

Michael Chekhov

(afternoon) February 15, 1938

FORM
CHARACTERIZATION

FORM:

Mr. Shdanoff's play: [Our Phantoms or The Possessed]

First of all I want you to do only the inner life in the following exercise. To realize your own body as a shape, a form, as if you are molding your bodies afresh, legs, arms, torsos, really move them actively from inside. Now change your positions, but very little, in the direction you will feel necessary if I tell you to get up quickly. This form is ready to burst. The idea is, "I am ready to get up". Try to appreciate this special inner state which is very necessary for this play. Everything is going to break. Now, add to this the significance of your being here, the significance of your being ready to get up, or as we say to "break the form." Even in the play there are two kinds of expression: one when the form really breaks, and the other is when the form does not break, but there is strong radiation where everything can be broken. Therefore, I ask you not to break the form. Try to get up being absolutely filled with this tension to break the form. Keep in these moments the same kind of being ready to do everything. There are no weak moments, and the kind of power is like that at breaking point. Now, will you please say the sentence which will not break the form but will be on the limit,

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and your speech must arise from the whole being, which is full of activity. Do not lose this activity.

I want you to break the form without shouting, but by whispering. Prepare your bodies so that you are ready to break. Now, the same feeling of form inside and out. Now, the same sentence whispered quite naturally, without breaking the form.

This activity which fills each of us during this play can be moved nearer to the surface as it were, and deeper to the inner being. It must be full, and strong, and deeper, and still deeper. Try to find the deepest point. Now, by whispering break the form.

I would like you to write it down and rehearse it for the play. It belongs to every character. I want you to rehearse these things at home because we must have this ground so deep in us that it is subconscious. When we are working with this play we will always come back and back to these things.

CHARACTERIZATION:

Church Entrance Scene:

We will try to find the mother's line. Follow me with your imagination. This is a person who moves, and feels, and knows that each movement, each inner psychological movement which she produces, influences others in a certain way.

Therefore, she has a great responsibility, great power, and

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great desire to influence in a good, noble, heroic way. She wants to be a hero, and her desire to be a hero find its incorporation in her son. After, "Whose mother?" she gives an order. Then gives an order to the coachman. Now I am asking - finished. Now I am thinking - finished. Now I am giving an order - finished. Clear cut - complete.

Now, on this basis, try to paint it with will. Everything is will power. She is not walking, she is doing her walk. She is not looking, she is doing her looking. She searches out people with her eyes which are powerful. This is the heroic. There is a certain humor in the figure at the beginning, but it will disappear in time. The mother does lean toward the girl, but must hold herself erect and rather away from her.

Another side of the character: She is of a nature which really gives, she not only enjoys being over everybody, but she gives much to others, and is really a good and strong personality, with only this slight touch of humor about her. The character is really very deep and serious. We shall see how she gives her warmth to her son.

"Can it be that nobody knows her?" The mother asks this question as if she expected an answer from the whole world around her. Then someone says, "This is Mary, a poor girl who lives near here." There is a big crowd gathered. She is not angry, she is more sorry for this girl. She has

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to study this man who answers her. She acts in the good sense. The girl is to speak through the mother, to the son. Now it must be a quicker tempo. This character is full of activity. During this entrance, someone comes up and bows to her and the crowd gathers.

I want you to enjoy this "acting". Now find more admiration for her. For a moment the mother is afraid. What is the impression being created among the crowd - are they suspicious of the son's connection with this girl?

Next scene:

The mother says to the son, "Tell me, what is the matter with you - I can help you." The son answers, "No, mother, you cannot help me." The son is absorbed in his ideas. Now the mother is trying to awaken in him some feeling. It is a deed or action - try to talk from heart to heart. It must be in a manner much deeper than usual. (Our whole art if it is taken musically is harmonious.)

The mother is asked by the son to put her hand on his head. This is what she wants - just to be able to do this for him. She is curing him and the son gets certain help from it and says, "Thank you, Mother." He has accepted her help for a short moment. He is suffering, and the mother suffers so that she can be one with him.

Last scene:

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The son has lost his way in life entirely, and does not know what to do. He has even the feeling of unreality in inanimate things. In the inner sense he seems to go away from this life. His outer appearance is in disorder, his room is upset and there are some things already packed as though he might be going away - he takes things without any aim. (Psychologically the same as a dying person who collects things to him before he dies.) The mother is quite helpless and can only look at him. She appears to be crying, but no tears come, and she is in anguish because she can do nothing. She tells him that his appearance is untidy. Because of this difficulty to find one another, they have to speak more carefully.

Three different facets of the mother's character:

Her first state was straight (coming out of church)
" second " " bending forward (to her son)
" third " " a bird with a very long neck
(last scene with son)

The son tries to have the psychology inside, but still is as strong in body as ever, and even if his appearance is untidy, the more he tries to give the impression of being a gentleman. He does not give in. We see that he is lost, but inside he does not give in. The mother and son are as if speaking in a dark room, trying to find each other. The psychology: "She is here but I am lost." "Can't I come". The mother makes another attempt to reach him. He is

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not at all mad, but he is tortured so much that he is divided. She is standing alone in the room, and waiting for him and crying - there must be only a hint that she has been crying. She will wait hours and hours for him.

As the son is leaving, he becomes aware that he is parting from her and turns and says, "If anyone tells you that I am a cruel man, don't believe them." The mother answers, "No, no, never." She has lost him. This is quite a concrete moment, and he speaks to her as a living being.

Psychologically, the mother is old in this picture. In the first picture she was still young and a hero.

The son has to prepare her and himself to say something very important and to make a decision. The son is going away and the mother says, "Perhaps not forever?", and the son says absent-mindedly, "I will come back." But everyone must feel that he will never come back. The son must never be weak at any time in the play. Follow through from the first scene to this old, old lady who has lost everything.

Scene:

Banquet where the governor is celebrating. He is very happy and very proud of his life. Dressed in a general's uniform everyone admires him. It is the spy's idea. The governor finishes his speech and the spy proposes a toast to the governor. There is loud shouting and hurrahs from the

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people. This is the beginning of a lot of short pictures. Now, take the atmosphere - everybody is intoxicated.

Another scene:

In the street outside the banquet hall there is an orator speaking to the crowd. He is telling them that he is here to save the world with the revolutionary spirit - the crowd is ready to explode. At the moment the people inside at the banquet are cheering the governor, the street crowd is cheering the speaker. The governor mistakes this outside cheering and is filled with emotion. The spy rushes out to the crowd and tells them to stop as he has not ordered this revolt. He knows that this revolt is premature, and will not help the large revolution that is being planned.

Another scene:

Street corner and the convict is there alone. He hears the distant noise of the crowd, and the church bell is ringing. He is looking up at a second story window, hoping not to be detected. He takes his knife, rushes into the building, and a few seconds later is heard the beggar girl's cry.

Another scene:

The convict is leading the crowd without any idea. Everybody has gone mad, and the lost element has taken them in its power. Then people not involved in the revolution are

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thrown down, and they try to escape up the small streets.

Try to find the psychology that the governor has to say very much and he cannot find the words, and the spy suggests to him the words he must say.