

Michael Chekhov

October 3, 1938

PERFORMANCE PLANS
APPLYING THE METHOD
ACTOR FIRST - METHOD SECOND
PLAYING WITH THE PART
FREEDOM

Stanislavsky

The most important thing I have to tell you is that in our life here, and in our work here, there will be perhaps some very considerable changes; very considerable and very important. I am sorry not to be able to tell you more about this until after Beatrice comes back, because she is our head and soul and without her I cannot tell you what ideas I have concerning this considerable change which I think we must face. So please excuse me for saying only that something will happen. Beatrice will return from India on the 10th or 12th, and then after several meetings with her we shall perhaps find the right way along which we have to go. Then I will tell you everything - how, why, where, everything.

PERFORMANCE PLANS:

The second point I must tell you is that in connection with this decision, to a certain extent, it will be very important what we will show on the 15th of this month. I consider it of the greatest importance what we are going to show. First of all I hope and believe that you will show, after having this period of time between the last term and now, whether you have worked or not. I think your souls have done something themselves, and this is what I want to see

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so much, what has happened to you. Knowing you well I think I will see whether you have grown up or not. Therefore this performance on the 15th is so important.

APPLYING THE METHOD:

Please take the problem very seriously and from now until the 15th try to concentrate on the things which you are going to show. It is not a usual performance, it is something much more for me, and I think for you as well. I will not disturb you very much with the plays during this period, in order to give you the possibility to really concentrate on the task. I will try to help you in the following way: during the next twelve days I will try to go over with you again the whole Method very carefully, hoping that you will try to apply the Method, to a certain extent, to the things you are going to show. How gifted you are I know more or less - more than less perhaps, but I would like to see how much you are able to develop yourselves, having the Method. It is an old story but true and will remain so until you get the Method. So try to apply the Method. Whatever we will do during these twelve days will be concentrated on the Method, and I ask you to think every moment while you are here in the Studio how you can apply it to the sketch which you are going to show. Not in general, but to this particular sketch which you are going to show in twelve days. Then perhaps you will get a certain feeling for the concrete Method, not an abstract

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Method.

To help you, I must tell you something about the Method. Perhaps you have made a psychological mistake during the two years or the one year you have been with me. One mistake you have made in trying to get this Method I can describe to you as follows. We all came to the Studio, to the school, as students having a certain life inside of us which we call, "I want to act." Everyone knows this because without it there is no way to the school or to the theatre. There is a point which you come to which says, "I want to act." You came to the school because of this and you got the Method, and what has happened is that the Method has killed this point which we may call, "I want to be an actor." Instead of helping you to develop, the Method has killed this natural activity, this natural desire. This is a purely psychological mistake which you have made.

Now I want you to make the effort to understand that the Method is a very scientific one, not only an artistic one, which can be something which kills or revives and develops, it depends entirely upon the student, and the teacher can do nothing but tell what he has to tell. If you are taking the Method - this is the psychological approach - if you are taking it as something which you must put inside of you instead of your desire to act, you are making a great mistake. If you are trying to keep your childish desire to act and you take the Method by saying to yourself, "First of all I

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want to act, and now I will take the Method and see how it can help me to act," that is the right approach. But if you say, "I have to assume the Method and my desire to act must be put aside," you are empty and the Method cannot be applied to anything because the desire to act has been put aside.

ACTOR FIRST - METHOD SECOND:

This is a purely psychological thing, and you must find it inside of you. First I am an actor, a human being, an artist, and secondly comes the Method. Not first the method. First I am an actor, and then the Method. Having suffered through this method, and having had many conflicts with it, and hating it sometimes, you will understand which I mean. It is not the method which needs you; you need the Method.

For instance, each point of the Method which you will take from now on I suggest you say to yourself first, "I am an actor. What have I to act?" I choose this or that scene, and I start to act it as an amateur, as a child, as a genius. Then when I am going to rehearse it in my imagination I will first say to myself, "I will never give in with my desire to act, with my feeling that I am an actor." Then I will take the psychological gesture and apply it carefully. Does it help me or not? Take it quietly, without any fear, and apply it to your soul. When you feel that it does no good, push it aside - the gesture, not yourself. Kill the Method, but not yourself! Then you will find the Method,

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because the whole idea of the Method is to help, and not to hinder.

Of course you will have moments like children do when they are going to learn the piano. They hate the teacher, the instrument, everything. These moments of hatred will come, but whereas the child cannot say to himself, "I am a pianist and I am going to be an artist," we are grown-up and we can say quite consciously, "I know how to apply all these exercises, and this knowledge tells me first of all never to lose the feeling that I am an actor, and I can apply carefully the Method to me; only as much as I think it will help." This does not mean that I betray the Method - quite the opposite - the more you are able to say ^{to} the Method, "without Method," the more you will get the desire for it. Whereas the more you will force yourself to take the Method, the less you will be able to act. It is a purely psychological thing inside you. If you find it you will find the Method, and then you will know what it means to have a method.

This is the only thing I want to tell you before we start our exercises, and I want you to apply this point of view to them; "I am the master of the Method, and it is not the master of me." Please make this experiment; it will help you and give you the power to get the Method and the desire to keep it. This all I want to tell you before the 15th - concentrate on the scenes and try to apply the Method.

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PLAYING WITH THE PART:

Now we will try to go through the Method and to understand this idea. When Stanislavsky's students got to the stage where they were absolutely oppressed by his Method, he told them not to think that they must play the part, but that they must play with the part. Then the whole problem was changed for those who understood him. Try to think of yourself as a teacher rather than a pupil; a teacher demonstrating what you already know. Now ask yourself what will happen to your sketch if you apply the question of the style to it? Try to think of this in your imagination and answer it yourself. Always remember that you are taking the Method yourself, and not that the method is being pushed on your shoulders. This is the whole difference. Try to appreciate this freedom, this feeling of being able to play with the suggestions of the Method.

When taking the single ground of the Method, it will help you if you will find the following thing. Do not say to yourself, "Now I take the atmosphere, and I shall be in the atmosphere, and I shall produce something." No, try to change your mind and say to yourself, "I should like to see what the atmosphere can give me." There is a great difference, and you will awaken in yourself, in your soul, the most precious thing, which is applicable also to the most difficult process of thinking. When I am thinking with this feeling of interest for the thought which will come next, this

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is free thinking, but if I feel I must find the idea it is torture. We must feel that we are interested in what the atmosphere will give us - it is an important psychological difference.

FREEDOM:

There is another point which will help you. I speak about this freedom. If you will again try to understand the psychological gesture it will lead you to real freedom in your life and in your art. Imagine you are standing in a small room and you feel that you are not free because of the walls which are your outer world. You will feel bound because of these walls. It is so natural to feel like that. You feel that if you had a bigger house and more rooms then you would be free, but when you get it you want it to be a little bigger. There is no end and this way is not to freedom but to be enslaved. One way is to be in a tower and feel yourself bound, and the other way is to find the freedom inside.

Here I will remind you of the story of the man, living in the middle ages, who has^{been} put in prison and placed in an iron frame which gradually compressed his limbs until it crushed him. But before he reached this point, he philosophically said to himself that he had no legs, no arms, no body, and so within himself he died before the end came. This case of the man in the torture closet in prison who

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died wittingly, before death came from the outside, is a very exaggerated example but it is the way we have to go. If we think that the Method comes from the outside and makes the same torture with our psychology, we will never be free with the Method.

You must realize that the Method which we have in the school is not coming from me, Michael Chekhov, but from yourself, from within you. It is the same as I have just told you to take the atmosphere as far as I want to produce it from me, not inside me. I will take the objective from me, from the point where the real freedom sits, then when the director or the teacher tells me, "Please take the objective," turn it at once psychologically so that the teacher is not giving the objective, but the actor is taking it. It is much easier than to fight with an objective coming from somewhere, which gives me a blow.

It is not only theatrically true, but as Stanislavsky states we have suffered until we have understood that we want to have a method, and then everything was all right and those who have understood him were all able at once to take the atmosphere from the point of freedom and to produce it. But you must make certain efforts to get this inner gesture and to get this idea; some will get it at once and some will take longer, but you will get it.

As an example of this freedom inside of us, let us

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Imagine that if you are tired and some one asks you to get them a chair, if you accept it as an order it makes you more tired, but if, in response to the request, you feel you want to get the person the chair, the feeling of being tired lifts. You are doing the thing from your own desire.

All over the world it is the same story with the question of freedom and the whole philosophy of freedom - all these questions are absolutely wrong only because the freedom in ninety percent of philosophising is understood as pushing things which are stopping the freedom. Quite the opposite thing should be done and has been done - the freedom is there and everything which stops me is part of my freedom. Nothing can stop me if I will turn the whole problem. This is the same with acting, and the same with religion. To take God's desire into me is the most religious gesture, and real religion comes only after the moment when one decides I want to do what God wants. Then I am free.

To awaken this feeling of freedom in the sense in which we are trying to understand it, try to do the following thing. First do it as if I have imposed it on you, and then make an inner gesture and do it quite freely. This is the difference between freedom and enslavement. Try to understand it. It is applicable to everything, and to the process of preparing a part. Of course, our profession is difficult in many ways, and one of the difficulties is that when we get the part in the form of a book, we have a feeling

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of joy because we have got a part, and then a feeling of fear as to how to move and speak. But something inside you responded with this desire to act when you got the part. If you will find the way to say to this desire to act, "I want to go the long way through, by finding the way to speak."

I want - not that I am being tortured by my director, or by my teacher. If you say to yourself, "I want to go through this long way to find out how to speak, to move, to find my character, I want to go through rehearsals", and not to come to the rehearsal with the feeling, "Will I succeed today or not?" No, I want to rehearse. I want to rehearse, I want to prepare the part, I want to accomplish my work. This will remove all these weights from your shoulders. Try to compare the two states. Get up and run the length of the room, because it is an order. Then do it because you want to.

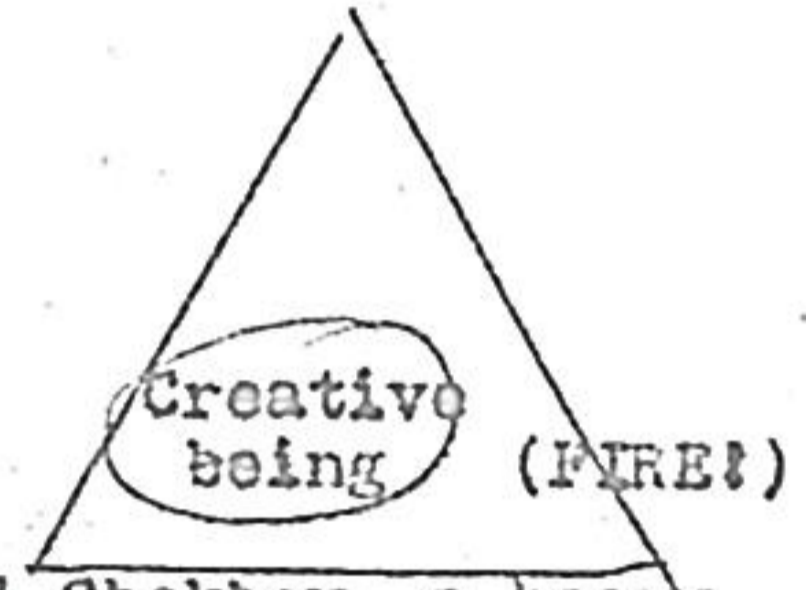
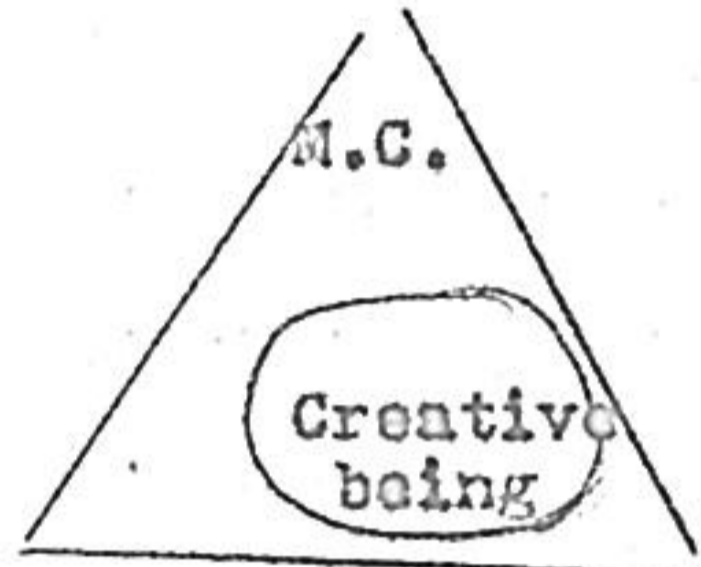
When the director gives you a certain ground, ask yourself what it will give you, rather than feeling that you must squeeze it out of yourself, or fill your body with the objective. You are just interested in knowing what will happen to you, if you live, and move, and speak in the atmosphere or with the objective. Ask yourself what you can get for your sketch if you will do it in a certain atmosphere; what that atmosphere will give you. I want to live in this atmosphere, and I want to see what will come to me from it.

Let us do the sketch with the scientist in the strange room. The first atmosphere will be a little formal,

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a little stiff when you enter the room, then gradually you come to the point where you are lost in these surroundings. Then when the chairman asks you to come to another house, you have a feeling of great relief. 1. Formal. 2. Lost. 3. Great relief. Then do staccato and legato with the same feeling.....Now ask yourself if you have experienced this feeling, this desire to do and therefore to be free. Let us make a schematic explanation!



In the past it has been Michael Chekhov, a heavy Russian, who imposed his will - a professor and an aggressor. Everyone tried so hard to make a triangle and it became heavier and heavier and more like a nightmare, until your creative beings were lost inside, and only M.C. is on top! Now comes the other approach; I say, "Build a triangle," and from inside the group comes the answer, "We want to build a triangle," and it grows until it is there.