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MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S THIRD CLASS FOR PROFESSIONAL ACTORS

"HOW SHALL WE DEVELOP OUR EMOTIONS AND OUR BODIES"

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Romeo and Juliet
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THE CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY AND THE "LAYMAN BEING":

How shall we develop our emotions and our bodies?
At the moment when we believe that there is a creative individuality, and another whom we call the "layman being," we are already taking part in this fight to accept the creative individuality, and try with it to defeat the "layman" who uses and abuses our voice, body and emotions. This is the moment when you must decide whether you want to go on that way or go on by developing yourself in the school, and in our discussions.

When we realize that there are two individualities - one against the creative process and another for it - then that knowledge alone is already of very great importance. When we know that there are two, and we know which we accept and which we deny, that is already great strength which we can give to the creative individuality, and can weaken the "layman" in us. As soon as we begin to develop our bodies, voices, and

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emotions, we begin to get our professional actor's technique, and as soon as we have our technique, we can start the creative process - and what will it be?

ATMOSPHERE:

When the creative individuality begins to create, begins to be active, what happens first of all? First of all, the creative individuality feels itself as if surrounded by the atmosphere of future work - we may not yet know what it will be - but we know that our creative individuality is surrounded by a certain definite atmosphere which is pleasantly worrying us. When we got a certain part and we say we don't like it - why? It is because the atmosphere is of a different kind, and it cannot accept this part. Whether we are conscious of this general atmosphere or not does not mean anything, but we know the result when the atmosphere says, "No, it is not what I want." Or we can say, for instance, that we want to act more tragic parts, more melodramatic parts, etc. What does it mean? It is a general atmosphere which one carries with one for one's whole life as a creative individuality. So there is a general atmosphere which dictates to us, as actors, what we have to act.

Of course, there are individuals who have many atmospheres which change with the years, with the times, the day, etc., but still there is one individual atmosphere always present. For instance, one wants to be a clown but has never had

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this opportunity, and this atmosphere of clown remains unsatisfied. This was my case. I never had the opportunity to show all those clown tricks. I wanted to be a clown, but I was acting Hamlet and other parts like that, and there was no place for clowning. Later on I noticed that I was clowning in a modified way!¹

We have to satisfy these atmospheres and we cannot avoid it. To kill an atmosphere which surrounds an individual is impossible. We have to feel it and when we know that there are atmospheres always in us, surrounding us, then again the knowledge of it makes a great difference in our own lives. If I know I am a clown, it makes life easier for me.

TECHNIQUE OF READING THE TEXT:

Each creation starts with atmosphere, however hidden and obscure it may be, it always starts with the atmosphere. Therefore, if we receive a part, and start with the text and begin to study the part with the ideas and thoughts and events and logical succession of facts, which are given in the play, we do, to my mind, the greatest mistake because we start from the point which is not logically right for a creative process. We start with the very thing with which we have to finish. We have to finish with the written play - that will be the result when we are so far advanced in our part. We shall be able to read it and understand what is behind it, and must not start with the superficial understanding of who is speaking to whom,

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what about, and what shall happen. This approach makes us somehow dry, dull, and professional in the wrong way, and kills the atmosphere not only of this special play, but our own atmospheres, whatever they are, are somehow offended.

If we start with the reading of the text, I feel I understand the play, but I lose myself. The more I read the play, the text, the more I understand it, the more I lose the interest for acting, and I begin to think of the production, what costumes I shall wear, how much I will get, and how I will get rid of the rehearsals as soon as possible. Not because we are not artists, but because we start with the wrong thing which offends the most profound thing - our individuality, surrounded by atmospheres.

What should we actually do? We should start with reading the play, but overlooking the thoughts, the logic of everything and to, first of all, throw away everything I have known about the play. Before we start to work on Romeo and Juliet, we have to throw away everything we have known about it, and start anew by starting to enjoy the atmospheres. Read it again and again, scene after scene. As soon as you can satisfy your hunger for the atmosphere of the play, every kind of reading is right and even no reading is right.

THE CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY - THE ARTIST:

I have prepared a little chart: [a graph or scheme].

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1. The creative individuality is high above everything, and our undeveloped part is down here.
2. Then comes the creative individuality surrounded by the atmospheres.
3. Then our technique comes when we try to satisfy our necessity for atmosphere.

IMAGINING THE PLAY:

When, for instance, we are going to produce Romeo and Juliet, we, first of all, read the play several times and create in our minds and souls the atmosphere. Then the next step will be given - while reading the play - which is to see, to imagine - not to understand - but to imagine the text. This is much more pleasant than to read and memorize the lines. To imagine all the events, characters, etc., whether they are very fine, or whether they are primitive at the very beginning, it does not matter, the only important thing is that we avoid the mistake of never imagining the play.

When you imagine the balcony scene, for instance, you will imagine all the pictures you have seen. You will be disturbed by the many pictures, but you will eventually get rid of them.

The third stage is to imagine the whole play - one sentence, one word, details, etc. This kind of imagination will be prompted entirely by the atmosphere. All the images which will come, whether primitive or complicated, will be in full harmony with the atmosphere of Romeo and Juliet, which

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we will have discovered or created while reading the play.

Now the process of atmosphere. It must go on simultaneously with our everyday rehearsals. We have to adjust ourselves to it. By imagining Romeo and Juliet, and especially your own part in it, you have to try to develop in more and more detail everything you are going to perform. The more details the better. That means that you have to act in your imagination, your own part, and also act other parts as much as you need in order to clarify your own part, your own character, etc.

THE ACTOR AS DIRECTOR:

Every actor must be a director, at least inwardly. The psychology of the director must be known to each actor. That means that the actor who gets a part must be able to see everything around this part. He must be able to see the whole performance, or at least to anticipate how he would produce the play. The Broadway producer will produce a play his own way, quite differently from us, but it is a harmless contradiction.

The important thing is that we have an eye which sees more than just our own part. While imagining Romeo and Juliet and your own part, you have to more or less imagine the whole performance around you. It will become necessary, because the atmosphere of Romeo and Juliet will not allow you to confine yourself only to your own character. It has to be done in order

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to satisfy the atmosphere which becomes more and more creative and demanding. To satisfy such an atmosphere, one has to imagine everything.

THE CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY:

That is what happens schematically. First, the creative individuality surrounded by the atmosphere, and then into the atmosphere you put more and more images and details. The first thing was our undeveloped emotions and body. Then when we begin to develop the general technique, something rises up as if to meet the imaginative performance. When the imagination is being developed more and more in details, you will need not only a good general technique, but a special technique for a special part. The technique for Don Quixote is different than that for Faust, the technique for King Lear is different than the technique for Cordelia. This is the most pleasant thing for our creative individuality - which is the artist in us.

This special technique needs to be found each time we prepare a part. For instance, we must find out how King Lear walks, because no one in the world walks like him. How Ophelia walks is again the thing which must be found by the actor. This special technique, this special body for King Lear, this special voice.

THE ACTOR'S VOICE:

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The greatest mistake we make is that we always use our own voices for every part. Lack of imagination, lack of interest for the character, lack of time, perhaps, but it gives one of the poorest impressions of our present theatre. We speak "in general" and so much in the one tone that we have lost the feeling for the voice - only thoughts, business, ideas. We don't hear our own voices speaking, or our fellow-man speaking. We don't really hear much either - we understand much but we don't hear. But if one's voice changes suddenly, we realize that it is not the usual voice. On the stage it is actually our duty to produce a new voice for each part. When we act Cordelia and Ophelia and Maria with our own voice, it is wrong theatrically.

From the artistic point of view, if we will listen to the character speaking, we will discover that we cannot hear this voice - how she acts and how she speaks is in great disharmony - someone else speaks from behind her. One actor speaks wrongly, another moves wrongly, and another forces his emotions wrongly. But by imagining in detail and by hearing the voice of Juliet in our imagination, we will get the desire to imitate this fine voice which we hear in our imagination. Then we have to appeal to our own voice to see whether we can produce it, and that is the question of technique.

Then we meet this necessity to have a special technique, a special voice, special body and special composition

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of emotions. Now the individual becomes more active. The atmosphere surrounds all the images, the images are born, and the general technique becomes a special one.

INSPIRATION:

When it happens that we have elaborated our special technique for this particular part, and when we have by certain means incorporated all our images - by using our special techniques for this character - then we have to wait for the last stage which comes of itself. And this stage is what we call inspiration.

Inspiration comes when everything is forgotten - the method, the technique, the part, the author, the audience, everything. Then a miracle happens. It happens that the play, the part, begins to exist independently of ourselves. Everyone knows this pleasant state, which cannot be mistaken by anyone. It is a moment of such greatness and strength that it cannot be mistaken for anything else.

INSPIRED ACTING:

It is the moment of inspiration when the character, being prompted by the right atmosphere, being prepared by careful imagining, being friends with the creative individuality is not there and we here. No - the individuality is here and there and everything is one harmonious, well-integrated psychological and physical whole. It is the event for which

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we have come onto the stage. We have chosen our profession because our artistic individuality has anticipated this inspiration. That is the beginning of our career, the dream of our profession, and it must be the end of our profession. In between is work, technique, effort, and then comes this harmonious whole.

IMPROVISATION:

Now I hope you will accept my suggestion that we shall start our sketch as if logically - first the atmosphere, then elaboration and technique, and then comes the moment of inspiration. Therefore, we shall start our sketch with atmosphere. I will give you certain material for imagining, and we shall study what should be the logic of a creative process.

I have in mind a theme which I want to bring to the point of performance. At the moment, I am the only one who knows what it is, but we will gradually come to the performance.

Atmospheres for the Sketch:

The first atmosphere will be the following one:
Early morning - very early - before dawn, in a tavern which is very dirty, very low. All the people are very drunk - they have been drinking the whole night. Everyone is tired and exhausted - prostitutes and sailors. Everything that could happen has happened. They are exhausted, unbridled, weak, over-tired - it is like a nightmare. Somewhere there are

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attempts to sing the songs which have been sung during the night - disharmony everywhere. Satiety. Drinking goes on very lazily - some exclamations, some attempts to sing, nothing reasonable, tired, stuffy. This is the atmosphere.

Try to imagine it around us - don't try to feel anything. We will feel as soon as the atmosphere is there. When you imagine the atmosphere around you, allow yourself to be open to it. Don't force yourself to be open - just open yourself to this heavy atmosphere. Now try to move a little in harmony with this atmosphere. In making these small movements, try to avoid analyzing what these movements mean. Without any special aim except to move harmoniously with the atmosphere. Don't allow your intellect to hold you at this moment.

Now, while producing these movements, simply speak the word, "Well," which it must also be in the atmosphere. Then get up, as if to go home, and fall down again. In harmony with the atmosphere. Then someone starts to sing vaguely, others try to join, then drop it. Each sailor and prostitute will choose a partner, and will sit together - they have been together so much physically that they cannot be separated. He: "How long have you been here?" She: "For eight years." Both are absolutely indifferent. Now drop the atmosphere.

Now take the moment when the greatest activity is present - singing, drinking, and kissing each other. This

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time the atmosphere is that of the same tavern - the same smelly, dirty, low standard of morality. It is night, and all the devils are here. Unbridled atmosphere - very active. It is full of a certain hot love - sly love - no hatred. One sailor, the Captain, is in the room with a girl. He tells the sailors that they must be at the boat at six o'clock. They attempt to capture some semblance of discipline.

There are two atmospheres for this sketch, which you can exercise at home. Imagine the air around you filled with the atmosphere. Try to move and speak in it - first in one and then in the other.

FEELING OF EASE:

There are four qualities which each artist must have developed in himself so strongly that they are always there. Whatever the part, whatever the moments in the part, these four qualities are symptoms of one who is a creative artist. We will start with the first quality today. We call it feeling of ease because it is a very strongly expressed feeling of lightness and ease.

That means that whatever we are going to experience on the stage - even if it is terribly heavy and uneasy - the impression that it is terribly heavy must be given, but how it is produced must be artistically light and easy always. Then it will be really something which we may enjoy, and we

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will understand much more what is behind the acting which is permeated with this feeling of ease. If, for instance, we show a very heavy thing with a feeling of ease, being light and easy in our muscles and our psychology, it will be pleasant for the audience, but if we are really doing it heavily and tensely - using everything opposite to the feeling of ease - it will give the impression of heaviness, but it will be an unpleasant sensation for the audience. Such efforts make the audience and the actors really ill - if two men are fighting in earnest on the stage, it is impossible to look at, but if they fight having this ability of ease, they will give the impression of a fight, but it will be a work of art.

Let us take the example of Michaelangelo's "Moses". There you will see how heavy is each fold of the cheek, and the nose, and the hair, and the clothes - and at the same time how light. Look at it from this point of view - the most heavy things are expressed with the magic feeling of ease.

Another example: When laborers are at work, they must get this feeling of ease when using their heavy tools. If they did not get this feeling of ease and rhythm, they could not do their work. Nature itself forces them to get immediately this feeling of ease. So this first quality will be useful for all of us. It makes the actor twice as happy on the stage, and the audience three times as happy when watching him. There is no philosophy about it, it is simply a feeling of ease. One

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is light when in a good mood, and heavy when in a bad mood.

Exercise:

Try to recall the feeling of your body without weight. Just lift your arm and experience the desire to become easier and lighter. This simple exercise can lead to great results. If we are able to move with a feeling of ease, we are changing our psychology. Many experiences will come as a result of knocking at this door of the feeling of ease. Try to lose the weight of your body.

There is always a certain slight preparation before the movement. Now to this add a certain rhythm which is there by nature. Feel your arms as wings. Now do it twice as quickly, and twice as quickly again. Then do it only in your imagination. When we have no arms and hands at all, when we become accustomed to using our invisible hands and arms, then we will see that we have only to "take" our visible hand with our invisible hands, and it will lose its weight entirely. The invisible thing is the artistic one. That is feeling of ease.

Now say the word, "Well," with this feeling of ease. That is what carries our speech and makes it much more audible.