

Michael Chekhov

March 10, 1939

TEMPO
USING OUR METHOD
THE THEATRE OF THE FUTURE
FEELING OF TRUTH
CHARACTERIZATION

Mr. and Mrs. Elmhirst
Inspector General
Meyerhold

TEMPO:

Criticism: The Possessed:

One thing I must point out is what seems to be your wrong attitude concerning the tempo. Being an actor myself, I know that if I imagine my part, I will not be able to act in the same tempo which I have done before this imagination, and I absolutely cannot go slower than I did before. So something is organically wrong in your efforts to imagine your parts, and the various scenes, in tempo.

Take this task as seriously and simply as I gave it to you. Go on imagining all the scenes in tempo - not in tempo in general but in the real acting tempo which can be expressed in each sentence, word, and movement. Imagine, step by step, all the sentences, all the movements, all the pauses, and discard pauses which are wasting the time, even in the primitive sense of the word.

As I have not seen any progress in the tempo, but have noticed even a step backwards, I must tell you that something is wrong. If you do not fulfill the tasks I set, you hold the work back. I know why you are given certain tasks -

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I have a definite plan in leading you. It is a difficult job because, first of all, you are students, and I must keep this in mind. But you must help me by fulfilling my tasks. If I am not able to see the results of the tasks I have given you, I am helpless, in spite of all my plans to lead you, and my desire to help you. Until I tell you that the task is to be changed do not stop work on it, otherwise all my plans to lead you will be in vain, because you stop the work before I stop it. So go on imagining all the things I have given you in tempo, with all possible details.

Today we have finished one period in our rehearsals of Spanish Evening, and I have discovered all the mistakes we have been making. We will not make a new approach to the play, then I will distribute the parts more or less definitely.

USING OUR METHOD:

There are some difficult things which I have seen today, in the rehearsal of the Sketches. One very important thing is what I would call a lack of interest for the things which we are trying to do in our school. Not to be able to get the right interest in such primitive things as, for instance, the feeling of truth - that is something I cannot understand. Or not to have any interest for using the objective, etc., etc. This is what makes me a little bit unhappy, because my only contribution to our work is to give you ways

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and to show you ways, but I cannot do them for you. I cannot develop the feeling of truth which is sitting in my body but not in yours - this is the limit beyond which we cannot go. I can do something for my own psychology and body, but I cannot become you. Therefore, my whole ability must be confined to trying to persuade you to follow things which I suggest.

There is another point - I can imagine very easily that some modern actors or students cannot accept this particular Method. This is understandable, because each has his own point of view concerning the art of the theatre, but the fact that you are here is somehow your acceptance of the Method, although I see there is no psychological acceptance. All these primitive things such as the feeling of truth, the objective, presence on the stage, etc. are accepted theoretically because you are here.

How can I solve this problem? To develop the feeling of truth which I have spoken about for two years, or to have the objective and fulfill it on the stage. The picture that I see is that my situation is more and more tragic somehow, because I don't want to belie myself. I know the Method and what it can do to develop the actor. But I ask what have I been doing these two years - speaking, giving certain ideas which you must realize. But I see I am only deceiving those who have given me their confidence.

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I am working in vain - I am not really leading the School because I don't see the right results. One sketch can be better and another not so good today, and tomorrow we see the same things are nothing - this means we are still in a state of relying upon accidents. When people speak about what a strange school - three-year course. - why so long? Many stars on the stage have started their careers and made themselves famous without any school, so it seems just nonsense to have a school with a three-year course.

The point is that if somebody - one of many thousands - becomes a star, this is a pure accident and a great world illusion that everyone thinks that perhaps his destiny is to be a star. Thousands of actors think "Perhaps I am a star. I will try everything to get to Broadway or wherever it is." There are Broadways everywhere which are deceiving and belying the youth. To rely on one in many thousands becoming a star - this is a gamble.

THE THEATRE OF THE FUTURE:

My idea was to educate a group of people and to build a theatre which will be, first of all, a very cultured theatre, a theatre consisting of young people who will take this banner of "THE THEATRE." Not a theatre of stars surrounded by amateurs. I want everyone in our theatre to have a good knowledge, a good experience, a trained psychology and a trained body - correct people from the theatre point of view.

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The beginning of a new cultured theatre in which the smallest part is a piece of art, where the part without a single word must be a piece of art in this theatre of my dreams. Everyone must serve the performance, whether he has soliloquies or not a word. Everyone must have an inner technique with which he can manage his psychology, and an outer technique for managing his body, his voice, etc.

For this aim I have accepted the invitation of Beatrice and Mr. and Mrs. Elmhirst. During our talks, Mr. Elmhirst expressed the real ideal marvelously when he said we will have a group in which everyone is a star, even the actor who must act the part without words. This is the only reason why I have started the school with the three-year course, because during these three years, I hoped that our "stars" would understand where I am trying to lead them.

How to develop an inner and outer technique - and not one of you can say that I required such techniques without giving you the means. You have many means and ways, practical ways for developing these things - therefore, you cannot tell me that the ideal is good but how can we do it. This is the only thing I have given you - a practical approach to an inner and outer technique - the objective, radiation, group feeling, etc., etc. - these are the practical means given.

But again we come to the point as to whether they are taken. They are not. This is your tragedy. I try to do

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everything to persuade you to take this seriously, and to understand that a three-year course is given because it requires time. This time has actually been lost because in October we will show our performance, but I foresee what the critics will write about us. "Oh, so, thank you Michael Chekhov for your promise which was not fulfilled." "What is the difference between your group and ours? You have no stars and we have, that is all." "You are a Russian idealist who has nothing to do with the real life - you have ideas but what is the concrete result? Nothing! Young students and nothing more." This will be the reproach against which I cannot say anything. I cannot explain to the critics that I have done everything to persuade my students to be fanatical with their exercises. Do your exercises sitting in your room, walking, doing everything. Be fanatical and develop this new life. I cannot explain to the critics because they will judge from the results.

This is your tragedy, but I am not complaining because it would be sentimental and stupid, but I want to describe to you the situation as it is. I want to describe you to yourselves.

FEELING OF TRUTH:

Now we must be practical and make another effort to go on, although so much time has been lost. About the sketches -

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you were unable to do any of the points of the Method, either radiation on the stage, feeling of form, atmosphere - none of the points of the Method were fulfilled. So I might say that nothing has remained after two years work, and I would be right in general. What struck me most today was that the feeling of truth was not only not there - that would be more or less understandable - but in its place was rude lying. This is worse than not to have a developed feeling of truth. This shameless lying makes me absolutely ill, because it is more dangerous than you think. The lies come from two sides, one is the individual lie - you are not even able to feel aesthetic shyness - you do things for which I was blushing while sitting there, but you went on without hesitation. I could not see the human being through these lies, and the artificial primitive things which you have sometimes done. Not only was the feeling of truth lacking, but the anti-truth was cultivated and shown. It was shown shamelessly. This is one point.

I have experienced another painful thing. When I saw these rude, unjustified, primitive things on the stage, they were accepted with laughter by some of you. This caused me pain, and I felt that our taste is not only not developed when we are on the stage - this is more understandable because when a person is working on the stage, it may throw a certain fog over his feeling of truth - but when you are in the audience,

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you must have more taste. Just at the moment when I was blushing, I heard laughter and acceptance. This makes me much more frightened than what was going on on the stage.

So there are two sources for the feeling of untruth - one is coming from the individual and another is, for instance, the mise en scene. Sometimes the actor is given a mise en scene which he cannot justify with his inner truth. It must be psychologically justified - it must be true - but it cannot be. This is another source of untruth - the actor is put in such a situation that he becomes a lie - he cannot justify it because it was not justified psychologically.

So one thing is the individual feeling of truth, another is the feeling of truth in interpretation. I would never say, for instance, that a part could not be played in such a way, but only if it is justified - only if it is true. So one untruthful thing comes from the outside and one from the inside - both are equally important.

Today I have noticed that all attempts at characterization were lying - not one single outer characterization was justified. One point was the lack of feeling of truth, another point was that through all the sketches, except perhaps for one or two moments, I have seen that the acting was not directed towards certain definite aims. For instance, there were no objectives. If we have not chosen them, it is

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one thing, but if our nature does not feel an inclination to have a certain objective, then it is already the point which worries me. So it was a lying and aimless wandering on the stage.

In making another effort to help you I would suggest to everyone that, until the next showing of the sketches, please discard everything. Stop all the outer characterizations because you are not yet able to justify them. Discard all unjustified mise en scène, and concentrate exclusively on the feeling of truth individually and for the whole sketch. Secondly, concentrate on the objectives - find the right objectives - don't cling to one if it is wrong.

CHARACTERIZATION:

The next time you show the sketches, I would like to see all of them truthful in every sense, with objectives, and without any outer characterisations. If you are successful in showing human beings next time and with objectives, then we will come back carefully to characterization. I mean outer characterization, not inner - inner characterisation, as you know, is a particular psychology which you have to go on developing truthfully. I am against outer characterization which belies you and spoils your psychological approach to the part.

I will take one example - that of one of the actors in A Piece of Art - if she had followed the Method, she would

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not have found it unnecessary to put on spectacles or to walk in that way, before anything had been found inside about the psychology of the character. I don't speak about the interpretation, but about the unjustified action of putting on spectacles before the need for it was found inside. At the moment when the actor put on the spectacles and found the wrong kind of walk, she killed the ability to develop the part, because she twisted everything and shut the doors so that she had no means to find the psychology of the part.

We once had a talk about The Inspector General. We spoke about the interpretation of the characters, and I said that you could interpret them as you like. Your interpretation might be wrong from the Russian point of view, but I would never tell you that if it is not Russian it is wrong. It is not important whether it is true from a historical point of view. You will find today many young people in Russia who do not know what The Inspector General is all about, because they have never experienced the psychology. So you may interpret the characters as you like, but truthfully. This is the only thing I ask of you.

If you take Meyerhold's performance of The Inspector General - he knows the Russia and the time from which the play arises - he has changed everything so that no Russian can say that he has mirrored the real life from which Gogol took his satire. It was not the historical approach that was interesting.

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but he has justified what he did. In this play we saw Khloostakov jumping on the chairs and tables, but it was justified, and, therefore, it was a revolution from a theatre point of view. It was not a question of interpretation - whether Khloostakov had the right to jump on the chairs and tables - he had the right if it was justified.

I do not demand anything from you when you do something, except that it must be true and justified. Anything you do on the stage must have an aim, and objective. Next time show me only the full inner life - don't be pale and insignificant but don't lie. Do everything truthfully and find as many objectives as possible. The objectives and the feeling of truth must be there.