

Michael Chekhov

(afternoon) January 31, 1938

PERFORMANCE OF SHAKESPEARE
SCENES BY STUDENTS
EURYTHMY - SPEECH

PERFORMANCE OF SHAKESPEARE SCENES BY STUDENTS: New Students:

We have to hear our first attempt at performance, and we shall repeat these attempts after having some suggestions. Therefore, I want those of you who have to perform to go away and try to rehearse and prepare. You have to be very conscious of the grounds on which you have to act, and you must not rely upon the excitement of the moment. It is a very good thing, and very necessary sometimes, but if we only have excitement, we are not actors, and it can become something very bad. Therefore, this excitement must have definite grounds. I want to see how much you will be able to combine these things, atmosphere, objective, and so on, and this is what I want you to prepare.

We have to hear the students and not only to get certain impressions but we have, by hearing them, to prepare some suggestions on the basis of our Method. When I ask you to give suggestions, I ask for concrete help based on our Method, and, therefore, by listening try to find the best means with which you can help them.

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| 1. <u>Othello</u> | Sam and Mary Lou |
| 2. <u>Romeo and Juliet</u> | Hurd and Mary Lou |
| 3. <u>Merchant of Venice</u> | Woody and Dennis |
| 4. <u>Othello</u> | Hurd and Valerie |

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I want you first of all to remember that this is not a performance, but a lesson, and therefore we have to take the whole performance from that point of view. How to help by the means of the method. Write down suggestions and think them through. I want you to say something which you think is the most important and most helpful for them.

Suggestions and Comments:

Alan:

There is something in general which seems to me might be helpful. Watching and listening I felt that the words were not justified - that for this tremendous richness and imagery and conceit you were not, as actors, justified in speaking those words, and that more imagination must be brought to bear to make the words live and to make the scenes live. It seemed very like the problem of the part where you have a rich form which you have to make live. These scenes must really live as drama.

Another thing which might help. It seemed to me that there was a lack of objective or psychological gesture between the characters; that very often they were just soloists speaking, and the psychological gesture or objective under the words had not been found. I noticed that especially in Romeo and Juliet.

Another thing that might help would be if you would

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imagine the scenes as from the audience. If you could sit down and be the person say in the last row of the gallery, listening and watching the performance, I think that you would find that many movements were wrong, many pauses too short. I think you should get the audience's view, and it would help in general.

Beatrice:

Alan has said the three things that I had in mind. I would only perhaps add that there is so much in Shakespeare that is significant, that perhaps you should have been more simple in movement.

Paul:

Concerning the first Othello. The first point I have may be just considered a suggestion. When the actors were asked to go into the other room and prepare themselves, I thought especially for that scene and also for The Merchant of Venice, that it would have been good had the actors been fully prepared as characters when they came in.

The second point is contact. I had a feeling as audience that the first Othello was talking through his Desdemona. I think I am right in imagining Sam gave his Othello two points of view. Sometimes in his speaking he did not even want to include Desdemona - she was not there. At other times he was definitely talking to her, but all through

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I got the impression he was talking through his Desdemona, and she was not a living person to him.

The third point is just an enlargement on what Alan said and that was concerning the emotions which Othello in this scene has to arouse. The emotions demanded in this scene are terrific. They are running very near King Lear, and for that I would suggest exercising the psychological gesture.

The fourth point: The Romeo and Juliet pauses. Hurd in both his pieces of work must watch the desire to drag pauses. This will be helped by exercising a feeling of rhythm. If you can catch the rhythm underlying the scene, you would make a pause no longer than is comfortable for the audience. Do not fall into the trick of recitation. Once you are on the stage, forget Miss Crowther, but act, and if that part of your technique is not right by then, it is too late. Once you are on the stage you are an actor and not a reciter.

This next point is a question of style. I do not see Shakespeare's conception of Romeo and Juliet being too such young and beautiful individuals. Maybe I am wrong. I ask you to consider whether or not more fire or temperament of an epic rather than a lyric quality could be given to your audience, because it is this fire which makes the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. The warfare between the two houses and the fire which produces this amazing love. It is a love

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which would make a charming point quite impossible - by just lifting her hand and kissing it. Nor can I see Juliet playing with his hair. But this is entirely a question of interpretation. The Merchant of Venice is again a question of interpretation from my point of view. At first I used to think it was drama, but now I have come to think that The Merchant of Venice is comedy. It fell short and went into the rhythm of drama nearly all the time, making it a little too dramatic. One other point: Watch your hands. You have a habit of putting your hands over your face. I want to see your face.

Mr. Chekhov:

You must define the suggestions from the point of view of Method, not from the standpoint of interpretation.

Mrs. Elmhirst:

I would suggest Sam working for contact quite definitely with Desdemona in the scene. For instance, every time she moves to or away from you that must have some effect on you, and if you are really aware of her you will take something from her in this scene. As we saw the scene today, she might have been quite non-existent - there seemed to be no current between you.

The only other suggestion I could make is to work with objectives. When you first came into the room it was

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not clear why you had come. Your objective was not clear to the audience. It was not taken through the scene.

In relation to Romeo and Juliet - I think it was too slow and too subdued. Also, I thought it had no quality of death in it. Three different people are meeting death in that scene and when the Friar runs in and sees Romeo - here is somebody who is dead - I did not feel in any way that there was this consciousness of death. In The Merchant of Venice I felt there was a very interesting beginning of character, and that probably you were working on character, both of you, and that if you could develop what you are doing so that you will get more shades, there is the germ of something interesting there.

In the last Othello, I would suggest to Valerie to get more feeling of contact. You seemed not to react to anything that was going through Othello's actions. I should work quite simply on that scene just with contact.

Terrence:

I had an impression that in nearly every case the words were learned, and their actions and movements placed on top of the words. If that is done, I would suggest that you make sure that every action, or everything you do is fully justified. Otherwise you will find that lots of little meaningless things creep in which don't amount to anything but clichés.

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There is another way of doing it: Read through the piece and find out what it is about them, without using the words at all, find where you can apply various parts of the Method very easily and slowly begin to act. Find out what it is about, do it, and then as you are sure, feel your way into the words. Another weak thing was the feeling of truth. The other points have already been mentioned.

Felicity:

In the first Othello, the form of Sam's action seemed to come from physical necessity rather than artistic creation. You clenched your fist because the tension was so strong, instead of as Terry suggested, working out some significant form and fitting your words to it. I should suggest a feeling of form and ease. Mary Lou did not steal the part from Sam, but as she had a good deal of radiation, she could have been more expressive.

Romeo and Juliet: Suggestion to Hurd. You had expression in your head and neck, but the rest of your body seemed rather weak. I would suggest that whatever point of the Method you take, use your whole body and make everything significant.

For Woody I have a comment rather than a suggestion, but it might help. You rather impressed me as a film which has been stopped. For Mary Lou, in Romeo and Juliet. Whatever point you took in the Method should come out more fully

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in your voice. In The Merchant of Venice, my suggestions were similar to that of Mrs. Elmhirst.

In the last Othello: To Valerie I would say that your movements were rather weak, so that the big movements looked like small movements. It gave the impression of being modern and not big enough for Shakespeare. Therefore, I should suggest attention to style, and taking also everything with your whole body.

Peter:

Most of the things I wanted to say have been covered. I felt very much that you had all worked on them alone, and only for a little while in your work you were together in the scene. Contact was necessary and the same style for the two actors. The outstanding example was the first scene - Sam and Mary Lou were acting in two different styles. If you had worked more together you would have known each other's style.

Two most helpful things I feel would be objectives for everybody. The long pauses did not hold the audience - objectives would have held them. The third point: The bodies were not sufficiently expressive. Fourth point: For the female characters especially. If they had imagined more - if they will imagine more the inner life of the characters, then they will be able to increase their powers and hold the audience much more.

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Eleanor:

I thought that one of the things would have been more concentration so that they could have carried through the line at a particular moment in the play, then go on to the next thing. I thought they were varied and therefore there was a certain amount of blur. The only other suggestion was that if you could realize more that you rely too much on your voices, and if you could just realize that you had your whole body to use as radiation and means of expression.

Mr. Chekhov:

My suggestion is very simple because, first of all, I do not think we have yet the right to judge our friends from the point of view of interpretation. It is too early for them and for us, because we do not know how they will develop after getting some suggestions. Therefore, I will avoid everything about interpretation for the time being.

In connection with the Method: I think we are not yet able to require from our friends the use of psychological gesture - it is too early. Justification: I am not sure that you are quite sure of this. Therefore, these two points are too early. Feeling of truth: I prefer not to work with our friends on the feeling of truth for a while.

If I ask myself whether it was well done or not well

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done, the answer cannot be given now because that was the first attempt. The students have been here for one and a half terms, and therefore it is too early to ask them to be able to say whether it is well done or not because after this fortnight, will show us if they have anything. This is the first step. They have done this intelligently and for this first step there are many good things. But, the second step will be absolutely decisive.

My actual suggestion is that each point of the Method must be taken into consideration, atmosphere, objective, and others - everything you know already from the Method. All these points need to be worked upon. Therefore, I will not say there is a lack of contact or imagination - everything is still new, but many things are already touched upon. You must think that you have to work on these parts from all points of view. This is my first suggestion and I must remind you that when I chose these scenes, I chose them because they are so full of different colors of fire, and this fire I have not seen, and this I regret.

Another fortnight will show us whether the fire is there, and this is for me the most important thing that I am now expecting of you. You will ask me how to get this fire if you are actors. My answer is: All points of our Method are nothing more than the means to get this fire. Properly used atmosphere, objective, imagination, - if the fire does

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not result, either the method is wrong or the person is not a born actor. This is one thing.

EURHYTHMY:

Second: Your bodies. The bodies are bound more or less in this or that scene. The most free expression I get from certain movements of Hurd, but sometimes I have seen in him what Paul has seen - this movement which you do because you are not free enough. But it is not bad because your bodies can be developed easily. It does not trouble me at all but I must point out the following: What we are doing in our gymnasium. This is very important and necessary. But, there is another thing which is much more artistic and fine and appealing to the depth of our artistic souls and spirits - and that is Eurhythmy. If you take Eurhythmy superficially, as something which is too soft, then you are very wrong. Eurhythmy is built so that it can awaken in us power which nothing else can. Eurhythmy must be taken with the desire and will to receive it. Some patients are going to a physician and are given drops but they are not enough, and it is increased and increased until the right amount is received, and the patient knows that it is helping him. We must have the Homeopathic approach. We have our strong things - gymnasium, and we have our fine type of spiritual method in Eurhythmy, and please take it with will and with desire to discover the whole depth of Eurhythmy, which will never come from gymnasium, although you like it very much. It will develop certain ability in you but it can never be substituted for Eurhythmy. Use the

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whole method with patience. Remember that the method is only being used when it awakens in you fire. This is the significance of Eurhythmy.

Mr. Chekhov to Miss Crowther:

Hurd's voice. My impression is that Hurd has certain qualities in his appearance and his inner life which requires that the voice be on the same level, but I hear Hurd's voice here, and Hurd is there.

SPEECH:

Miss Crowther:

Hurd has a naturally good quality of voice, but he has a very bad accent, and he has as yet no control of vowels or consonants, and is not able to get any form in his speech. He is not able to allow the warmth of his feeling to come out because his vowels are not clear. Therefore, he has a big handicap. (Mr. Chekhov: You must possess your voice.) I feel that the natural quality would be good but it needs a great deal of development and much hard work for Hurd. It will free you when you get your full ability.

I am speaking from just the amount of work we have done - we have had such a short time. There are many things which I feel could have come into the speech, although some of you did try to bring your method in. A thing which would help you most in your next step is the feeling and knowledge that you are not speaking prose. The voices on the other

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hand, were very modern. They belonged to our present day and not to Shakespeare. (I think Alan spoke of full consciousness.) That is, not half of the words were spoken consciously.

I am afraid that as long as I work with you I will always ask you to follow the method, and never will I ask you to take my interpretation of a line, but I do not agree with Paul. We can work through our method, and get so much more quality in the voice so that we can get the style we want. This must come through an understanding of the method. The method, as far as you have gone, is to live in your consonants. You must speak on the breath stream. If you have the breath through your sounds you will be able to get the style and quality you want. Another thing which perhaps we have worked on a little, not much, vowel sounds.

Mr. Chekhov spoke of fire, and it is through our vowel sounds that we are able to bring out this fire which is inside. We bring all our emotions on our vowel sounds, but they have to be carried by the consonants. They are very, very important. I will still talk about consonants after three years. The consonants must spring more and more into life, because they help you to bring your vowel sounds into such beauty that you can cover the consonant sounds. Of course we heard many many times the voices on the throat, but this is only to be expected now, but in the next fortnight try to bring your voices more forward, so that you are not on your

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throats. One thing which will hold you back now is accent. While we have our impure vowel sounds we cannot have good quality of voice. The vowel sounds must be pure and the consonants clear. If you have gesture in your voice, you can express through your voice the contact which we want to get. Before we speak we must have our gesture of voice very radiant.

One thing was mentioned which I think we could improve a little, and that was the hurrying over the passages, and of course the words. Finish one phrase then grip your next phrase. One thing which will help a great deal, and which will come during the next few weeks, is the background which is behind so much that Shakespeare gives you, and this will take away this thin, trivial quality that one hears in the voice.

Mr. Chekhov:

A very important question arises. When Paul found himself offended by this reciting he was right. Nobody wants to have that which we call "reciting". I have found this thing in all countries. There is always this confusion between the real fire, when we first try to speak Shakespeare. Through the fear before this bad thing we call "recitation," we are afraid. When this confusion is there then we are in a quite hopeless state because we are afraid of this false recitation. Then we shut the door to very important things.

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My Method, properly taken, gives you the possibility to awaken this fire.

Another side of this is the speech work which Miss Crowther gives us - the ability to incorporate this fire in properly developed speech. All other methods are appealing to physical parts of the diaphragm (there are many such methods). Therefore, after much personal experience we have chosen Miss Crowther's method because it is deep enough to get the fire from us. It is quite enough to give our whole being fire. We are near enough to this method through the gestures I give you. Therefore, if you hope to awaken your fire by the method I give you alone, and will discard your speech work, you are standing only on one foot. Miss Crowther can teach us real recitation, and this is done at Dornach, but we have to combine these things and have really to develop our speech method for the theatre. This method will lift us up as music is able to lift the human being up to a certain level, which is higher than our usual level. What Mr. Oppenheim told us today about music is true of our speech, and of the method. Without this higher level we are not able to be actors of the new theatre. As you know, our repertory will be very varied and we must have ability to be at home with everything in it. Therefore, there is no contradiction.

I must say again that really in spite of all these things we have to expect from you, as new students, I am on

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many points very happy, and if in one fortnight you will show as much ability, it will be marvelous.

PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDES:

You must know that each group has, of course, its ethics, its unwritten rules. As we are from now on going to work more and more concretely with two plays - Mr. Shdanoff's play [The Possessed], and Henry Young's play [Spanish Evening], and perhaps later on with the fairy tale [Two Kings] which Terrence Morgan is exploring, and [Joan of Arc] on which Beatrice is at work, the more we are working for our future theatre, the more important this rule becomes. Of course, you will not be asked to sign a paper, but inside ourselves we must sign this "paper," as it were, because the important thing is to be able to keep professional secrets.

There are family secrets; personal secrets; national secrets - our plays are our professional secrets. You have friends, sisters, brothers, parents who are interested in your work, but you have no right to tell them what we are doing or are going to do here for our future theatre. The first lesson is that nobody outside of ourselves is able to judge properly about our work, because they will have a certain anticipation which can only be wrong as they are not working here, but we are. If we discuss our work with outsiders, this judgment and criticism and wrong opinion which is formed

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around us will be there, and we will pay for it later on, perhaps dearly.

This is one side of the question, but there is another which is more practical, and perhaps more dangerous. The theatre today needs and lacks play, ideas, themes, authors, and repertory. Every theatre is chasing for them. Insofar as we are still students it will be a long time before we appear on the stage with our play, but rumors about what we are doing, what we are preparing, can jump to other cities and other countries - to London, to Paris - so quickly that before we are ready to present our plays the ideas could already be done by other groups or theatres.

Perhaps some of you have already guessed what story has been taken as a ground for Mr. Shdanoff's play, but it is only a ground as the play is a new conception. If some of you were to mention it unwittingly, it might become known and somebody might produce such a play, the idea of which is so enticing for every theatre, and we would be lost.

The same is true of Henry's play. If we speak about the idea of The Spanish Evening and the Commedia dell'Arte, the idea will be taken, can be taken, by others and in a few weeks we will see it in London. It is too important a theme not to be used. We must keep our professional secrets. This is too important not to be understood and taken seriously by all of us.

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Then there is another point which is much simpler, but it is in connection with our preparatory work for the new theatre. I refer to what we have done just now when our young friends have performed and we gave them suggestions. This is the "school" approach, and it is very good and useful in the school, but it must be stopped definitely and entirely when we are working as actors. Only the director and his assistants have ears to hear and digest suggestions. The director is happy to get suggestions and he will ask and wait for them, but he will be absolutely unhappy if friends and actors will give each other suggestions. If this goes on then there is no need for the director, and he must be discarded.

I know this from my work in Moscow - we speak very much and love to give suggestions - everybody suggests to everybody to do something else. Then the director cannot recognize a single one of his ideas - he becomes helpless and the actors become crazy. This cannot be allowed, for the actor's sake and the director's sake.

The director is the person who leads the actor, and each director, good or bad, has a certain plan which must be carried through carefully, with great patience and understanding. The actors must follow this plan if they belong to the group which prepares the play. All suggestions from outside break the plan of the director, and this broken

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plan will be very painful for the actors themselves. Therefore, it is not possible to give suggestions or even discuss the rehearsals with the other actors. If someone says, "How beautiful you were today," this means my actor is spoiled. Tomorrow he will be too deep, too strong, too weak. Such things are very disturbing to the director who may never say you are very good because he may want to say that in two weeks time.

If anyone of you knows the source of the ground work for Mr. Shdanoff's play, please do not read it at this time. If we read the source before we enter into the play deeply enough, we will make the same mistake and take suggestions from the other side. Some ideas will sit in you and disturb your work. Mr. Shdanoff and I may want you to read certain passages, and we will tell you to do so at once.

In the same way, I do not think that our Method should be spoken about, because it takes time to be worked on, and to be lived.