

Michael Chekhov

PRINCE SERGI VOLAONSKY. PARIS, 1931

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Michael Chekhov is an outstanding figure of the contemporary theatre. His is a special position. He cannot be measured by ordinary standards. In any case one cannot measure him by the single performance in which we saw him play four short roles. It is difficult to reconcile that uniformity which is peculiar to him with the versatility which he showed in these roles. So far as one can perceive his uniformity resides in that which he completely lacks. Not in one of his roles did he exhibit even one of the tricks and artifices of the ordinary actor as, for instance, a faulty intonation, an absurd tearing apart of words, or a false continuity, deliberate devices for emphasis, proffering a word for the sake of a laugh; in a word, nothing of all that which, like rust, eats into the actor's recitation, ruins his speech, and kills its natural and true quality.

With Chekhov everything is true. It is chiselled where needed and also molded when necessary, and everything is amazingly integral and is done not for us, the onlookers, but through his innate natural law. And so, absorbing the purity of his playing, free from acting (even one dislikes to mention the word playing) I am reminded of Tolstoy's words, "The hero of my novel, whom I love with all the strength of my soul,

whom I try to portray in all his beauty and who always was, is, and will be beautiful - is truth." So, that is the ever-present uniformity which, so far as I am able to perceive, in that versatility which we saw on the evening of April 4 in the Salle Caveau.

This truth not only moved him, not only shone through him, but it pervaded the whole evening because we saw not Chekhov the actor only, but also Chekhov the producer, the expounder, the leader, and, finally, Chekhov the maker, the creator of these plays which he produces, of those types which he incarnates. He compelled us to see in Chekhov, the author, depths and subtleties and the blending of the tragic with the comic which we, simple mortals, had never suspected.

Chekhov showed us four different types. In the first picture we see a chronic drunkard of a noble type. One of the charms of Chekhov's comedy acting is the secondary role he allots to the WORD. The real, most comical word, the one in which lies the veritable kernel of laughter, he somehow enshrouds: the word is hidden somewhere like a strawberry under a leaf. Sometimes it is modest to such a degree that we almost divine it. This extreme concern as to the comical influence on the onlooker is, in the end, much more effective than the insistence of the comical. The important thing is that this method keeps us at the opposite pole to that vulgar assertiveness which seeks an effect and chases after applause.

With him a word seems to be drowned in the mood, and the latter becomes the chief moment of the entire stage existence. The mood itself in its expressions is worked out with such flow and cadence, from one form to another, that there is not one moment in which the content of the inner psychology is not apparent.

In this respect, most remarkable is the young student's intoxication. It is difficult to convey to what degree this is worked out, to what degree the gradualness of his intoxication is produced artistically and how resourcefully are utilized the surrounding objects - all the props of the external setting, so modern and scant; the cap, the buttons of the jacket, the chair, the table, the bottles of beer, and the love letter on the blue notepaper, the cup instead of the glass, splashings and spillings of beery liquid - all these things play a part and turn up at the right moment and assist, so to say, the orchestration of the given moment. We see the amazing rhythm with which the physical movement harmonizes with the inner movement.

There is not one moment of vulgarity, even on the very brink of the places most dangerous in this respect. THAT is, of course, his greatest merit. And THAT is why, during the whole play, in every movement, in every one of his roles our HEARTS GO OUT TO HIM. We love him - for what? It is not because he is a hero, or a lover; he portrays human worthlessness, and nevertheless, we are drawn to this squalid world of

depths of beggarly emotions, where worthlessness and greatness intermingle and laughter and sorrow dwell together.

In the monologue, "The Story of a Bureaucrat," I was struck more than in anything by the force of some of his pauses and by the eloquence of his silences. In this, perhaps with more clarity than in anything, is revealed that independent road by which he came out from the Moscow Arts Theatre. M. A. T. always loved "pauses" but with them they were always filled by the lighting of a cigarette, by a thrown stub, by drawing one's fingers through one's tousled hair, or by some "empty" sigh, or by staring through a window. Those pauses, strictly speaking, were not pauses in the true sense; they were not psychological pauses, nor dramatical, nor mimic pauses, no, they were simply stops, gaps in the action. With Chekhov everything lives; he has that genuine "psychological pause" which either lives in the sense of the PRECEDING word, or forecasts the FUTURE word. This is such a pause as distinguishes a personality from a lack of personality, a temperament from indifference, an artistic reading from one that is simple literate.