

TO THE READER

A HISTORY OF THE SEVERAL VERSIONS OF TO THE ACTOR; ON THE TECHNIQUE OF ACTING, BY MICHAEL CHEKHOV, TOGETHER WITH A HISTORY OF THE SHORTHAND NOTES OF LESSONS AND LECTURES GIVEN BY HIM DURING THE LIFETIME OF THE CHEKHOV THEATRE STUDIO FROM 1936 to 1942; TAKEN FROM THE RECORDS OF DEIRDRE HURST du PREY AND INCORPORATED IN THE MANUSCRIPT, THE ACTOR IS THE THEATRE.

TO THE ACTOR; ON THE TECHNIQUE OF ACTING

If my memory and records serve me, the initial work on the English version of Michael Chekhov's To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting was commenced at Dartington Hall in Devonshire, England, in 1937, when Chekhov began dictating to me from notes which were handwritten in Russian.¹ This I considered to be Version No. 1 of the work, until I was advised that there had been an earlier manuscript, written in German. Mlle. Georgette Boner, a close friend and theatre associate of Michael Chekhov, wrote to me in March 29, 1972: "You know that I have been working for about five years, from 1930-35, with Michael Chekhov. But perhaps you do not know that already then, that is to say when the Chekhov-Boner Company, Le Theatre Tchokhoff, was producing plays in Paris, Chekhov and I wanted to write together a book on the actor's art. It never was finished, but I have the manuscript, mostly handwritten by Chekhov, and some of his drawings."

This set me on a course to try to establish the period in Chekhov's life when he began his initial experiments with his own ideas for a technique of acting method, as well as his first attempts to write down such ideas.²

It is probably safe to say that in 1919 Chekhov was still working with

idealism and his concept of the theatre as a spiritual experience were highly objectionable to Soviet authorities.

In 1922 the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre left Russia on a European tour, with a production of Strindberg's Eric XIV, in which Michael Chekhov played the title role. The brilliance of Chekhov's performance, revealing the immense range of his talent, together with the vivid theatricality of Eugene Vakhtangov's startling, stylized production, created a sensation in Berlin. This first contact with the European theatre world proved providential in that it acquainted Chekhov with different art trends, opened for him new vistas, and confirmed him in his resolution to pursue his own intuitive conception of a theatre in which composition, harmony, and rhythm were, for him, fundamental elements.

At this period in Chekhov's artistic evolution other forces were at work, springing from his discovery of the writings of Rudolf Steiner, Austrian philosopher, scientist, and educator, whose influence was being felt in the Russian artistic and literary world of the time. Steiner's philosophical concepts served as a source of inspiration for Chekhov, indicating a new direction - one for which he had long been probing and searching - in which to develop his own artistic convictions.² In this search he was encouraged by Stanislavsky, his much loved

² See notes of June 8, 1938, p. 1879: Suggestions for an article (unpublished) about Michael Chekhov and the major influences which affected his Method: Constantin Stanislavsky, Rudolf Steiner, and the European theatre.

mentor and friend. Although Stanislavsky did not agree with Chekhov's disavowal of naturalism and its analytical approach, he recognized the validity of Chekhov's search for a technique more suited to the demands of the "new theatre." For Chekhov, as for Vakhtangov and other gifted younger artists of the time, the theatre held many more possibilities. Stanislavsky wisely urged Chekhov to follow the path of his own intuition which led him into the realms of the creative imagination; the inner life of the image; the four stages of the creative process leading to inspiration; the divided consciousness of the actor; the rhythmic harmony between speech and movement; the psychological gesture; the atmosphere; the pause; the composition of characters; the rhythmical composition of the performance; the perception of the whole; and other subtle, intangible, yet powerful means of expression to which Chekhov's artist's nature was so profoundly drawn.

Coming at this crucial juncture of his life, the moral and spiritual support which Chekhov received from these two singular forces - Stanislavsky by his personal devotion and understanding of Chekhov's unique artistic gifts, and Steiner by his philosophical teachings - exerted the greatest influence on his development. Their support gave him the determination and the fortitude to follow, from then on, without compromise, his vision of "the theatre of the future," to the creation of which he was to devote his dynamic moral and spiritual energies for the remainder of his life.

The hostility shown by those in power towards Chekhov because of his ideals - expressed through his teaching, his own brilliant performances, and the productions he directed - continued and worsened. He was condemned for his principles and methods, and was accused of being a "reactionary idealist."

In 1928 Chekhov fled from Russia, where the suppression of any reference to his brilliant career has persisted up to very recent times. Even the Russian edition of his book, To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting, which he published privately in 1946, was not permitted into that country as late as 1969, although there is evidence that copies had entered and been passed "hand to hand."

Within the past few years, there has been a growing resurgence of interest in Chekhov's ideas in Russian theatre circles, prompted by enquiries from insistent young actors concerned about the artist whose genius is now being acknowledged, so belatedly, in his native land. In a student's thesis, published in Moscow in 1969, the following statement appeared: "We have no right to ignore the enormous treasure of creative accomplishment left us by A. Chekhov." Victor Gromoff, a pupil who followed Chekhov to Europe and became his assistant for a number of years, wrote a book entitled Michael Chekhov, which was published in Moscow in 1971. More recent reports indicate a definite change in official attitudes, the most significant being that the Central State Archives of Literature and Art of the U.S.S.R., in Moscow,

together with other official organizations, are preparing a history of the theatre career of Michael Chekhov and his ideas of acting, directing, and teaching. The purpose of such a monumental work is to "eternalize the name of this genius actor."

As a Russian émigré artist, Chekhov performed for a number of years in the theatres of Western Europe. In 1928 he joined the Max Reinhardt's company in Berlin and Vienna, creating a number of roles (among them his famous portrayal of Skid, the clown, in Artisten) which caused Reinhardt to write of him: "Michael Chekhov is a genius." In Berlin, in 1930, Chekhov directed the Habima Players (who by this time were also émigrés from Soviet Russia) in their famous production of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. In a number of German films his acting was highly acclaimed, in particular the character of the tramp in Troika. In 1930-31 Chekhov sought to create Le Théâtre Tchekhoff and a school of acting in Paris. With the Chekhov-Boner theatre he appeared in Hamlet with his company of Russian actors, and in collaboration with Georgette Boner he presented a Symbolist adaptation of a Tolstoy fairy tale, Le Chateau s'éveille (The Castle Awakened). It was during this period that he first began to work on a book concerning his method for an acting technique.³

³ Mlle. Georgette Boner, an eminent theatre historian, collaborated with Chekhov on the manuscript. It was written in German, with many illustrations by Chekhov, but was never published.

From 1932 to 1935 Chekhov performed, directed and taught in Latvia and Lithuania. Turning more and more to producing, he presented Hamlet, Twelfth Night and The Inspector General at the Lithuanian State Drama Theatre in Kaunas. Later, in Latvia, he directed and performed the title role in Hamlet, and played perhaps his greatest role as Czar Ivan in A. Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan the Terrible, which he also directed. During his stay in Riga he produced the opera, Parsifal, and organized a Theatre School where he had the opportunity to carry on experiments with the principles of his Method, which his theatre productions helped him to verify.

In 1935 Chekhov came to America with his company of Russian actors, the Moscow Art Players, appearing in Gogol's The Inspector General, The Deluge by Henning Berger, and A Chekhov Evening. His performances received high praise from the critics who acclaimed him as an exceptionally gifted actor.

My long and close association with Michael Chekhov began in 1935 when he was invited by my friend, Beatrice Straight, to establish the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington Hall in Devonshire, England. There I assisted in the practical work of organizing the Studio, auditioning students, and helping Chekhov to acquire a knowledge of English so that he could teach. In those early days, Chekhov began with me the initial work on the first English version of his book on the technique of acting.

At this particular period in Chekhov's career, his concepts of theatre, his insight into the elusive nature of the creative process, and his practical approach to the actor's technique were being synthesized. Working with his group of talented young students in England and America, he was able to explore and define his Method, free from the restraints which had shadowed his creative efforts in Russia. Chekhov's highly original insight and creative ideas provide a significant contribution, not only to the art of the actor as he interpreted that art, but to the theory and practice of other theatre techniques. The universality^{of} Chekhov's ideas have a strong appeal, not only for the artist in the theatre, but for the artist in opera, music, dance, and stage design.

The technique of acting is an extraordinarily complex subject, and Constantin Stanislavsky and Michael Chekhov are among the very few innovators in the theatre to have propounded and developed a System or Method, stemming from their theories and practical experiences, and to have succeeded in having their ideas published and widely accepted. The influence of the methods of Stanislavsky and Chekhov on the training of students of acting in America has been, and still is, of enormous importance to the theatre art of this country. They sought to strengthen and deepen the understanding and appeal of theatre by a more vigorous training of the individual actor, of the group, the designer, the musician, and the director himself, so that all the elements

could be fused into a harmonious whole - into total theatre.

Speaking about the actor of the future, Chekhov declared, "The audience does not yet know that the actor is the theatre." In another lecture he said, "I think the theatre consists of the actor, and that is all. Nobody else is important in the theatre, from my point of view. If the actor is not there, then there is no theatre. All that the director, the author, the designer will do will not make a theatre." Many actors acknowledge their debt to Chekhov's teaching, and to his Method.⁶ In Actors Talk About Acting, Carnovsky wrote: "Michael Chekhov was a great actor, and one who understood the nature of the actor more than any person since, and possibly including, Stanislavsky."

Anthony Quinn wrote, in a letter concerning my work: "Having experienced inspiration from the spirituality which Michael Chekhov's philosophy instilled in his followers, I find it heartening to see the youth seeking his approach in order to find truth through our medium." Theatre students are eager to know more about Chekhov as a creative force in the American theatre, and one who evolved an acting language which speaks directly to the actor's nature.

Convinced that the theatre offers a means for the study of social problems, Chekhov stated in an article written

⁶ Yul Brynner, Morris Carnovsky, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Hurd Hatfield, Burt Lancaster, Marilyn Monroe, Jack Palance, Mala Powers, Gregory Peck, Anthony Quinn, Beatrice Straight, Paul Rogers in England, and many more.

in 1942: "In these troubled times it is necessary to emphasize that artistic work for young people has to be more than ever appreciated as a means of developing and freeing their inner life. The more the talent of a young person is discovered, developed, and freed, the more the person himself will find his connection with the great mysterious world-drama that is being enacted. To be able to enrich one's creative scull through the life around one, the source of the creative impulse must be found in oneself. The youth of today does not need to have its way dictated; it needs to be helped to develop and free its creative impulses, which will lead it in the direction in which the individual is drawn. The right means must be found for developing the creative nature of young people, thus preventing them from dissipating their talents, leaving them indifferent to everything. The nature must be freed, and here we come again to the necessity for individual development, and training." This is typical of Chekhov's philosophy.

It is in the spirit of what Michael Chekhov himself has said concerning young people's artistic aspirations - which is no less true in our own time - that these transcribed notes are offered, in the hope that they will foster an understanding of the creative acting process as Chekhov conceived it, and will perpetuate his ideas for future generations.

The heart of my three-part study remains that of Chekhov's guiding principles for the theatre, so cogently

expressed by him in his hitherto inaccessible verbal
statements.

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