

Michael Chekhov

February 14, 1938

SHAKESPEARE'S VOLCANIC POWER  
SCENES FROM SHAKESPEARE - CRITICISM  
MOVEMENT NEEDED FOR ACTING SHAKESPEARE  
JUSTIFICATION  
FEELING OF THE WHOLE - ANTICIPATION  
STYLE  
CHARACTERIZATION  
FEELING OF FORM  
FEELING OF EASE AND SIGNIFICANCE  
SPEECH  
PSYCHOLOGICAL PATTERNS

Romeo and Juliet	Hurd and Mary Lou
"	Daphne and Blair
Merchant of Venice	Dennis and Woody
Othello	Valerie and Hurd
"	Mary Lou and Sam

I want you to tell our young friends something which will help them - suggestions which are more helpful than critical.

Today, I want to contact another point of view. To a certain extent I was disappointed, and in certain moments I was comforted. This is only speaking in general. Now I want to speak more concretely.

SHAKESPEARE'S VOLCANIC POWER:

First, I would bring to your attention that these are Shakespeare's plays, which must be performed as Shakespeare deserves. There are no actors at the present time who are able to act Shakespeare. They are not born. Attempts have been made, but they are hopeless. Here, in our school, we are not pretending to play Shakespeare - it would be a

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

claim which is not justified, - but we will take these small sketches as a very good way to develop ourselves as far as we are able. Therefore, Shakespeare is taken as the best means to develop ourselves, and to widen our inner scope in every way - in outer expression and inner life - from this point of view, as school work. Only this point of view allows me to say something.

Shakespeare's imagination is the imagination of a genius and we do not know what his genius was. It must be something like a volcano, a double volcano, because we are not able to imagine as he did, therefore, we are so helpless trying to perform Shakespeare. But, if we will take his words, his situations, and his characters, and train our imagination on his work - everything, text, situations, characters, then we will have the best way first of all to understand what the real creative imagination must be, and second how to train it. Therefore, my first suggestion is that everybody will please take small moments from Shakespeare's plays, and imagine them again and again, and again the same small piece then you will get something which is so hidden in Shakespeare's plays and so seldom seen. When it is discovered, it is something like a life event in our actor's soul. Try to discover it by doing these exercises of imagination on Shakespeare's plays...

If you will imagine a very modern play when two

9351  
M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

people speak about something, you can imagine for weeks and months and you will never approach this volcano power which is in Shakespeare. In our actor's development, Shakespeare cannot be substituted for the opening of real creative things for us. Each of us has had dreams about our future, dreams about our acting - these dreams come from this point which is able to understand Shakespeare. Then the concrete things of life cover this place and that is why Shakespeare is not understood, because the place is covered and hidden. Therefore, we must imagine Shakespeare's characters, works, etc., through the imagination, and we will discover a most important point - the real activity which lives in us as actors and wants to lead us forth.

Now, this is what I want from you in the next fortnight: First, I want you to confine your work to three points, and I want you to do it consciously; three things in each sketch you do. 1. Quite definite and clear atmosphere. 2. I want you as actors to know absolutely what objectives you are fulfilling. Is it one objective for the whole sketch, or ten or twelve. 3. I want you to pay attention to the power of radiation and nothing more. We shall look upon you from these points in three weeks' time and we shall see how you are able to develop. Sketches must be shown on the stage, which is at your disposal, with lights, curtains, costumes, etc. You will create the atmosphere not only by the

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

means of your inner activity, but everything will be at your disposal in the theatre. Now, for some suggestions:

SCENES FROM SHAKESPEARE - CRITICISM:

Romeo and Juliet: Hurd:

It was better than last time, the words, the text was more justified than last time. I felt that there was more necessity to speak these words. This is very good and very important, but you must get more. It was done in a half-dream (although you have justified) you have spoken, you have moved, you have done everything half instinctively, half asleep. Now, I want you to continue this right instinct by a very conscious approach, and for this I will give you three suggestions:

1. Try to justify each word, on the basis of this objective. Atmosphere gives the same power, which is the power of justifying the text, and send it out with your radiation. A special task is to justify the words. You have done this already but the desire must be in you to do it more consciously.

2. Your mistake is your body. Although you have a very beautiful body, you are quite tense - your body is not yet at your disposal, its tendency is quite opposite to Terry's body which is quite flexible and controlled. Of course it cannot be done overnight but it must be done. The result of this unelaborated body is that you as a person are full of emotions

and feelings, but at the moment when the feelings want to arise, the body stops them and always leaves these things you have inside of you - they can't go through this body. You catch your own emotions in a grip and stop yourself. Therefore, you must do exercises - hours of simple exercises for the feeling of form, feeling of beauty. They will free your body; and you must imagine yourself being free. You must all do this when you are imagining - imagine yourself with a free and flexible body. When you imagine for instance, that you are Othello and other characters, imagine for yourself: "Now I have a free body; now I have a flexible body." This will help you very much.

3. What I liked very much this time. It seems to me that you have a very good sense for the stage, which must be underlined and developed. Quite opposite from what we have seen in Sam. Sam has other good qualities and other mistakes - I am not blaming one and praising another. Comparing the Othello of Sam, it was like in a desert.

MOVEMENT: NEEDED IN ACTING SHAKESPEARE.

It is, of course, a great mistake to imagine that Shakespeare requires nothing because in his time there were no settings. We are other actors, other people, another stage and age, and it is quite wrong when the actor thinks he has to be stiff. Quite a different epoch. We are we, and we must act Shakespeare as we are today. If we discover the

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

real Shakespeare, we discover the world of movements. We have not discovered them yet because we are too dead in our movements.

The humanity of today, in general, are newspaper readers and nothing more. If we want to become actors, we must overcome this difficulty of the immovable life inside and out. When we bring this immobility onto the stage (although it is very comfortable) it has nothing to do with the theatre. Therefore, I am very much in favor of acting Shakespeare with movements, with feeling of space and human body and composition in movements. Whether it is tragedy, whether it is right, is another thing. But that Hurd has made an attempt to show Shakespeare in movement is a great thing, which can awaken not only in yourself something which would otherwise be sleeping. It will awaken in the audience certain feelings for movement on the stage, and the audience will be disappointed in the usual stiff style on the stage, which is like corpses standing before us. This is an offence; this is not our way. Therefore, we must say this is not our way, absolutely, and you must go on with your attempts to move in Shakespeare.

From this point of view I want you to go on with this movable interpretation but, and now comes another suggestion, not only for this movable stage but for your speech, for your inner life, will you please, in addition to these

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

three things, objective, radiation, atmosphere, try to make all your movements and speech and mise en scène on bigger psychological gestures. They are sometimes too small, too modern, too roccoco. If we try to imagine what kind of psychological gesture is underneath your Othello, we would find it to be too small. (We will bring Mr. Shdanoff's play as near as possible to Shakespearean tragedy, and we will be much more expressive.)

When we imagine Shakespeare, we are conscious only of his gestures. If we imagine that Shakespeare consists only of such big gestures, then we will realize how much more impressive the gestures must be.

JUSTIFICATION:

Mary Lou:

This is quite opposite to Hurd. Your words are not justified. You will ask me why, and I shall say on all points. Therefore, I should say you must try to think your part through again; to think in the sense of imagining all the points of the method, and especially these three points which I have given you. Mary Lou's appearance in this Shakespeare thing is very characteristic. She is less interesting when she speaks than when she is silent in this play. In other plays there is quite the other impression. When she speaks easy words, small gestures, she speaks beautifully. This means that you have something to develop in your speech in connec-

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

tion with big Shakespeare plays. This is a point to be corrected, as it will give you certain things which you are not yet in possession of. Not that I want you to be a Shakespearean actress, but use this opportunity to discover some new things.

FEELING OF THE WHOLE - ANTICIPATION:

Each actor, if he has a feeling of the whole, is from a certain point of view, anticipating each point, anticipating the end. This feeling of the whole was sometimes strong and clear, and sometimes very weak. I want you to pay attention to this feeling of the whole. For example, when Blair appeared as Romeo, from my point of view there was great feeling of anticipation, because it seemed to me that he was anticipating. He took me with him because of his anticipation of the whole scene. Then gradually it was lost, and this is another question.

Now, in Woody's performance it was absolutely without any idea of the feeling of the whole, of the coming scene, of anticipation. Where was the beginning? With Blair, you will see how important it is to anticipate and to promise the audience something. When you start like Woody the audience will not go with you, because you have not taken us.

I would suggest to Blair to elaborate your part in two ways simultaneously. Something in general like your appearance and the anticipation, and another thing for you



M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

especially, try to elaborate with very small pieces sometimes. As we have done with the appearance of the showman. It is good for you. He comes in, he tries to understand something - such a chain consisting of small links. It is your personal way and it does not contradict at all the Method, but each person must take the Method in his individual way. In general, such small thing must be your way; you were lacking today these small things. It was very good that you tried to incorporate the music because this is a similar case to Hurd, that to be a good actor, or being a good actor, one will always try to create a certain 'aura' around him. This is a good sign and you must do this. The idea to bring the music and to use it is good and the music was well chosen. It was necessary to have the feeling for this visible and invisible aura, and not to think that the actor must be immovable and alone. These are old fashioned ideas in connection with "stars". For us there must be a big aura around everybody, at every performance.

STYLE:

For Woody, I would make the following suggestions: Paul's idea was very interesting to show this play as a comedy, but the interpretation depends upon the actor. Today it was neither comedy or tragedy - it was almost a little modern play. You must find the style within the scope of

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

Shakespeare's dimensions. You had actually only two colors in the whole long dialogue. This is very poor. I would suggest that you try to find new colors so that each sentence is quite different in color. This will develop you very much.

#### CHARACTERIZATION:

You apparently have some idea of the character. This makes you stiff. You have chosen one possibility from the many for this character, and you give the impression of being bound. If you want to find a character, you must find it so that it is able to move freely and in various colors. You must find the character not like a statue but living and movable, and rich with possibility. Therefore, elaborate your character much more, and show us unity with different possibilities. If you are unable to draw in order to express what you mean, we want to hear the description before you start, of the appearance, dress, etc. We want to see you as a character, completely imagined through. You have imagined quite clearly. If you will give some drawings, and then explain something in addition, I want you to explain or draw it with all possible detail. For instance, if you describe a beard, I want to know what kind of beard, color, size, type, etc.

#### FEELING OF FORM:

Sam - Special Task: You have made a little prog-

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

ress in being more movable and flexible than before. I want you to be absolutely free inside and outwardly, and for this aim I want you to start with inner freedom, and by this I mean something special. Will you, therefore, throughout the whole scene, carry through the feeling of form for his emotions, and this is the point from which you will develop the freedom. It was not quite clear to me what real experience this character was feeling at the moment. It could be anger, cynicism, tears, etc. It was not convincing. Sometimes it was a mixture. I want you to differentiate. He is angry, he is suspicious, he is taking the impression, and so on. It must be quite clear to you, and the feeling of form being applied to the inner state of the character.

Daphne:

I want you to make a little effort to bind together the different states, to build bridges as it were. For instance, Juliet is going to be awakened, without any bridge, when she comes back from this world where she was so far away, and now she comes to this reality. This is a big, long, psychological way, and then by looking at Romeo she must build another bridge. She must realize that she is here, and build another bridge to realize that she is dead. All the transitions are omitted. Try to find out where the scene lacked bridges.

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

Dennis:

Especially for you. Try to find your character without any staccato, inwardly or outwardly, in your legs and feet. It must be one big flow or wave, built on the basis of deepest and profoundest friendship and devotion.

Valerie:

Will you please try to find Desdemona through your imagination, and then other activities must join in. This character is the most active. Try to interplay her character so that she is not less active than Othello.

You have all taken these scenes as if each one were a complete scene from Shakespeare. You must take it with the feeling of the whole play. The inspiration must come from other scenes and characters in the play. Imagine the whole play and then lead all these strings to the scene you are doing.

FEELING OF EASE AND SIGNIFICANCE:

Peter:

Contact and freedom. This morning I felt that the contact was not strong enough. The actors were hindering themselves by not having contact. The other thing, for instance, in the next fortnight when you have worked on your objectives, it might be helpful having got your objectives very fully, to take the feeling of ease, because that feel-

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

ing, taken deeply, will help to free you, and make it a much easier performance to look at, and also take at that point significance.

Eleanor:

I wanted to suggest the feeling of ease to combat an inner hurry, and that the interpretation should be clearer in all the scenes whatever they may be. There were many times when it was not clear what the action meant. This could be helped by imagining and by being very clear.

Katherine:

I think it might be helpful if you had more feeling for giving out something to the audience. You could find this by looking at points of the method such as radiation.

Gavin:

It seemed to me that often the settings were not of very much help, and that the actors did not make the most of them. In Hurd's Othello I thought they should have used different levels - I should have liked Hurd up and Valerie down. At the time I felt the settings could have been combined in the psychological gesture of the character and the setting.

Terry:

I think in each case there was a little vagueness about what was going to be done. If they had concentrated

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

fully on the parts of the Method they were going to use, and why, and had everything very clearly before them, it would have given us a cleaner and less blurred impression.

Comments by Mrs. Elmhirst and Miss Crowther:

Mrs. Elmhirst:

I have one or two points prepared. First, I wondered if it would help you to see the whole scene more in terms of the outward form, so that we would get the feeling the character was working to a climax. For instance, when you drink the poison, the drinking had no more importance than any other movement. Then I could see what Mr. Chekhov meant when he said that you use your space in a very interesting way, but in the first Romeo and Juliet I felt that you were using your space without your center being Juliet, and that if she could always remain your center, you would not wander around, so that Juliet is lost. I wondered if with the mise en scène you could arrange it so that the focus was more concentrated for the audience. We could never see Juliet's face while she was lying down, and it made contact difficult between the audience and Romeo. It was very hard to center it with the two of you, but we were able to center it with the other. I should suggest trying to find the different atmospheres. In the same scene the different atmospheres through which you move until the final moment: The different transitions of atmosphere.

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

For Mary Lou (Romeo and Juliet) I have nothing inward to suggest but when you say the words, "There is a noise without" it did not have much meaning - we did not feel that there was anything outside at all.

Hurd

It was difficult for me to bring the inward feeling into the outward expression. I felt that he was working harder for the outer expression than for the inner content. I think he must have worked very much on the outer personal form, but it was not filled with the inner content.

For Blair and Daphne (Romeo and Juliet), I would suggest that Daphne try to imagine more what it means to suddenly see him at different moments. And again, the changes of atmosphere, the atmosphere of awakening, and so on.

In Valerie and Hurd (Othello) I felt there was very little contact, even in terms of your voices. They seemed to be speaking from entirely different regions, so that the voices were not meeting one another. Again, for Hurd, there was too much emphasis on the outer form and not the inner form. He must increase the inner form and diminish the outer form. There was no creative atmosphere. I wonder if Valerie could work for more radiation even in moments when she is still.

In Mary Lou (Othello) there was nothing inward for us. Sam was too much on the same level all through. There was no climax. The inner form was confused and there was

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

very little contact between him and Mary Lou. Her movements seemed to have nothing to do with Sam.

Blair I felt had a very interesting quality of concentration. I felt that the whole of him was in those moments.

SPEECH:

Miss Crowther:

Hurd has a great problem because he has no form in his voice. For instance, today he ran through his words so quickly that it became one big sound. There is phrasing, yet no gesture in the word itself, and the placement is wrong, it is down here and it is not possible for Hurd to form his words. Very often when he has the most fire, the most emotion, there is no means of it coming out. The words become so jumbled together they become bound in the voice, and it is impossible for the emotion to come out - it is stifled inside. It is curable, but it means a great deal of hard work, a tremendous amount of work. He must get in double, treble the amount of work. No moment can be lost, otherwise it will not be possible to accomplish the work.

Hurd has a good natural quality in his voice. May I ask whether it would be possible for Hurd and Woody to consider speech as one of the most important subjects for a certain length of time, because I feel that their speech is going to be left so far behind that they will never be able



M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

catch up. It means not only time with me but special time with themselves.

Mr. Chekhov:

It may have to be arranged to have special lessons for them here and special lessons at home. I hear it myself, therefore, I prefer to give them free time because without this all other things are in vain.

Miss Crowther:

For me, even now, the voice work counts as nothing. In the preparation of these scenes, how much time and thought is put into the speech work? Is every phrase worked over with as much of the speech method as you possibly can, because this morning it was very difficult to find any one thing that was carried through in the speech, and so much that Mr. Chekhov has mentioned today should come through in the speech work. For instance, did you find your way into the style of comedy or tragedy? Did you try to get your epic quality in the drama, and lyric in the comedy?

I felt that the sounds themselves did not count for anything. Whenever you wanted a stronger, fuller quality you shouted. Then everything is shattered as far as the voice is concerned, the moment one comes into a shout. The words themselves should have had a greater significance all the way through. There should have been more feeling for rhythm.

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

Sam's Othello was built up of long pauses all the way through. There was no feeling for the blank verse. This iambic pentemeter, which is the most important form of all poetry for the actor, leads the actor through to the beautiful speaking of prose on the stage, and I felt there was not the freedom of the form there in the lines. Mr. Chekhov, may I ask whether you would like me to help during the next fortnight, or is it much better to have them work out sounds for themselves?

Mr. Chekhov:

I think our friends are "second generation" and they need your help more in general, but you must decide this question yourself because you know better which help is needed.

Miss Crowther:

As we are working today in the speech room, there must be no sense of hurrying. When you have a passage in which you feel the movement is quick, you must go through your actions with activity but not hurrying so that the words are indistinct. Hurd very often gets a slight lilt in his voice, lifting up at the beginning of a phrase whether the word is important or not. You must go with your rhythm. Don't feel that every line must begin the same. The gestures stop too soon with everybody.

Mary Lou, I would also suggest your working for rhythm much more. It will help you build your way into your bigger passages, because sometimes you shout.

Blair, watch your "s" sound because that is still spoiling your speech. Your gesture was good at the beginning, but when you want your voice to appear as if it is dying, where the gesture must be so definite and so well formed that inside you can allow the voice to go. When you get the fire of your emotions be very careful that you mold much more, because if the molding is not there it becomes jumbled.

Daphne, I know you cannot work exactly as the others. However, work with your rhythm, and watch your phrasing a little more carefully.

In The Merchant of Venice, Woody, it was very much clearer than a fortnight ago. You used your throat again. Then it gets tight. Dennis, yours was better but you must get rid of your "s".

In the Othello, Valerie, the voice is very thin in gesture. You must have more gesture to begin with - more space, more vowels, more consonants. Sam, you must be careful that you don't let your voice shout from the beginning to the end. When a thing is full of fire and emotion, and it comes through on a hard shout, it has the quality of making us feel embarrassed. It won't allow your feelings to come through truly. If the voice is hard it makes everything

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

hard. It makes the audience uncomfortable.

Mr. Chekhov: To the Old Students:

When you are giving your criticism in a fortnight, I would suggest to you that you try to form your suggestions for each individual person. Try to find the approach to each individual case which will be very useful to us and to them.

\* \* \* \* \*

PSYCHOLOGICAL PATTERNS:

Spanish Evening:

Now I want to touch on some psychological patterns in Henry's play and we shall start with the bridegroom. The bridegroom has reached the climax to be almost dead. He is afraid that he is not living, and at this moment he sees the physician coming into the room with the mother. This time the mother will not have her usual job, but will act quite a different task. I want you to develop only how the physician, the showman, from being nothing, grows into a successful magician. The psychological pattern must be that they are so hopeful, and they trust him so much that gradually he notices this and becomes powerful. The mother and the bridegroom are under his spell.

I want the showman to concentrate on one small line for the rehearsal. You are afraid and you are suspicious that they have already discovered that you are only a showman.

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

Your psychology is, "Shall I run away or not?" The bridegroom imagines that every moment the doctor is there it helps, and he is getting better.

The showman has one thing to look out for. He must hesitate after each movement to see what effect it is having on the patient. This is the first stage, then we have to find the transition to the magic. You make certain movements and from their reaction you will get the idea to do some magical tricks. Movements must be full of power and decisive. I want you to try to find the character from the idea that the showman walks over the whole world - every limb is free because it has nothing to do. He comes into the room and begins to create. Every movement he turns to good use.

The young wife's gesture is to use every opportunity to get nearer and nearer, and finally to seduce the Sacristan. The final idea is to kiss him like a tiger, and to remain in this state forever. The Sacristan's idea is to protect his innocence. He tries to escape, not outwardly, but inside by studying his theology each time she advances toward him. Even when she is kissing him, he is studying his theology. When he is first kissed he is the victim, but being awakened he realizes that he is a man. The wife must find actions to entice him. The Sacristan is young, blushing and full of life.

The young maid and her lover: Simply - schematically - his every movement is preparation for embrace - her stopping him

M. Chekhov

February 14, 1938

is more active than her invitation.

Now the march to the Church with muted music - very stately - the bridegroom enjoys his ability to walk. The young girl is hoping he will break down. The showman is walking not with the procession but leading - imagine that they are puppets under his control.