

Michael Chekhov

July 11, 1938

FREE ACTING  
IMPROVISATION  
METHOD  
FEAR OF FLOUNDERING  
OBJECTIVE  
FEELING OF TRUTH  
ELABORATING THE FORM OF THE PLAY

The Group Theatre  
Mstislav Dobujinsky

FREE ACTING:

This is acting; simply acting, presuming that the grounds of the Method are there. Quite free. You will act the following theme quite freely; the words, the psychology, etc., and you will see from this how far you have been able to digest the Method.

IMPROVISATION:

The theme has been taken from one of Hauptmann's plays, but we will interpret it differently. We shall take it in three parts - follow with your imagination, which means to act inwardly. The family consists of the mother, her two sons, and an old lady friend of the mother's, who, with her daughter lives in the house on the second floor. It is a commonplace scene - they have no problems. It is like water which is quiet - commonplace. This is the first scene.

The second piece: The husband was a very strange man, always sitting in his room on the third floor; writing something which nobody knows about; always thinking about

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

something; a very egotistical, despotic person who was the cross for the family. He dominated the family with his strange nature, a despot whom nobody could find any psychological approach to. He was always putting around himself a gloomy, heavy, tragic atmosphere - a tragic person whose influence was dark, gloomy, and tragic.

On one occasion one of the son's struck the father; this was a tragic moment for the mother and for everyone, and the father disappeared from the house. Nobody has heard from him since, and they do not know whether he lives or has died. They have gradually come to this comfortable passive state, and they have become accustomed to the idea that the father is dead, and this has given them peace. Then comes the moment when a strange old person is standing there at the door like a phantom. You must act from the moment when they see the father, to the moment when they open the door and ask him to come in. What happens during that space of time?

The third piece starts from the moment when the father enters the room. All the old feelings of disaster come back to them again. They must start again this life with this strange person, although they have lost the approach to this former life. Gradually they notice something new in this strange old man; some idea is torturing him.

The audience must discover that the idea which is torturing the old man is the blow which he got some years

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

ago from his son. Now it lives in the father's mind in the following way: he was sure all these years that the son pursues him, and he could not acquire peace because he has been possessed by this idea that the son is following him to give him another blow. That is why he could not resist the temptation to come back and see the son perhaps finally to get the blow. He must see the son. Gradually, in a very fine way as all people are who have a fixed idea, he tries to find the approach to the son, either to get the blow or to be reconciled. Now the family notices that he is mad, and this is only one of the points by which he is pursued because he is really pursued by a persecution mania.

This is the third part which comes to the point where something will happen which you will solve out of your improvisation. What is the last point? Where is the moment when the curtain comes down? Something must happen. It must be a psychological point. Leave it to your performance. You will act, and if it is successful you will find a solution. When you feel that the theme is fulfilled, you will finish the play. Another condition: the father must act this mad state in an artistic way. It must not have anything to do with hysteria. It must be an artistic performance and not a clinical approach at all.

I have chosen this definitely psychological thing so that you can apply the method in a very psychological way;

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

not to outer things but to the psychology.

The old servant has been like a lost dog without his master. This strange servant is like an animal, like a beautiful big dog. Try to rely on your artistic nature and act without the Method, but if you feel during the work that you have lost yourself, that you need some help, then appeal to the Method.

Criticism: It was obvious that many good sparks, good possibilities were there, but only sparks and possibilities. It is good to be able to spark in improvisation, but it is better if you know what was wrong. Of course from each point of the Method it leaves something to be said. For example, concentration. Were you more concentrated on the scene in general, or were you concerned with the development of the theme? This is the way to a very wrong thing, which is to satisfy the audience. If you will concentrate on this useless, fruitless thing of being all right, it will lead us to try to satisfy the audience and forget the real things.

If we look at it from the point of atmosphere we will find again some moments of atmosphere, but why was it not developed? Because you do not believe in this atmosphere as something which inspires us. Instead of taking the atmosphere and being inspired by it, you tried to think what you would do and what words you would speak.

METHOD:

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

You must go over all the points because it is quite obvious what happened, but I want only to point out one thing which was important for all of us, both for the old actors and the new actors. It is something which can be cured when a group decides to have a certain method - only a method can cure this thing. The Group Theatre has a method and that is why they are acting better than others - the method has cured them. They are acting professionally because they have a certain method, a certain ground for their work. They are always trying to acquire new skilfulness in their profession, therefore they act so well.

FEAR OF FLOUNDERING:

But when a group of actors has no ground, no method, no system, then you will see something such as that which has spoiled the whole sketch today - tremendous fear - fear of floundering - and therefore you have floundered more. And what does the Method actually give, if it is taken? It must give the ability never to flounder, because in each case we have a certain means to take and if we take these means we will never flounder. At the moment when we feel that we are not floundering, we have nothing to fear. We have only to rely on our talent - but not without the Method, because if I rely only on my talent I will be good for five minutes, and the rest of the time a fool. The Method is given only as something to rely upon.

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

Our school, which tries to give the method, tries to give the most precious thing, and the actor who will not take the method is compelled to flounder his whole life, or to become an actor full of stiff muscles and habits which are his ground. He is no longer an artist, he is a craftsman, sometimes not even that. To kill our talent means to rely on certain habits, while to use our talent means to rely upon a method which will give us help at any time. To flounder means to rely only upon talent.

This tremendous fear which we have seen today led you to all possible mistakes. Instead of following your own inner line of the psychology, simply by being concentrated on your partners, you could have followed this inner line and created movements, situations, words, etc., instead of which you have fallen into this abyss of fear. Our intellect is always coming to our rescue with wrong words.

Instead of following your own psychological pattern, you became afraid and asked yourself, "What shall I do?" At once the intellect came and whispered to you to say such and such, and at once the whole thing is dead. Instead of developing this psychology of two persons who have met after so many years, the intellect comes and asks questions. If the intellect has taken power over your being instead of the Method, at once everything will be dead. You can be sure of it, theoretically and practically.

It was a marvelous example of how hopeless it is

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

to appeal to the talent alone, and the only thing which can save us is to be brave enough to say, this is my Method on which I stand. Until your nature will understand this secret, you will always be floundering - if today is a happy floundering, then tomorrow will be an unhappy one, it makes no difference because it is still floundering. At some moment you must decide that you are in the school because you can get the Method and assimilate it with great effort - not less than the musician who does his exercises for years and years. Our profession is even more complicated, but until we get this idea that the Method is necessary for every ground, we will be compelled to flounder and to be victims of the phantom which is always chasing us - fear. Fear before the audience as to whether we satisfy them; whether we are in harmony with our partners; phantoms of fear, and as a result it becomes our means of death, which is our intellect, and we are killed and we become puppets.

Use today's experience as an impulse to understand that without the Method we are lost and will be amateurs forever. With the Method we can create the future not only for ourselves, but for the future in general.

And the Method can only be taken if your whole life is concentrated on getting it. Why do you dare to think that you have only to enter the stage, put on make-up, and you are already artists - never, never, never. This is a very bad idea which has grown up, that to be an artist on the

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

stage is simply to get a part. Never, never, never.. The more we go on the more clearly we will see that the theatre is dying out because there is no technique, no method underneath. But here in the school, in such marvelous surroundings and conditions, shall we spend our lives to become, after a few years, amateurs? It is much more interesting to decide to put the first stone for a building which will be later on a real technique for our art, which does not exist now.

I have told you this many times, and I must apologize for the repetition, but I must tell you again because I see where the mistake is. The mistake is that the Method is here, but we are over there. We listen about the Method, but we do not make the real effort to take it and with great efforts to digest it. To digest it, otherwise we are weak amateurs, even if we are geniuses. This is only to remind you why we are here. It has given me the opportunity to remind you again of these very important points.

#### IMPROVISATION:

Another theme; again on the same basis - we are acting freely but when we are floundering we will try to get what we need out of the Method. The scene is a heath through which goes a long, long road. Empty space. On this long, long road we see a small house - a resthouse for transients. In this house there are a certain number of people living there. It is night, a stormy night, a gloomy night, a fright-



M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

ful night. There is a very simple clean room with a lamp on the table. Some people are in this room and there is a very strange mood, a strange atmosphere. It seems as though they are listening for something, very attentive, very concentrated. Gradually they hear some bells; somebody approaches the house; someone drives along this endless road. They are waiting for these guests to come.

The sound of the bells comes nearer and nearer, and finally the horse stops outside. Then we see another strange thing - all the people move quickly and do things which they have done many times before. There is nothing of the real preparation for receiving guests, but something very strange. After half a minute of quick preparation, we see that the whole room is changed and we see a family sitting at the table. The father opens the bible and reads aloud, and all the others are sitting around piously. The whole family seems to be very quiet and religious, sitting and reading the bible on this stormy night. Everything is stately, religious, and quiet.

Someone knocks at the door; they greet them as guests and the whole pious atmosphere embraces the new people who have come out of the storm and rain. They bring their luggage into the room, beds are prepared for them and they are given food and everyone is quiet and pious. They all sit at the table and all is well.

Then gradually we see that again a certain change takes place. When the guests are eating the family around

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

them gives them more and more to drink, and simultaneously but in a very fine manner we see these people become more and more gay and free and sing songs to the sound of the accordian. They become even more gay as the people drink too much - although they don't drink - and they change the pious religious atmosphere and begin to dance and try to twirl the guests around and do everything to make them dizzy. Gradually it becomes a real orgy, and when the guests have quite lost their senses they put them to bed, and in an instant the gay atmosphere stops, and we see the people trying very quietly to search the luggage and rob the guests of everything. It is a gang of robbers and this is their manner of stealing. They do their business very skilfully, like jugglers. They put paper in the luggage so that they will not suspect that they have been robbed.

But this time was not so happy for them. The three persons who came as guests are really policemen who want to get this nest of robbers. At the moment they begin to rob, the police jump up and begin to fight with the gang, and try to catch them and shoot them. After a very long fight the police overpower the robbers. Another group of policemen enter. The first moment is before the guests enter the room - this is the introduction. Then comes the big interesting psychological business when the pious people arrange themselves. The second part is when the guests have fallen asleep and are being robbed. The third part is the fight with

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

the police. The epilogue will be the empty stage - the stage will act this because of the atmosphere.

Criticism: The more sure you are, the better you act - it is quite obvious. To be sure means to have a method; to be sure means to act better; to act better means to use your talent. Perhaps you have noticed the following in this case; sometimes your action was disturbed by doing things schematically, instead of doing them psychologically or even physically.

One of the greatest enemies in our art is, first the fear we have spoken of, and the other is to perform the scheme instead of the real inner or outer action. For instance, when you fill the glasses too quickly, you have already spoiled your psychology. It will take you time to get back your real human feeling of truth. You spoil your psychology by these untrue things. It means that something was already wrong in our psychology, and instead of correcting it we make schemes on the basis of this wrong psychology, and on the basis of this wrong action we have a lot of wrong psychological moments later on.

For instance, I pretend as a policeman. I am pretending that I am drinking, but I am pretending without any aim. If I pretend that I am drinking, it must be for a certain aim to fool someone, and this is the most fine schematic action. I pretend that I am drinking in general - but there is nothing in general on the stage, ever. It must

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

be something definite; for some definite aim, and we call this the objective.

OBJECTIVE:

If I pretend I am drinking, without having an objective, it will only be a scheme which leads to disconnection with one's partners. At the moment an actor is "in general," he loses his partners. It is like a fog in our profession. Bad actors have the feeling that they are acting marvelously - as if drunk - and they are happy, but it is only in general on the stage, as a scheme without definite things which should be fulfilled, and then we would see a living person without scheme.

FEELING OF TRUTH:

For instance, it was a stormy night, and you entered without having any connection to it. It was simply a scheme of entering, but there is no entering "in general," no exit "in general," it is always some entrance, some exit. And if you had been truthful enough to enter by taking this storm with you, you would have discovered inside you the most beautiful thing, the beautiful wonder which is your own talent. But if you are only schematic, the talent will not respond.

If you were more careful with this truth - I don't mean always naturalism - but the feeling of truth should be

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

there. If you had been truthful the whole time, and schemes had not shut the box in which is your talent, you would have taken many suggestions which you gave each other, but which you could not take or develop.

For instance, Beatrice found some way to send them to sleep - it could have been taken by everyone, as if you were casting a spell over your victims. But it was only beginning, and then a scheme came and it was dead. When you developed the gay part you did not reach the climax, because you started with some trivial things. Then it came to the scheme in general and you could not reach the climax, it was not ended or accomplished, and the feeling of the whole was not there.

In the first sketch there was the fear which comes when we have no ground under our feet. This can be cured by the Method. In the second scene we met these schemes which are always trying to catch us, but they can be cured by the feeling of truth. Try to appreciate the good moments, and imagine them and throw them like a ball from one to the other. The scene at the end was unexpected and very fine. After today you must have two ideas: 1. Overcome fear by the Method. 2. Overcome dead schemes by the feeling of truth.

#### ELABORATING THE FORM OF THE PLAY:

I am always with you in my heart and thoughts and the days cannot separate us, although I have had to be away

M. Chekhov

July 11, 1938

from you for several days. But in order that you may be with me, I want to tell you what I have to do. We are working on the settings and the texts of our two plays. Henry is trying to get the plot elaborated more and more, so that in his funny light and free scenes the audience will be able to follow the inner line, because even in this funny story there must be a serious inner line. On this line all the jokes and floating things can be put. We are going from one scene to the other, and are gradually getting more shape and form for this play. It is not yet complete, but we will get it in time. But because in our theatre the idea is one of collaboration it is necessary for us to spend very much time together working on the play.

Terence and Miriam are trying to find the settings, which will be as light as the play is, and as movable as the play is. We are trying to solve this problem. Is it possible to build the set so that each time we will see the old theatre and a rehearsal in this old theatre. This is one possibility for the settings. Another possibility is that we are not showing the old theatre always, but we are showing the theatre as it is and only in the real theatre certain things are moving. This has brought us great difficulty. When we tried to use the illusion of another theatre it became very heavy and it killed the play. Now we are trying to solve this problem.

[The Possessed]

The task with Mr. Shdanoff's play is more difficult.

2896  
M. Chekhov

2271  
July 11, 1938

Our idea was always to get a stormy performance - the form filled to the bursting like our style. But the tremendous amount of words spoils the whole thing, although to cut them out with the pencil is impossible - something is lost and instead of becoming more condensed and serious, the play becomes empty. This has presented a big problem when the author and director collaborate. We are trying now to find the right wording, and the necessary number of words, and the order in which they must be spoken from the stage, and that presents a difficult but very interesting task, and one that cannot be done at once.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Shdanoff has tried to re-compose the thoughts so that they are all there, but with the minimum of words. We have not yet reached the right point, but it is already something quite different from this point of view. We will change this version again and again.

We have found something in the structure of the play which is that the play begins from underneath. Verkhovenski appears from somewhere, from darkness, abroad, unknown, etc., and he develops his activities more and more. One climax is already clear - a very big part of the play - from the meeting to the end of the revolution. This is a big climax - this power of Verkhovenski who came from somewhere and at the meeting he opens himself entirely - then revolution and downfall. This is one climax which is quite obvious for today. We have decided that this moment of the meeting and

M. Chokhov

July 11, 1938

the revolution can be elaborated in more detail and many more words can be there, with less words in the beginning. Then the line divides - Stavrogin goes upwards to the point which we call Father Daniel, and Verkhovenski goes down; from the point of the meeting and the revolution. From this point there are two lines. Mr. Dobujinsky tries each day to find how to incorporate in the settings this big gesture which divides, and which gestures are in each scene, because each scene has its gesture. We have found some ideas.<sup>2</sup>

I must ask you again to keep the secret of our play. It is so easy to get the idea of Dostoyevsky and then in a few months we will see another performance and our whole work will be useless. There will be no commercial or artistic success if the play is performed by others. It is so easy to speak about it casually.