

Michael Chekhov

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THE OBJECTIVE
IMPROVISATION
PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE
CHARACTERIZATION
CONCENTRATION
IMAGINATION AND INCORPORATION

Moscow Art Theatre - Stanislavsky
Hamlet
Strindberg's Eric XIV
Dostoyevsky
The Three Sisters

OBJECTIVES: Lesson for Beginners:

When we are on the stage, when we are acting, and even when we, as actors, are preparing our parts we must know what we are really doing during the performance. That means what the character is doing from the beginning to the end. Perhaps you have read Stanislavsky's book, An Actor Prepares, in which there is a chapter on objectives. Every character has a certain wish or desire to reach something. The objective is the invention of Stanislavsky, and it is a very important thing, because it means that each character has always a certain aim to which he or she goes.

With time you will see how important it is to know what you are going to do on the stage, and what you are going to reach. The idea is very simple; it is a question of analysis to find the right objective for a special character, or scene, or sentence, or word, or for the whole play. There can be a series of objectives; one main objective, and then smaller objectives, and even smaller ones, etc. We will not touch the process of analysis at the moment, but will now try to under-

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stand the actor's psychology as to how to take the objective and have it inside us, and how to fulfill it. This will be our theme.

I mentioned to you that Stanislavsky has found this beautiful thing, but the technique of how to take it and fulfill it we will understand in our own way. In other words, we will take from him the idea of the objective and use it in our own way, and I will explain to you the difference. When Stanislavsky gave his objective to his actors, we took it with our intellect, with our brain, with our thinking abilities. We always did this in the Moscow Art company. We understood the objective at once, and we tried to carry it through. The result was that everything we did to reach our aim was very straight, primitive and like a straight line without any vibrations or modulations, because the intellect is very straight and primitive, and very stupid when it tries to help in the creative process. In art the intellect really means nothing. When we tried to take the objective with our intellect we were at once too primitive; everything was too clear, and we seemed to lose our talents, and this was our great mistake.

I must say it is very tempting to find the objective with the intellect, and it is much easier, but it gives very little to our actor's nature. It does not awaken a flame in us. Because in the Moscow Art Theatre we have taken the objective with the intellect, we needed so much time until this

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intellectual jewel came very slowly down and was finally something in our heart. It is well known that plays were prepared over many months because of this mistake. Then again months went by until it, the objective, became our will. Therefore, if you take the objective with your intellect it will be easier, but not for the actor who wants to act rather than to know.

It is a great difference for an actor to find the objective with the intellect, or to find it with the imagination. If you are able to imagine your part, or the whole play - if your imagination is vivid enough - you will see that you don't need to use your intellect in the sense I have been telling you about. You will see that your imagination is much, much richer than your intellect - if you are an actor, that is. I do not speak about you as personalities, because for us in certain directions the intellect is absolutely necessary, and it might be wrong to start certain things with the imagination. But for us, as actors, it is absolutely wrong to start our work with the intellect.

If you will recall some performances which you have seen, you will realize that the performers are not acting at all - it is an intellectual outburst, it is lecturing or speaking, but it is not acting in our sense. This is because actors have no time to work, and they only have their intellects to appeal to. Therefore, they walk, and speak, and smoke and are intellectual from the top to the bottom. And that is why our

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art is dying out, because of this influence of the intellect.

This does not mean that the actor must be a stupid person, or that he must not use his intellect. I mean that his main power is his imagination, and the intellect is the second or third instrument in this inner orchestra. The intellect's task is only to bring order and clarify things which are given from other parts of our actor's souls, from those deeper parts where the artist is sitting somewhere. This is what I mean when I say not to use your intellect when finding the objectives, and in carrying them out. Through practice you will gradually see what I mean by this.

Let us say that you are acting Hamlet, and your objective in the scene with Ophelia is to let her know that you have never loved her as a higher being, but always as a human being - "I loved thee not." You can take the complicated objective to tell her that you have not loved what you now see in her. If you take this intellectually it will be dry and heavy. If you look at this theme many times in your imagination, it will come to you as a spark, and you will know and feel and will the objective. Then you have to appeal to your intellect and ask it to make it clearer to you what you wished and felt before you knew. In this case intellect is quite justified.

It is very tempting to take many suggestions which the intellect gives in the first fifteen seconds, but we must

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get accustomed, if we wish to awaken our actor's being, to deny the intellect until one's whole being is flaming. Then you will know the real objective, and will ask the intellect to make some suggestions to clarify things which have arisen from your whole being.

Let us try a little exercise for taking simple objectives in the way I will suggest to you. Your objective is to walk through this room and touch the step which is between the two rooms. The method of taking the objective, in our sense, is first of all to imagine that you are doing this. Imagine that you are already touching the step. Now try to appeal to your will, and inside try already to do this. Fill your whole being with the action - "I am already touching the step. I am already fulfilling it inside." This is the right approach to the objective.

Now be attentive to the certain feelings and powers which fill your whole body. You must have this power inside of you. That means that you are able and ready to fulfill the objective. Your whole body, your whole being must understand it. To understand the objective with your whole being means already to produce it inside. Try to increase the fulfillment of this simple objective inside you. Try to think with your legs and feet and torso, "I am doing this already." Now do it. Now do the same thing but using your intellect only, and in a practical way find the difference between the two ap-

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proaches. Now do it again with your whole body, with your whole heart, with your whole activity, and produce it inside before you do it in reality, so strong that you will get the feeling, "I must fulfill my objective," and this is the right point when you have to fulfill it. Try to increase this inside you so that it is not possible not to do it.

The moment when we fulfill our objective must not be vague. To be lazy or without will, this process is very destructive for the fulfillment of the objective. However complicated the objective may be, it must be taken at once, and this gives very much for the actor's nature, if we are trained sufficiently to take the objective with the whole being and at once, and keep it until it is fulfilled, perhaps hours and hours, without being tired. We must not allow ourselves to be tired, and it must be there until it is fulfilled. This condition is absolutely necessary in order to carry the objective through with the necessary temperament.

For this aim we must be able to dedicate ourselves to taking the objective with the will, and to keep it hours and hours and find how to fulfill it even in the fifth act. I have fulfilled my objective when the curtain is down. Then you can rest, but if you rest before you have fulfilled the objective you will lose the power and the pleasure of having an objective.

If it does not give you any pleasure to have an

objective, it means that something is wrong. One of the greatest dangers is to have the objective very weak inside. The opposite pole to this is that when the objective is fulfilled, you must be absolutely free from it. Nothing must be left of the objective which has been fulfilled.

Let us take another example from Hamlet. Let us imagine an actor who is very full of moods, and when he has fulfilled his many objectives he is still Hamlet, and cannot be freed from it. This must not be. When the curtain is down, at the end of the play, you must no longer be an actor. If you continue to be an actor after the curtain is down you will weaken your talent. If you begin indefinitely and finish indefinitely, it will weaken you. You must go from one point to the other and not be vague about it.

Now take the objective very sharply and definitely, and when you have fulfilled the objective, then finish at once. take it and exercise inside this ability which must not be weakened. To take the objective means to do it inside continuously; to have the real necessity to fulfill it.

Now walk around and keep the objective inside until I tell you to fulfill it. Fight with the thing which tries to make you weak. Keep the objective for hours if necessary. This is the real life on the stage - to know what you have to do and to really want to do it, to permeate your whole being with this desire. This means to be able to act on the stage.

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Gradually you will see which role the intellect has in our work. With experience you will find how much you have to appeal to the intellect, how much it will help you, etc., but don't start with it, because if you do the part of you which is the actor will be held back. It will not respond. Everything must be clear for me - then I am an actor. Start in this way and the intellect will find its way to help you.

A psychological objective can be expressed through the legs and arms - the most complicated psychological things are living in our legs and arms. Some conductors move only their hands and arms, and if you will observe you will see that they exercise tremendous restraint to keep the body quiet, or it may be from the nature, but everything comes from the intellect. This does not mean that the conductor must dance, but if you will penetrate into such a conductor you will find some difficulties in him. Let us take Klemperer as another example; while he does not actually dance, his whole body is doing something, because everything which is art inevitably penetrates our whole body, whether it is music - such a high and noble art - which forces Klemperer to move so, with all these visible and invisible movements. As actors we must be more movable than Klemperer or Weingarten, because we are showing our bodies on the stage and if we show nothing through our bodies it would be better to make a screen and show only our heads! We must show our body, our whole body, which is like a membrane through which

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all the finest psychological problems must be speaking to the audience.

The Psychological Objective:

We must get accustomed to taking the objective with our whole body, even if the objective is a psychological one. I may have to speak to my partner very quietly on the stage, but my objective is to get rid of him. If I really have the objective to get rid of him my whole body will be absolutely movable inside. Then I am able to speak very politely, but my whole body streams with this thing: "I want to get rid of him." But if I take the objective with my brain, with my intellect, there is nothing going on and my body will not be speaking. We must develop very wide and broad movements in our body, and invisible movements as well. If the body becomes like a membrane, then there will be a movement of the whole body, and the objective will stream and speak through it.

Let us take the objective, but make it more psychological than it was before. You must walk forward so that you come nearer to the door, which will be open. In the room beyond there lies a person whom you do not want to disturb. Your objective is not to waken or disturb him or let him know you are passing by. When the objective is fulfilled, leave at once. Very consciously know the beginning of the objective, the fulfillment of it, and when you are free. Take it decisively when you are told, and take it with your whole body. Ask your legs

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whether they have the objective in them, whether your torso has the objective, etc. Do it with your will and with your imagination. Your whole body must be as full of this psychological objective, as Klemperer's body is full of the sounds.

Now let us take an even more psychological objective; we must try to experience what it means to take it with our whole actor's being, and to realize what it means to have an actor's being. A person is sitting in a room alone - he is a spy. You want to penetrate into the most innermost part of his soul in order to find out whether he is spying or not.

Again you must take the objective with your whole body, because you must take it through your body, in order to awaken some beautiful new qualities for your actor's being. With your whole body try to suspect him, and you will truly awaken the most beautiful feeling for the actor, that of being present on the stage with your whole being. You will never speak on the stage only to recite soliloquies - never. Every part of your being will speak through your hands, your eyes, or even through your static body - this is the beauty of the occupation of the whole being on the stage. This is never seen today, and actors are tortured because at their disposal is their whole instrument but they torture themselves by using only separate parts of it.

Don't allow your body to sleep - each part must be active. Try to foresee the great pleasure of having your whole

being at your disposal. It requires training, but it is worthwhile to train oneself in this way, because it is the most beautiful thing for the artist-actor.

Take this psychological objective which is, to penetrate into the being of this other person. Take it with your whole being, your hands, your fingers, everything must be full of the desire to penetrate into this person's mind. The more you will question the different parts of your body as to whether they are full of the desire to penetrate, the better the results will be. Do the objective first inside, then do it. Ask yourself if your whole body is full of this kind of activity. Then stop and be absolutely free. Everything must be at the disposal of your will; you must want to have yourself at your disposal.

It is so important for the real actor not to be vague at any time, but absolutely clear in everything and absolutely in control of his own power. Only then will you be able to create a new kind of actor, a very fine kind of actor, very persuasive for the audience, and very intelligent. Try to criticise, with warm feelings and in a good sense and without any evil feelings, but really criticise our best actors by asking them whether they are really intelligent in their profession. You will be shocked, because you will see that a famous actor may have a fine personality, but as a professional person he is an amateur, he is not intelligent.

This is what is dreadful on the stage today, that an

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actor who is a very fine person in his private life, when he appears on the stage is at once stupid. Therefore, we must build a new kind of actor. Our future theatre must be a theatre consisting of intelligent actors - I speak about the intelligence in the profession, not as persons. I am sorry to say this, because I am an actor, but if you will compare the different professions you will never find such professional stupidity in other branches of the arts, because on the stage we have so many gaps to fill that we must create as many bridges as there are gaps. Therefore, we must be very careful about the training in our studio; we must give such training our whole interest in order to achieve a really intelligent profession, and not something quite vague and indefinite.

If you will observe the musical profession you will never find them unintelligent, because they have to know so much, to feel so much, to say so much in their profession that you will not find unintelligent musicians. Quite the opposite; when certain conductors are conducting you will feel what a person! As a musician he is clever, although he may be stupid at heart, but as a musician he is clever because he must know his profession. For a musician three year's training is nothing; this is what it means to be intelligent.

We have a very complicated profession but when our profession becomes intelligent we will have a new kind of actor. As long as our profession is as vague and as simple as it

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is now, our theatre will be unintelligent. When we are able to create this new approach we will be able to create a new theatre.

ATMOSPHERE:

Take in the atmosphere, speak out of it, and radiate it. The process of taking in and giving out the atmosphere is really one thing, but it is good some times to do separate exercises.

IMPROVISATIONS:

PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE:

The theme of the improvisation is that of two friends who have lived together for many years. They know each other very well - being nearer to one another than relatives. But something has happened between them. One feels guilty towards the other - you can imagine what this was or you need not imagine it - it is more artistic not to imagine, but just to have the pain of it. This psychological disaster comes suddenly, and the more they try to solve the problem, the more definitely they feel that something has been broken between them, and they must separate. One is packing to leave.

Take the situation in a very tragic sense. The conditions are that it is late evening, almost night; a very small room with a very small lamp. Both friends are psychologically tired and worn out. They have already said everything necessary to one another; all that is left is to pack and leave for-

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ever. The friend who remains is guilty; the friend who leaves is the hurt one. This improvisation must be done on the basis of the psychological gesture.

Criticism:

It was fascinating to watch because I got the impression that you are standing on a basis, and with the basis you will be able to improvise more and more theatre which is varied. Now you see how important it is to exercise gesture as gesture, and then it will become more and more speaking.

I remember the gesture which Vakhtangov gave me for King Eric [Strindberg's Eric XIV].¹ When I got this gesture inside, I could play four acts of the long play, having this gesture in all my movements, in all the words, in the psychology, in the outer exercises, everything. It is possible by having only one gesture to make it the ground for a four act play. How rich the gesture is if it is archetypal!

CHARACTERIZATION:

Let us take another improvisation, this time based

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on characterization. The theme is from one of Dostoyevsky's novels - very funny and very tragic. The family is that of an insignificant clerk who was married this morning. The groom is a very small man with a thin tuft of hair - skin and bones. He is very afraid of everything because his life has been very difficult. He is a fair-haired person with pimples, while the bride is very strange. Very like the groom, very thin, with a very long nose like a pin. She hates him and everybody she meets in her life.

The whole scene takes place in the bride's house because her father has a little bit of money. He is very ill, almost paralyzed, and he uses a stick. His whole life is concentrated on reaching somebody with his stick and hurting them. He is now carried in a chair. His wife is a very tall old lady, always with a toothache. She wears a bonnet which makes her still taller, and she is full of temperament and fury. She suspects everybody and tries to prove that they are evil, whether they are or not. She believes everyone intends to do something against her family, and she is always doing something against somebody or punishing some-

body. The groom's mother is a really good-hearted person, who spreads warmth and love and comfort to everybody. She is the only positive character, but by nature she is very quiet.

It is late in the evening; there is a wedding party and they are dancing and trying to make tricks by making sounds like a dog or a cock. Into this feast comes a very strange figure, that of a very young general. He has just been made a general and is full of the feeling of being one. He wants to be active in any way. His idea is that he will be such a liberal general, that he will be present at his clerk's wedding, just to show how broadminded he is, and how warm his heart is. He has big moustaches and he loves himself tremendously. By coming to this event he expects that he will change the whole life of the people.

The other guests are a newspaper reporter who is always trying to find what he can in the way of an anecdote which, he will write up in tomorrow's paper, and hurt the person he writes about. Small but mighty, he is tall, well-groomed and well-dressed, and he always wants to be noticed so that everyone understands that he has the power to write something about them tomorrow.

There is a medical student who is only gay, and nothing more; for him everything is beautiful, everyone is happy, and he tries to add to the things which seem to him to be funny. He is absolutely stupid because he wants to be more and more

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gay. He creates his own world, and is more untidy than the others.

Another person is very gloomy and sad; nobody knows who he is nor what he thinks. He is always somewhere on the side, looking at somebody, always observing and keeping himself at a distance. He has on very short trousers.

There are two girls who are the bridesmaids; they think that the mystery of the wedding consists only of one thing which will come tonight. They think only of this and they have no other feelings. They are as if stupid, and they only see this moment which is closely connected with the bride, who is the only thing which exists for them.

The servant is a very Russian type who is always doing something, without asking why, without understanding what is ordered, without knowing what she does, but she is always prepared to receive orders and fulfill them. If she does not get orders she is dead. She is very handsome, with hair which is dressed very high as if it did not belong to her. This activity and willingness on her part is without any criticism of what is going on.

Another lady is like a man, and she tries to carry through and prove women's rights. She is very clever with statistics. She has not read many books but she has her own ideas; very stiff inside and stiff outside. The last guest is an old man, a clerk who is high enough to be a link between

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the general and the others.

The general enters and steps into a dish which has been prepared for the supper. When he enters the group is at the climax of the dance. They gradually notice his figure. When they notice him they are half-dead with astonishment, because of this unexpected appearance. Then he tries to make a speech to explain his ideas and why he has come. During his speech he feels, and everyone in the party feels that the contact is not established, and he becomes more and more a strange figure. Then he makes a second effort to get nearer to these strange people.

Criticism:

In spite of the lack of improvisation, there were some good things, one of which was that the characters were there. The big mistake was that there was no "circle"; everyone was blind to what was going on around, and it was not vivid enough. Each one of you was alone and you were afraid to take in the others for suggestions, but tried only to conduct your own life. With time you will get this connection with each other every moment, and then you will find the time to help and support each other. It must always be a composition, not a group of soloists. Repeat the exercise, but first try to establish the "circle," and try to find fine reactions to everyone.

Criticism:

This time it was better because you were more quiet inside you; but not yet quiet enough to get inspiration. You must be absolutely quiet inside and believe that you will get inspiration, but you had a certain fear that if you did not do something, what would happen? Be brave enough to do nothing but concentrate on the basis of the ground given to you, and this time it was the character.

From such exercises you will gradually get something which is very difficult even for experienced actors; this belief that something will come, not only from you but from everyone. If you touch it very inwardly you will get some sparks, but don't spoil these good sparks with work which is not the right kind. You must be brave enough to wait for the inspiration quietly. That is what is meant by the "circle." Each of us has a talent and we must believe in it. If we make a mistake it is much better than to do something without waiting for it, and just do nothing.

This time many things were wrong as far as the feeling of truth is concerned. Your intellect told you to begin, and therefore you stopped your feeling of truth, and you have done one wrong thing after another. Therefore you could not prepare yourselves to see the general as a person who did not belong to your society.

If you had been brave enough when dancing and moving

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to pay attention to the general's entrance, you would have felt that something was going on inside you. Don't do something; don't allow your intellect to tell you to act. You must be brave enough to wait until this thing will grow. You will get something, but you must believe that you will. But don't be absolutely alone on the stage, as though in a stone turret. Take time, and in this way you will find the way to the improvisation. When it becomes necessary during rehearsals to conserve time it will be done, but now you are quite free, so take time, but be attentive to all the possibilities which are in you. Don't preconceive anything, especially with your intellect - when the feeling of truth was absent from your work just now it was because of your intellect.

Lessons for Beginners:

The Actor's March. This exercise will be for concentrating your inner activity. You have your body for conveying your ideas, your emotions, your will impulses to your audience. I have my body in my will. It is beautifully built. Each part of my body is like a piece of art. My neck is beautifully placed on my shoulders. Realize and do this. In my chest I have my center which leads from inside. During the march keep these qualities in mind.

I want all our new students to exercise the things which have been given them by means of a little theme or sketch.

In acting such a sketch we will pay attention, for example, first to concentration. You must then find the points, throughout the whole sketch, in which you must be concentrated. In this way you will escape the condition when the actor is on the stage and is full of temperament, but he does not know what he is doing because he is not able to concentrate on anything. It is like smoke and earthquake around him, but without any point to which it streams.

CONCENTRATION:

Let us take a little scene from The Three Sisters. The play takes place in a small Russian provincial town in which lives a family consisting of three sisters. To this town comes a regiment of soldiers. There is great excitement in the town, and the three sisters, who belong to the most intellectual family in the town have, of course, to receive the officers of the regiment. They have prepared food and everything, and are waiting for the officers.

We will take only this small period when the table is prepared, and the three sisters are waiting for the officers to arrive and introduce themselves. Then the meal is served and lively conversation begins during the meal. Also when they leave the house and say goodbye it is an occasion for them all to speak. The oldest sister, who is thirty-five, is very serious, with some ideals, and she wants to love someone, as it

wore. The second sister is a person who works very much; she finds it necessary to do something, to work and be busy in life. The third sister is a very clever girl, but still a girl, very simple and open to everything, and very receptive to all impressions around her. She is as if waiting for something to happen in her life; a girl's psychology.

The commanding officer is very intelligent, very noble, very sure of himself. He knows that he is very attractive, and when he enters the room everyone looks at him. Another officer is always very gay and tries to make jokes. He is well educated, but his eyes are always looking for the point where he can find something more amusing. Another officer is very gloomy and pessimistic. Everything is wrong and he knows something which is so dreadful in the world around him. He is always keeping this half-knowledge and carrying it through the world. He is not interested to know why he is so sad, but to be sad with this half-knowledge is so beautiful. Another officer is German, and he is a little afraid of his friends. Too much German because he is in Russia. Too many buttons, too close, too tight. He is always afraid someone will do something tactless. He is there at once to save these situations. With time it has become, unwittingly, his profession. The husband of the second sister is always thinking of household problems and doing things in the house, because of love for his wife, and because of his own character. He is entering more and more

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into the family life as a woman, not as a man. They have a little child, and he is always attending to the child. He does not complain, as it is quite natural for him to respond to his family situation in a way that is half-woman.

We will take this small sketch. Act as you like, good or not so good, but the exercise is for the purpose of always being concentrated. You must find the points on which you must be concentrated during this exercise. The whole purpose is to exercise this concentration.

Start by being concentrated on your future work - perhaps by some imagination as to what you will do. Now take account of what you have done. Were you concentrated each moment? Be quite aware of this and find the places where you could have been more concentrated. Were you floundering very much? If so you must try to repeat it in your imagination without floundering, but really being concentrated on something definite. This is the meaning of the exercise.

IMAGINATION AND INCORPORATION:

Now we will take a small part of the same scene for imagination, and the incorporation of your images. Rehearse the situation in your imagination, and when you are ready try to incorporate what you have seen in your imagination, and do it in reality, but with certain conditions. Hurd must imagine his character to be nearly fifty, very tall, very brave, with very clever pursuing eyes, very quiet. Sam must imagine quite

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a different type; very short, a little bit fat, like a little ball, fair-haired, near-sighted with spectacles. George must imagine a German officer whose body is like a stone, without any neck, more muscles than usual, all strengthened at the same time. William must be like an eagle, but a pessimistic one. Woodie must be very stiff and heavy and slow inside; he doesn't know this, and it seems to him that he is as quick as air. Emma must be very clever and serious, and very romantic and very reserved. Valerie has spectacles and is very nervous but she doesn't show it; she is nervous inside.

Now try to imagine the scene and rehearse it in your imagination, and then incorporate it. Don't exaggerate your characters but make them true. Again rehearse inside, and then incorporate. The idea of the exercise is to train your imagination so strongly that you will really be able to get something which is not vague, but something which you can use on the stage. You can get such very precious material out of your imagination, therefore you need very long and intensive work, and then you will discover with time that the imagination is something which will lead you throughout your life, and will really feed you. To have the imagination is very good, but to have the ability to incorporate what you see in your imagination is something else. Through exercises we will get this ability to create images, and to be fed by them. First to know what you do, and then to believe that when you are ready

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to incorporate your image it will be incorporated. The things which are most disturbing to the conscientious actor will be solved, because you will have a technique and your body and emotions will be obedient to you.