it in the same way. I must give you my conception of the Method, and you must imagine how you will accept it. Then you will get a vision of the Method which is yours and not mine, and you can develop it according to your own individuality. If you think I am going to impose something on you, you will throw it away. The point is to individualize the things which I am going to tell you.

Now let us take one more point from our Method. I have told you that there are four qualities which each actor must have as permanent qualities which he can apply whenever his creative individuality wants to apply them, and in which way. One of them was the feeling of ease, and another was the feeling of form.

FEELING OF FORM - THE ACTOR'S BODY:

The feeling of form which I have in mind is, of course, the outer form starting with our body - we must try to meditate upon our own body as a form, to experience it as a form. We forget things which we have no right to forget. We have to realize certain facts which are so obvious, so well-known to everyone that no one thinks about them any more. But we must know that our body is a form - a definite, concrete form.

2888
M. Chekhov

1108
November 24, 1941

At first, it may seem difficult to realize that we have arms and hands which are able to move in different directions. It is so obvious, therefore, our movements are formless and shapeless, unless we go through this obvious thing consciously. If we try to realize that we have arms, hands, legs, and feet, and are astonished by the fact, then we will become able to manage them subconsciously, with much more expressiveness.

Decades ago, people were much less poisoned by the intellect - their lives were not like ours, torn to pieces by everything around us, radio, television, telephone - senseless distractions, but we have grown accustomed to them. In the past, people were much freer in their spirits and souls, their nerves were much more sound, their heart-beats more normal, their breathing much deeper than ours and many, many physical and psychological things were not lying upon them like a terrible weight, which lies upon us even though we may not feel it.

When we awaken again this feeling of our bodies as a form, it will give us a new and definite ability to manage and govern our bodies in the most expressive way, and more than that, we will be able to get inspiration from our bodies.

Here I must again speak about a small point - we get inspirations from our bodies although we do not know it, but our bodies inspire us mostly in a wrong, narrow way because

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

they are the expression of certain ideas we have about ourselves. If I am fat and have a big tummy, then I express a certain idea. If I am very thin and have a very thin waist, I cannot get rid of this idea and all my inspirations come from this thin waist. Or I have a well-developed chest, which gives another psychology. If I have big feet, for instance, I stamp on everyone psychologically. Instinctively and artistically we feel it. If, for instance, a very fat person says, "I will run and bring it to you," of course there is something humorous about it.

Therefore, there is something which comes purely from our bodies as a form, which inspires us consciously or subconsciously. If our bodies are developed to such an extent that it will be just the same which waist, which shoulders, which feet we have, if we are able to manage our bodies to such an extent that we will get inspiration from the whole body, then we will get inspiration from our physical bodies. It may sound strange that something like inspiration, which is very spiritual, can help us in this way, but it is true. So this suggestion to experience the body as a form is again the way to the same point - to the creative process and the inspiration.

Exercise:

The simpler we do this exercise the better. First try to realize, each for himself, that you have a body which

4888

2008

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

is upright. No other being in the world has such a position - animals are horizontal and even apes are bound to the earth in an ugly way. So realize that you are upright. Then realize that your head is like a crown on this part of your being, and that your head is round. This is the only round part of your body. Then realize that you touch the earth but you do not belong to it. Now recall that animals are bound to the earth with all four legs. The cow, for instance, is completely bound to the earth. But we can touch the earth here, there, and everywhere. Now move about and realize that you are touching the earth by pushing it back. Then realize the following fact: that the animal has to use all of its four extremities. Now take a position and realize that being an animal you cannot move your hands and arms. What a terrible thing that is. How can you express yourself? Even the head is turned to the earth.

Compare this imaginary animal psychology with your ability to stand upright and have free hands and arms. We must appreciate the fact that they are free. Now you will see that the arms and hands are the most expressive part of our physical being. But we confuse two things, we confuse our heads - including all the most subtle muscles of the face - with our arms and hands and try to express things by making gestures with our faces. That is a terrible thing. When we laugh on the stage, for instance, and try to show the teeth,

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

etc. - all such grimaces are made because we confuse the movement of the hands and arms, and substitute movements of the face. All such grimaces are coming from our subconscious confusion because we do not know what our arms and hands are for. When we keep them in our pockets, there is nothing for us to do but make faces. When we learn to use our arms and hands, then our eyes will become more expressive on the stage, and that is right because our whole life will be concentrated in our eyes. We have the right to radiate with our eyes.

It is sometimes considered that moving the hands and arms is a national instinct - for instance, Russian, Italian, and French people move the arms and hands too freely for American taste. Your taste will tell you how much you should use this ability. The ability must be there, but how to apply it is a question which you, as an individual artist must find out. But what is wrong - whether you are American for foreign - is to always have the hands in your pockets.

After we realize that this round, thing, our head, must not produce gestures or grimaces, and after we realize that we have our arms and hands free from the earth, and that we are upright and touch the earth by pushing it back, then we have to realize one more thing in order to experience our body as a form, and that is that we have in our chests an imaginary center, then we shall find that all our movements on the stage, and in life, will become much freer and richer and

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

more expressive. If we are not dragging ourselves behind us, which is always the case when we do not know where our center is. When I know where I am centralized as a form, then I move forward, being led by this center. The whole harmonious psychological attitude is there for everyone of us, and this is the key to many abilities.

To feel oneself harmonious inwardly, means that one is able to produce inharmonious things much freer and better. On the other hand, if we are always inharmonious and try to produce beautiful things, we are always wrong. Now walk around being led by this center. Feel the center in your chest, and see how the whole body will become grateful to you for harmonizing it, so that the arms and hands and legs and feet are somehow in their right place, as it were.

You will find that both physical and psychological balance will come, and the body which has been made harmonious gives us inspiration. The scope of the inspiration is wider, the ideas which the artist and actor will get will be much richer and more interesting, if they come from a sound, harmonized body.

We can recall again the fat person who tries to run for something, if we penetrate into his imagination and see how he thinks of himself, that is quite a different world. It is a very different kind of thing from that of another person with another kind of body. His world is different from

0988
M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

the world of any one of us. A tall person has, of course, a different kind of imagination from that of a short person, but the only way is to harmonize our own body, and then be able to imagine oneself fat, tall, short, or thin.

Of course, the physically fat person cannot imagine and perform a thin person, but if he tries to harmonize his body in the way we are speaking about, he can give the impression of a thin person. Pickwick was like that, I imagine, because his character was somehow organized, but Falstaff was quite different because his whole psychology was around his stomach and even lower. Sir Andrew Aguecheek's center was in his nose.

CHARACTERIZATION:

We will touch upon another point in our Method, that of characterization. We must have the psychology of an ideal body, even if we do not have a physical one, then we will see how easy and pleasant it will be to imagine and perform any bodily characterization. Very humorous things can be found in this way. For instance, if you will imagine that your whole center is in your nose, or your center is behind you, a fat, heavy, round thing which drags you back. Your whole body will become expressive through your inner imaginary body.

Now walk around to the rhythm of a march, recalling all the things we have mentioned - the head a round form, the

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

center in the chest, the arms, and legs starting from the center like a big scissors.

MOVEMENT AS FORM:

The next point is that we must experience the movement as a form itself. This is also very important. Because if we develop this ability to experience our movements as forms, then again we shall become more expressive, even if our hands and arms are in our pockets! If you do it with a feeling of form, then it means something. For this exercise, try to stretch your right arm out and experience the process as a form. You begin and you stop, and what happens is the form in movement. It can help us very much to imagine that we mold the air by our movement, and that something remains in the air after we have made our movement. When we experience this feeling we will know what it means to experience form in movement.

Now get up and experience the movement as a form which you carve and mold in the air around you. Now sit down with the same feeling of form. Do it pedantically so that later on it will become free, spontaneous and subconscious. Then combine movements of your arms and hands when standing up, and take a few steps forward. Do not drop the movement vaguely or accidentally, but decide when you are going to stop the exercise. You may become a little stiff and staccato

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

in your movements at first, but it will pass. Now take a certain position and imagine that it is in the air, then move away from it and imagine that the form remains in the air. This will awaken the feeling of form in you.

Now shake hands with the feeling of form, and say, "Hello," or, "Goodbye." Now three persons will meet and improvise the meeting each time, by adjusting to each other. You must experience the feeling of form of three persons meeting. You will see that your actor's nature becomes more and more satisfied as you do the exercises.

Now let us experience some abstract movements. One person will take a position and hold it, and another person will join him and take a position in harmony with the other. Now another step. We must combine the feeling of form, plus the theme which will be given by music in this case. We will listen to the music, and, feeling the theme intuitively, we will take positions in harmony with the musical theme and the bodily positions which are creating and expressing it. Now let us take a theme such as jealousy.

FEELING OF EASE:

Let us once more exercise the feeling of ease in the simplest way by raising our arms and hands, which are the most expressive things in our actor's profession. Now take a chair and move it with the feeling of ease. It will lose its weight because we are filled with the feeling of ease.

M. Chekhov

November 24, 1941

Now the whole group will take the heavy table with the feeling of ease, and lift it so that the table will seem to be without weight. Now each member of the group will get up and say, "Hello," to the whole group - it will be a little performance for each one, again using the feeling of ease. It is good when rehearsing sometimes to drop everything and just take feeling of ease.