

Michael Chekhov

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STYLE - COMEDIA DELL' ARTE
 VAUDEVILLE - CIRCUS - CLOWN STYLE
 SPEECH METHOD
 IMPROVISATION - CERVANTES INTERLUDE
 STUDENTS' SCENES - CRITICISM

Cervantes Interlude
Lower Depths - Maxim Gorky
 Maxim Gorky

STYLE - COMEDIA DELL' ARTE:

Spanish Evening:

The whole idea must be that of a modern Commedia dell' Arte. It will give the possibility for the actors and the audience to express their freedom through the theatre. All possible things current in the world today must have an outlet. Please think of this evening - not waiting for the next rehearsal - but really conspiring each one of you as one of the creative actors. It must grow with its jokes, and Cervantes will just be a humorous theme running through the whole play.

I have the following idea connected with some of Cervantes' interludes. There is a type of beggar - a low person morally and in every sense. This person appears to grow more and more important in this little town. He gets more power and authority by his bad tricks and becomes like a tyrant. Then comes his downfall. It could be a very good "spine" for this theme of fascism. Actually, there is no philosophy behind fascism, while behind communism there is a very strong philosophy. Therefore, it is good to start with this low person who becomes more and more important and

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significant, and he becomes so because no one in his surroundings is quite aware of what he is. Then we must find out how this person, who represents fascism, meets his downfall, and here we can exercise our ingenuity as a group. I will give you some themes later.

Let us go on with our preparatory exercises - they are very important because they will become the style of the performance. They are exercises for this particular play, and these movements will later on give us the style of not only the acting but even inventing our jokes. First of all, let us take the simple feeling of ease, but this time combine it with the feeling of form.

I imagine that this play will have songs and dances. Try not to slur things and find little pauses. Later on you will see that the acting will be of a special kind, and these pauses and exact business will be just what we require. Bring your voice in harmony with this ability to move swiftly and lightly. Speak very loudly, but so that it will not become shouting. Now whisper when using your voice, but with such radiation that you send it out and give us the impression of being very loud.

VAUDEVILLE - CIRCUS - CLOWN:

The style of the performance we may call vaudeville, although it is not. However, it is close. The psychology of

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a vaudeville actor is that everything is truthful, but a little exaggerated psychologically. It is too much or too little, but truthful. Someone will make slight movements with his hands, and you must react as if the movements were made by a giant and were tremendous in size. Or he will greet you, and you will react more strongly than you should, but truthfully. You will soon see that anything that is slurred in this play will be detrimental to it.

We must be sure of the difference between vaudeville style and circus or clown style, which we must not have for this play. The difference is that in vaudeville all the reactions are right, only a bit too much or too little. In the clown style the reactions are wrong for us. For instance, one clown kills another, but the dead clown goes on. In vaudeville, if you are killed, you are dead, but you are a little too dead or not quite enough. So be sure that you do not substitute the clown reaction. Do not fix things too long because they become comedy and that is something different again. Wide, easy movements and loud speech without shouting.

Angry quality. Separate each movement - each angry movement and each angry word. The style requires that you speak out of you. So find qualities in your voice which you can send out bravely and openly, but it will still be light and easy. Don't slur.

Now change the quality to extreme tender love. The

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same kind of movements - big, wide, open but the quality is different. Don't slur, physically or psychologically. Each moment must be like sparkling champagne. To be able to do this we must be able to sparkle and to disappear - appear and disappear.

SPEECH:

Because you hurry from one movement to the other, you have no time to be aware of what you have done. Therefore, you repeat the same mistake. Do it and then take a little time to realize whether it is right or wrong. Then go on to the next one and make it better. We cannot work upon speech now, but one thing must definitely be there. You must choose one word and speak it so that you will place it just on the wall. So that every word will be here on the wall. Send out your speech psychologically. Now a little sustaining. Don't make it abrupt - sustain just a little to be there when the word is there where we want it to be. According to our speech method, a great part of it is connected with the psychology, therefore, in all this sending out, although technically important, we are stressing only the psychological side - desiring to send the voice out.

The whole speech method is very much connected with what we call the psychological gesture. Now drop your words down to the center of the earth but help with a gesture of

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your hand. Now send your words to the wall with the gesture of a big curve. Now with music - a very short phrase - move with coats and cloaks. Adjust your sentences and movements to the time of the music. Now forget the exercises, and we will make a little improvisation, hoping that these movements and speech and style will slip into the improvisation.

IMPROVISATION:

People are sitting at a table having a good time - a young wife and two friends, while the old husband has been skilfully sent away. They start to eat and drink, being very polite, stressing and underlining this politeness. But the more they drink, the more gay they become, and then the atmosphere of love is there, and they begin to kiss each other and dance and sing. Then it becomes an orgy and the old husband comes in.

The aim of the improvisation is that this exercise will somehow become a little like a style. There must be a crescendo, then legato - from politeness to orgy. It must be short but in spite of that the very fine legato must be there. The dance must come out of the movements.

Criticisms:

It was too heavy. One of the main elements of this style is feeling of ease. It was too noisy in the speech, in the bodies, in everything. It must have strong moments, but

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never noisy ones. Like a strong dream which is never noisy. Although it can be a very passionate thing, it must have the quality of a dream.

Sing with very soft voices. We shall start quietly and softly; they become passionate without increasing our voices. Now begin to dance in the same atmosphere - wide but passionate movements. Like a dream. Fiery atmosphere around us but muted. It will be very important in this performance to combine things which seem at first to be not quite akin. For instance, passionate and muted. Wide movements and piano.

Criticism of Students' Scenes:

The general impression is that all of you have grown up very much and very quickly - especially Guy, for instance. Your development was simply striking.

Barbara: As Phoebe, I have really no suggestion because it was perfectly done with good, fine taste...radiating without any unnecessary outer things. Marvelous concentration which has become part of your actor's ability. I don't mean only that the character was concentrated. I mean that you have the ability to be concentrated on the stage. It is not a butterfly, but someone who has a profession and who is able to crystalize her mind. It made a very good impression on me. To my mind, your speech was good. I got the impression that you are a real actress. I always liked you on the stage, but I have only got the impression of a finished actress today.

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As Nastia, in The Lower Depths scene, the acting was right, but I would accuse you of not being able to understand what you are doing. It was not Nastia at all - not because it is a Russian type - we must not be too national - if we take a certain type, we do so because we are able to penetrate into such characters with our imagination. But in this case you did not understand anything of the character. You made out of the first part, when she is dreaming, almost a disease, but really it is an increased desire and longing for better things. It should be painful for us to look at it, but it must still be light. Yours is almost a clinical case of a madwoman. It is really unsatisfied love - there is more than love and torture, there is love for the whole of humanity. It is her dream of love and life and religion. And that is what you do not understand.

When taking sketches or parts from a play, you must take into account the whole. If you are more attentive to the whole play, you will find out that this character is the light spot, perhaps the lightest one except for Luca, and he is another kind of light. He is wise, and she is full of heart. If you look at the whole play, you will see the two lines in the play, and you would know that you have no right to make anything diseased out of it.

You were not able to penetrate sufficiently into the whole composition. The acting you did was good, but you

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did not do the right thing. When you spoke to the others, it was wrong because of the fact that she did not let her light come into existence. She can become a marvelous thing - a hysterical, mad prostitute she becomes and that is what they have made her. What you did was not profound enough for the whole composition.

The play is a composition of people and how they go down. And that was Gorky's song - we all know what didn't happen to us; - these people cannot come into existence. For your English ear the name "The Lower Depths" should indicate something - depths. Now start to look upon your part as being part of the whole. You can find suggestions from the whole composition. I would give more regard to your arms and hands, which are not expressive sometimes. You use your hands in an uninteresting way, partly because you don't pay attention to them.

Guy: Whether you grow inwardly or not I do not know, but ask yourself and then accept it. It will help you. I cannot tell you to take into consideration the whole play and the whole composition of Richard III. It is enough to concentrate on the suggestions you can get from this special scene. Of course, there is the whole idea of Richard III behind you. You lack a sense of the complete tragic destiny of the king, but this is not a reproach.

If you take the whole character of Richard, having

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imagined it sufficiently, you would see that it is one of the characters whom destiny follows almost visibly for the audience. He is never alone. He is there, and always behind is the phantom which he cannot get rid of. It would affect your acting strongly to always feel yourself as if being constantly inspired. This strange, mysterious destiny of the king would make your characterization more expressive.

I feel that you are trying to find the inner characterization which is so true and interesting in this case. What you showed us was, to my mind, an inner characterization without any outer indications, and as you have touched upon this inner characterization, I have to mention that without this strong feeling of destiny, Richard is not characteristic enough. He is even acted as a weak or romantic person sometimes, but that is the result of something else. The real Richard is hanging upon him, and therefore, he is listening to his destiny, watching and not seeing.

You took the imagination as a ground, and I must say that I can really see what you have imagined, but not enough. Therefore, I can tell you to go on working upon this part. You have started it so rightly and are not yet far enough in it to enjoy the actor's result. If you stop it now, it will do you harm because you have not yet reached it. If your beginning work had been unhappy, I would tell you to stop, but now I tell you to go on.

In Winterset, your work was less clear to me

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because I was not sure what you were aiming at. Here I saw certain things which I have seen so often in our improvisations. It is the easiest way for you to be on the stage when you are not ready. I cannot tell you what it is because I am not able to catch it - it is a certain inclination as if a "meter" leads you and gives you certain assurance on the stage. It is not real assurance, but it was truthful and full of atmosphere and was inclined to a certain character which I did not get. In comparison with Richard III, I must say that in that scene I did not see one single sign of this "meter" thing, which I cannot explain with a better term. In Winterset it was Guy relying on certain crutches, but in Richard you were already standing on your feet.

Virginia: You know how much I appreciate your work. You have, I am sure, a very fine and strong talent and, therefore, I can scold you a little. In Egyptian I was unpleasantly shocked by something which I have never before seen in you. It was to my mind eighty percent outer action. Pretending that you are such a character, but I did not believe anything. It is because you have not imagined enough. You started to act, actually to persuade the audience that you were deep enough in the part, long before you were there. It was done with a primitive means, and anyone can do such things. It was not interesting because it was so primitive and naive and didn't come from inside at all.

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I know that you are so talented and that you are able to grasp your characters and images. You must definitely see, once and forever, that before you grasp the thing by doing it spontaneously or after much work, do not lie. Because when you lie, you are uninteresting. You know inwardly when you are in possession of the character, and when you are not, you must also know that. Even if you felt you were in possession of this complicated character, it was not ready to do such a complicated scene. It is not so simple to digest it. It is not enough to imagine somehow - it must be a really good profound work. When you feel that it is ready, then you can begin to cry and laugh. Otherwise, it becomes just an outer shell put on a thing which is not yet ripe and which collapses.

So my suggestion to you is to be much more firm with yourself from the point of view of ripening inwardly. Take imagination, or any point of the Method you prefer, but don't undergo this primitive business of trying to deceive yourself and us.

In Liliom you made another mistake; actually the same mistake but in the following way. Perhaps you did not have time to know that it was not yet ripe enough. If you will really imagine what she says when she speaks the words "Sleep, my boy." When a person says to a dead person "sleep," everything is there. It is not in vain that in all languages

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we say "sleep" to a dead person. To have the right to say this, imagine how deeply you must go into it. Each word is so tragically human - two human beings parted. When she tells him each word - you must know what each one of those words means to us. I don't mean that you have to think of each word, but it means that you have to imagine it all much deeper. Only you really understand what it means to say "Sleep, my boy." When you feel that you can't even imagine it without tears, then you have got to the right point for all parts.

You can do it, but you must also know that I would never have thought you would stop so naively half-way. I never thought you would stop there. You are a little thing, and yet I have seen you like a lion. Therefore, I will not accept any half-way from you. You stopped and were satisfied with a very clear understanding of the scene, but that is not enough for acting. Never try to speak while crying, and never speak when excited. That is for everyone. Find the way to speak a word here and there, and find the moment to utter sounds.

Esther: In The Stronger - this was an interesting experiment in which two things were very clear. First of all, you are able, it seems to me, to preserve the results of your imagination in your soul, and give it out. I have noticed moments when you had so much in you, and you gave it just as

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it was needed. You supported your partner, which is a good quality. You gave to the group feeling just as much as was tactful. That was good.

In the beginning you showed us a very intriguing kind of acting, but suddenly you lost it, and you began to show even more than you had. Then I felt that there was nothing there, especially at the end when you became tense in your body. That is not your way. Perhaps you have to be educated to keep inside more than you have to show, except in some scenes when you have to give out everything to the very last. But as an actress, it seems to me that you have to be richer inside than what you show outside. Then immediately you are intriguing. There are outer things which some actors can use, but they must be so skillful in it. But you must feel your inner life, which is more interesting in you. You could never play a King Lear because as a character it has so many outer things, and yet Virginia could. She has the right to shout and to beat her partners, but you cannot. You are an actress of a different type, and if you become an outer actress, you will not get very far.

Each one of us is born for a certain aim - inner or outer. Chaliapin had no limits, but most of us have to follow the line for which we are born. So it is better to develop your own line, and then you can get to very great heights in your art, provided you do not try to use the means which are not yours. Your inner richness is most persuasive on the stage.