

Michael Chekhov

October 28, 1936

ATMOSPHERE
FIRST WORK ON THE PLAY
CONTACT

ATMOSPHERE:

We must approach each play from the side of atmosphere and the side of imagination. We must continue our exercises and develop our powers of imagination because of our work on The Green Cockatoo and The Golden Steed.

Exercise:

Enter the room through an imaginary door, in a very gay, happy mood, say, "Hello" to the people in the room and then do some small, amusing gesture or trick - like a kiss or something of that kind - and disappear. This must be done with warmth because you must see in your imagination not only your bodily image, but you must see your feelings, too. You must have a warm, gay, nice mood in harmony with the body.

Exercise:

The whole group must do an exercise for atmosphere. They are in a room in a gay, happy mood, and altogether they must feel the moment when they must enter the other room, gradually losing the feeling of happiness, until deep sadness moves them almost to the point of tears.

Exercise:

Each student in turn goes into the other room and is given a colored gelatine. Each must instantly create a

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movement and perhaps a sound for the color. Then, returning, do this for the group in the other room - they, in turn, must guess the color that was done.

By working with atmospheres in this way, we will find the harmony for each performance. The music, costumes, decor, movement, everything will be in harmony if governed by these rules of atmosphere.

FIRST WORK ON THE PLAY:

The Green Cockatoo:

It is only possible to succeed in this work if you really work on these plays, not only here and in our rehearsal rooms, but you must be a little bit crazy about your parts. You must live each part spiritually until we know every part of the play so well you don't need the book. This is really necessary and the most important part of our work.

Our method of approaching a play is that we must try our exercises with atmosphere, then later with images, and then later with the incorporation of images and atmosphere. Then we must study the play, but this will be described later. In this way we gradually approach the performance of the play. We must grow gradually into the moment which we call performance.

Therefore, you must start your work with The Green Cockatoo in this way: first, you must do some movements or exclamations not taken from the play - don't act the scenes.

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Do something not in connection with the play. Then gradually try to find some small movements or scenes which will remind you of the play; then after this, take small scenes from the play.

In this way you will approach the play very gradually, and you will see how important it is to escape many pitfalls of which the theatre of today has so many. We have so many bad performances and actors today, not because the actors are not gifted, but because their method is so wrong that actors begin to be without hands and legs and are physically and psychologically ill because they don't know how to be healthy. That is why actors drink and take drugs to such an extent: because they feel that they must do things which are not right.

We must work in the right way and be healthy, glad, and happy in our work. The sexual life in the theatre today, which is so wrong, is the direct result of the wrong approach to the work. Stammering is also the result of something wrong inside. We are not able to cure this at once, but all these things are the result of a wrong psychological situation. We must not say to anyone that their sexual life is wrong - we can only ask them if they wish to work with us in a healthy way. This healthy approach is very important.

The Green Cockatoo:

1. To rehearse over and over again, one simple

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gesture - this will make us realize what it means to act. It is very hard work - like a violinist practicing scales. We must work as real workers are working in factories - otherwise, we are only a very bad kind of "bourgeois" - doing nothing bad, being very effective for our audience. We must start to work very hard, and to rehearse again and again is what I call work.

2. After you have done the same exercise, these very simple movements, ten or eleven times you begin to feel that something is flourishing in you. This is of much more value than speaking about your images or discussing the moment in which the exercise takes place because it gives you the possibility to do rather than to speak. Such laborious work is the right way. In order to be responsible for the future creation we must be responsible for present work.

By doing this work continuously you will develop a special instinct whether to do or not to do something, and you will know whether you are ready to advance further. Your instinct will become so finely developed through these exercises that you will know when the right moment has been reached. When you are forced to rehearse, as old actors have always had to do, you are not able to develop such an instinct, because everything is done to kill this instinct. Actors have not had the chance to do this before now because they have had to do everything too quickly.

If you are inspired on the stage, you will be able to shout as you want, but it will always be aesthetic. But at the moment when we are not ready, then shouting, or even speaking, will be just a little ugly. This also applies to movements and speech. Therefore, we must approach both movement and voice slowly.

3. When you have tried the same simple movement over and over again, and you have seen how many different ways it can be done, then it means to work. To do twenty times the same thing - then your imagination begins to work. If you will think about your own imagination and your own body in everyday life, you will see how closely in harmony your imagination is with your body.

As a young man, I could move very easily, and in my imagination I was always thinking, "I will run," or "I will jump" etc. But when I became older and experienced difficulties in my body, I imagined, "I will go," or "I will drive" because the car is already part of my body. After I developed certain difficulties in my body with my heart, I began to think of doing things slowly because of my physical difficulties. Therefore, if you repeat your movements again and again, you will be free in these movements and your imagination will be free, and it will enrich your performance in the play.¹

Please consider yourselves as laborers or workers. You must have the will and ability to work. Then you will be

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good citizens. Not to speak about workers, but to be workers -
that is more important.

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CONTACT:

Eleanor [Faison] gave the exercise in which two people
move together as one, sensing the movement, which must be a
mutual thing.