

Michael Chekhov

Afternoon June 2, 1938

THE NATURE OF THE NEW KIND OF ACTOR
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THE NATURE OF THE NEW KIND OF ACTOR:

Criticism of new students' scenes:

I have found the performance today very interesting from several points of view. First of all to see what your natures give by simply knocking at the door. So I will not be concerned very much with detail but will speak to you more in general. The aim of our School and the Method is not to praise or blame without giving any ground, so you must not expect me to tell you it was good or bad.

For us all it is very important to realize that when we appeal to our "sleeping natures" we get from them the most precious things in an actor's sense, but if we appeal only to our nature it will only show us one little finger and the whole richness will remain there, and we will not see it if we do not apply certain means and method. I have seen one small finger of your nature today, because your actor's nature sleeps deeply and cannot be awakened by the simple appeal of being on the stage and rehearsing many times. This fact we must be brave enough to recognize, that the nature of present human beings is a nature which is oppressed by the

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kind of life that we have on the earth today.

We are no longer the people of our grandfather's time - we are people full of different emotions and will impulses, etc. We know from history that our forefathers have acted with elemental power - all the doors to their nature were open and they really only needed to enter the stage during the rehearsal, without audience, they were absolutely in another world in their flaming imagination; will impulses and everything. But it is no longer like that. It is the times. Today everyone is oppressed under the powers of our life, which are drying the brain and the heart; the powers which are killing our feelings, our ability to experience ecstasy, to feel the feelings of other beings. Open the newspaper today and you will see what "snakes and scorpions are creeping from it" into our brain, our hearts, our will. So we must understand that the approach to our own natures and talents must be quite a different one.

What is this approach? It is long, careful, continuous work. We must not rely upon our natures - we must rely upon our work - conscious work, passionate work upon our natures - only by such work will we come to the state where our natures will respond to our requirements. How can we do this? That is another question. Our forefathers worked very hard but relied upon their natures. If they repeated one scene many times they would get a volcano of fire - we cannot do this.

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PIONEERS IN THE NEW THEATRE:

We must have a certain very carefully elaborated means by which we have to work upon our natures. It is not that I want to impose this upon you, but the times requires it - our life requires it. Therefore, the first point is that we must work, and the second point is that we must work by elaborated means. In our profession, we have our means although we are only pioneers in this conscious work, this is perhaps a very honorable position. If you will understand this point of view it will change your outlook, deeply and professionally, so that you will awaken and say to yourselves, "Yes, now I will take a new point of view. I am a professional worker from morning to night, with certain points which are like a, b, c, for me. I will take one point after another and try to apply them to my own nature, hoping that my human nature will gradually, perhaps with great resistance, answer this mathematical approach to my own nature."

If we are able to change our minds in this respect we have almost won the fight, but without this idea that we must work absolutely by the means which we have in our hands, we will be floundering. To have the means is only half the task, but to realize and recognize that we have the means by which we have to work, and that we have nothing in the whole world to rely upon apart from these means, this is another thing. To have the means, and to want to have them - to ex-

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perience the need to have those means.

There are thousands of actors who come to the theatre with great hope and love, vague hope and vague love, great activity and vague activity, great desire to go forward and a vague aim, etc. What is the result? Gradually they become disappointed in the people around them. Everything disturbs them because they cannot go on, then with the years the circle enlarges - many more things disturb them and they believe that their destiny is a very difficult one. Gradually they come to the idea that something in themselves stops all their hopes and activities, in them lies something and that they must cure their natures before they can display them before the world. This is one way - a long way of suffering but I suggest quite a different way.

OUR METHOD:

Instead of experiencing all these things over a period of years, I suggest that you do it in one evening - understand the problem once and for all and say to yourself "No, I will not go this long way of suffering - I will do it in a few hours in my brain - I can do this because I am a thinking person." Here is the secret, but how to open the door? By means of the Method. If you will accept this you will save if not your whole life, at least many many years of youth, which is the most precious thing - you will still be young and able to work when you reach the point when you

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can get the result which hundreds of your colleagues cannot get because they have gone the long way. Therefore I suggest that you save your power, your time, your youth and go this way - our School places at your disposal a means which, if you will apply it, will allow your own natures to grow. The Method cannot create the talent, but the Method can cherish, develop and feed it. If you go on without the Method your talent will be more and more killed by the life.

It is very good that you have chosen to perform things of great dimensions because they develop you much more than other types of plays, such as drawing-room comedies which are superficial almost "skim" performances. If you have chosen things of great dimension they will give you the opportunity to develop certain inner dimensions, which must be in harmony with the outer dimensions. You have taken grand words and grand situations, but you are not yet there, and these big forms are not yet covering you. You must find the flame inside - such a flame, such feelings, such will impulses, such images that you will gradually merge together with these great forms which you have chosen for your exercise.

Some of you have more spiritual ability than others, but it is worthwhile for all of you to work on these things by trying to direct your attention more to the inner than to the outer forms - this is the point on which you are still lacking. How can you do this? By the means given in our Method. For instance if you will imagine and really develop

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your imagination to the extent where all these images and characters you have shown us will live before your mind's eye, not in a vague, mystic atmosphere, but as concretely as this chair, and even more so because the real imagination is more concrete than real things. If your images will visit you as living beings, then you have got the power.

Something must happen to you in your room and stop everything you are doing. If your imagination is strong enough you will see Electra with your mind's eye. At the beginning you can force yourself to see her eyes, her movements, her voice, what she feels - this is good for the beginning to call upon her, but it is only the first part, the beginning. The second part and the victory comes when the image comes to you and forces you to look at it. Perhaps you have experienced this to a certain extent, but it must become a professional thing.

THE IMAGES

It is my ideal to develop in you as students this ability so that it is like any of the abilities in your everyday life. Therefore I give you so many exercises for the imagination, so that you will get this ability to receive these guests who are ghosts at the same time. Only then begins the real joy and pleasure and creative fire. Because you will see that if the image comes to you concretely you will see what is happening with your nature - you will under-

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stand what it means to have a heart beating, what it means to burn all over and to tremble because you are inspired, what it means to love the image and to be one with it, and what it means to have the real desire and will and wish to act, because you must show something to everyone of what you have seen. This means really to have imagination. If imagination is taken in this sense it is point "A" in our Method, which alone will discover and reveal your nature and free it and let it expand illimitably.

Now we can take atmosphere as point "B." If the ability to create the atmosphere is really developed it will be like jumping into the cold water of a river - the whole nature responds and adjusts itself to the new, cold, fresh world. The same thing happens to the human being when it really plunges into the spiritual atmosphere. What does it mean? It means we are able to get inspiration simply from point "B" alone, although there are still points C, D, E, etc. We can be very rich if we want to be, or very poor.

Therefore, I ask you to change your minds - try to want all these things - don't think they are there and you are here, and perhaps you will take them or perhaps you will not. This attitude of mind will only disturb you, and preclude you from developing your own natures. It is only right for the human being to enjoy his own nature when this nature is inspired; then the human being has the right to enjoy his own nature. This desire to enjoy one's own nature is so

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strong in everyone and so right, that it can be a great stimulus to develop one's nature and enjoy it when this is inspired. But as a rule we use this right instinct in thousands of small ways, and in hundreds of small things which are not given us for enjoyment.

For instance, I very much enjoy speaking, because I enjoy hearing myself speak. Everyone enjoys this if he is not embarrassed, but this is the wrong kind of enjoyment. I enjoy somebody looking at something I like, but this is wrong, and wastes precious energy and precious power which could be a leader and guide for our creative nature. We rob our creative nature by using it for uninspired moments, for talking, for making jokes which are not important. So we must try to economize our power, our instinct for enjoying ourselves, so that instead of wasting it we will work upon the method until the moment when we have the right to enjoy ourselves, being inspired. This will economize our power and our time, and we will go straight on to our aim, without losing different creative parts of our being, and so we will come nearer to the moment when all our creative powers are needed.

FORM:

I was astonished and very pleased to see that all the students had a very good feeling of form. I see that your natures are inclined to accept this feeling of form. Keep it but don't exaggerate it. Put it in your pocket.

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TIME:

We have not spoken before about the special feeling of time which each artist has. It is quite different to the feeling of time which people have who are not artists. The artist has his own feeling of time, and if he loses it he loses much - even if he acts beautifully. It is one of the artist's secrets and is part of rhythmical education. This inner time must be there. Today I got the impression that there is a germ of this feeling for time among you. Put it in your pockets.

ATMOSPHERE:

Now, for the weak points: The atmosphere was simply not there. All the things you have performed are actually full of atmosphere, but they were dry. This you must put in your other pocket. It is impossible for the audience to receive all these great things without atmosphere. Without atmosphere you have no air around you - you are alone on the stage and the audience is sitting alone - a big gap is between you and the audience because of this lack of atmosphere, which gives the audience the same rhythmical breath as we breathe on the stage. You kill yourselves by being on the stage without atmosphere.

RADIATION:

The second point that was lacking was radiation. Your radiation could be measured in feet, and even five feet

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would be too much. You were as if afraid of the space around you, but you must love this space because it is the same as your artistic timing. It is your space. Think of the scene of King Lear on the heath which we have done - the actor must imagine tremendous endless space around him, so that he is running through this great space, although he may be taking only three or four steps. If you will get the feeling for this imaginary space you will realize the necessity to radiate into it, and to spread the atmosphere into this imaginary space.

OBJECTIVE:

The third point was that no Objectives were taken. I could not penetrate into you and guess what you were really wanting when you were speaking and moving, because you were actually wanting nothing. Simply a performance - the shell of something which could have been filled with the objective. This was very obvious for us, and it must be so obvious for you that you must become ill - you must get the instinct to know when you are appearing on the stage without an objective. Until you awaken this instinct for everything in the Method you will be like blind people walking in the darkness - you may think you are far away from a chair but you find it is right here - you will always make such psychological mistakes on the stage. But if you will get this feeling of the necessity for the ob-

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jective, atmosphere, psychological gesture, then you will be able to walk with open eyes.

All the scenes must be understood from a deeper level. The characters and situations are given by the author, but it is like a sealed letter which we have to open. We must always perform something which is in the letter, and not on the envelope because that is only the address and nothing more. Many actors and young students are content with the envelope and overlook the contents. If we open the envelope we will find something much more important. How to tear it open and penetrate into it? By means of our Method. By means of radiation, atmosphere, objective, feeling of truth, etc. Then, and only then, will the contents be there - don't think you can do it by means of clairvoyance.

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