

Michael Chekhov

November 7, 1938

HUMOR
 CONNECTION BETWEEN ACTORS
 COMPOSITION OF CHARACTERS
 RHYTHMICAL IMPROVISATION
 TEMPO
 FIRE - TEMPERAMENT
 PSYCHOLOGICAL TRUTH - TO BE "PRESENT" ON STAGE
Hamlet
Stanislavsky
The Inspector General

Criticisms and suggestions:

Spanish Evening:

Erica: The moments which are not true must be carefully elaborated. Sometimes this untruthfulness comes from an attempt on your part to get the comedy. Sometimes it comes from the not quite clear idea about the connection of this person to the daughters, to the crowd, etc. I have noticed that these two things are leading you in the wrong way, because a certain foundation is not there. I would suggest: 1. Try to elaborate the connections. 2. Try not to act comedy. 3. Don't jump over the moments which you feel are not true.

HUMOR:

When you are not trying to make us laugh then it is first of all funny, and second, if it is not funny today, it will be funny tomorrow. This is so important for everyone who tries to act comedy. Humor is the crown for serious things. Because humor is one of the windows through which serious things can be seen and accepted, in a very deep sense. For instance, if I put before you a very serious thing, and put it very plainly, it is possible that you may not be able to swallow it, grasp it, and di-

M. Chekhov

November 7, 1938

gest it. But if I put forward the same serious thing through a window of humor, this humor will free you so that through it you will accept this serious thing. It is a certain new organ through which to get the seriousness.

That means in this case that if we start with the wrong kind of humor, without having anything serious behind it, it will be nothing but an illusion, a psychological and physical grimace. But if you have a serious background, and before it, or on top of it, you have humor, then it becomes real humor. This means that if we start to prepare our part with the idea of showing the humor, we take a wrong step because it does not lead to anything, but if we start from the serious end, having humor in our human nature, it will lead us to this crown of humor which we can put on this serious thing which we have prepared. This is the first task.

The second task: You must justify the tempo psychologically, it must be like lightning and flame. If you will try to combine things which seem non-combinable, then you will always get a good effect - it is like a law. But if you combine things which are the same, it will be very little. Justify the tempo out of your feeling for the necessity to have it.

The third task: At the moment the age of your character is sometimes forty, sometimes fifty, sometimes eighteen. You must be seventy-five. This is your task throughout the whole play. Then you will perhaps come back to forty, but it will be absolutely elaborated so that the forty will be a brilliant forty.

M. Chekhov

November 7, 1938

Faula: Try to find in all her psychology the quality which you have in this part, but I want you to increase it; piercing eyes, ears, spirit, etc. This is the only task I should like you to prepare for the next time, emphasizing this quality without exaggeration, with the feeling of truth.

Alan: You did not understand me when I asked you to do the scene with partners - the partners did not understand. You must act this with full responsibility. If you are really partners, then you must do it with full acting responsibility.

CONNECTION BETWEEN ACTORS:

Criticism for Erica:

Behind your sentences there is nothing, and this is what was most speaking - these empty things. There is no ground. No actor in the world can do these abused things. Why? Because there is nothing to speak of, or about. The actor is not expressing her connection to the imaginary husband, and this connection is the only thing which is interesting on the stage. The connection with this individual or that one. If you will think about this very strange thing, why such connections are so interesting on the stage, you will see that that this is actually the thing which interests the whole world; the connections between living beings.

If you think of it you will see that Hamlet as such does not exist; he exists only in his connection to Ophelia, to King Claudius, to his mother. When we understand this then we know what Hamlet is. The actor is living in a great illusion if he thinks

M. Chekhov

November 7, 1938

that in his part as Hamlet it does not concern him who his mother is, how they play together, etc. And this is the point where all of us old actors fail.

COMPOSITION OF CHARACTERS:

If you will think about it you will find that first the connections are creating the character itself. When we are at last able, in our Method, to come to and to touch upon the rhythmical problem - which we have not yet actually touched on - I will bring before you a very interesting thing in our profession, which I call the composition of characters.¹ This has never been used on the stage before; through it you will see how important it is that Ophelia and Hamlet are both creating something which is above them - plus Claudius - a new world.

At the moment I only want to show you how empty it is, when there are no connections. We hear it with our ears, our psychological ears, we hear and there is no person for us, because the person does not exist.

RHYTHMICAL IMPROVISATION:

In Alan's case there are again two things; one is valuable and the other is a little bit disturbing, as with other actors. When you are serious, then it is funny and we are aware of the humor. But the moment when you try just a little bit to be funny, it fails. In Alan's case the good side prevails; you have found a certain real thing inside. Perhaps you are happy only for moments, but in general the thing is the right one.

M. Chekhov

November 7, 1938

And what is the sign that the foundation on which Alan stands is the right one? Because you can be absolutely sure that if he is told to speak these new lines, and to move in quite a strange and different way, he will be able to do so because the basis is there. For him, in the happy part of his work, it is now absolutely immaterial what words and what situations he is given, because the person already lives, the person is already born. For example, if we take someone who is not yet ready and give them other words, they will not be able to take them, and this is quite right and natural, to start with this inability to speak certain things, and move in a certain way. However, the moment must come when the ability to do so, under any circumstances, is there. This is the point after which comes the ability for improvising, real improvising, and then the next step is the rhythmical improvisation. The bad side is only when you try to be funny.

TEMPO:

For Alan the next task is to try to compress everything in time. Tempo. Then when a very good thing comes - such as the sewing business - there is nothing of the intellect, everything is one hundred percent theatre. This scene can be acted because it is pure theatre. It comes not from the author, but from the actor and the director, because both of them are theatre people. This is a most professional thing. It is an "apple" scene, but a marvelous "apple."

It is important for you to have the crowd with you; they

M. Chekhov

November 7, 1938

have used this opportunity to rehearse their parts; because everyone will be in the crowd, and this is the style of the performance. Don't think they lose the time - it is an opportunity to prepare other things. You are at the present time disconnected from the others. Your tasks are: 1. Compress it in time. 2. Be careful with your speech; sometimes it disturbs you; try to send it out. 3. Go through the whole play with everyone.

FIRE - TEMPERAMENT

Peter: Many things are very good and right; your appearance and your movements and sometimes the tempo, but in addition to all these things I have given you there must be the fire. Pierrot - what is his fire? Call it radiation, if you like. If you call it temperament, then temperament, as you like. But you must do it by appealing first to your imagination, just as you did the exercises for this streaming; now you must see Pierrot acting with fire. Do it thirty times technically, as an actor, then you will know what it is, and tempo, speech, the wave movement, all these things should come together.

In telling you about the wave, I forgot to mention that this is actually the feeling of the whole which I am aiming at. How to appear, how to hide, how to wait and knock and disappear, as one whole.

About your fire in comparison with the character of Terence; my idea at the moment is that this sorrowful boy, this flying-not existing and existing character, has fire and radiation. Two

2888
M. Chekhov

2808
November 7, 1938

opposite qualities - weeping and radiating. Just the opposite from Terence's character which is brave, but everything is inside - very brave, but everything goes inside. In Peter's character everything is sorrowful - everything out. This will give this strange composition. One character rude like a piece of wood, and the other so soft, so gentle, that no one can hear how he speaks. We shall combine quite opposite qualities, and we will get certain strange effects which I am aiming at. Therefore, I ask you for the fire.

Woodie: Your task is to show the whole part from the beginning to the end in the version we have now, with all your partners. 2. To go through the whole play and continue the work with your speech, because it was much better than last time, and you gain very much with it, and the audience can follow you. It is absolutely important for you, in order to accept and receive your emotions.

Deirdre and Jean: Try to get the right tempo, or get nearer to the right tempo. Don't force yourself too much because it is not always possible to catch the right tempo, without disturbing your psychology. Deirdre: Try on the basis of all these things, which are now firm enough to be a basis for the next step, try to find as many colors as you can. Quite freely, but be sure you are always changing the colors. Jean: In the scene with Woodie try to get more of the quality of sharp decision. You must be a little bit more burning with this idea to get him and entice him; not so calm psychologically. Your task is to make everything sharper.

Deirdre and Jean in the Soliloquy: Will you please try to imagine the following scene: you are returning too late from the

M. Chekhov

November 7, 1938

tavern, and being a little bit drunk you in the greatest hurry. You run through the streets and everywhere, and come on the stage absolutely out of breath, into a different world, and then you see that everyone sleeps. Try to adjust yourself to this atmosphere, but the devil is sitting in you, and you want to dance, and jump, and juggle. Two different things: you are full of life, but you must suppress yourself. Starting from this streaming, devilish, drunk atmosphere, and gradually come to this tragic soliloquy in this short time. This big scheme; starting from the top and finishing at the bottom.

Jean: In making this transition, don't take the color to be sentimental and to ask for compassion. Try to find this heavy black color, without any blue tendency. Then again come back to this world and ask for a drink, so that when you are at the black point you have almost to awaken yourself to the reality, and again this little devil comes. I like very much your dancing tendency. If you keep it for the whole part it might be too much, but I should like to see it before you take it away, so show the whole part with this dancing quality. Can you have through the whole part with this dancing quality? Can you have through the whole part not only dancing, but juggling? A commedia dell'arte actress could do this; something of the profession would come through. 1. Develop the dance. 2. Tendency to juggle. 3. Elaborate the psychology.

Deirdre: At the moment when you try to change your gestures it becomes more attractive and more persuasive. You have many other possibilities which I should like to see. 2. Start the soliloquy

M. Chekhov

November 7, 1938

by coming in this strange mood and hurrying. Start by paying attention to the people about you on the stage, then in the middle try to speak to the audience, and in the third part to nobody but yourself.

Daphne: Please start to work upon the part of Florinda for the next rehearsal. Go through the whole play with partners.

Mary Lou and Mary La: The mistake which both of you make, and especially Mary Lou, is that you are always pretending to be, when you are not. The only thing I can suggest to you to cure you of this pretending is to take the objective, and take all the other means in our Method which can help you. For instance, start your scene with the mother. What is your objective? "I want to tease." What does it mean to tease? What does it mean to mock? We must try many objectives until we find the one which helps. If it is an objective it will be persuasive, but now it is the old habit of speaking, pretending you are in a comedy, and you are playing a young girl. You must throw this away with the help of the objective, by taking the objective with your whole being.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRUTH:

Such elementary things as simple psychological truth must be in our plays and in everything we do, otherwise we cannot take up the curtain. You must find the difference between pretending and wrong artificial tones, and the real objective. In our future theatre you will often hate me, and be very angry with me because I will torture you with such things if I see that your nature lies, and

M. Chekhov

November 7, 1938

and you will see that the moment when you are angry with me and hate me, you will overcome the problem because all this pretence will be gone at once when you are you.

TO BE "PRESENT" ON THE STAGE:

It is the wrong way to be present on the stage - instead of to be present on the stage-because you can do it psychologically. Before you cross the threshold you must have presence on the stage, then you will not need to have the moment when you will be so angry that you hate the director. First be present on the stage and then you will get the objective at once.

Being present on the stage means that you will not be able to pretend. We don't want this pretending. To be present on the stage, to take the objective, to have the psychological gesture, this is the way to be cured from this pretending, which is false acting when you have nothing inside. The wrong way is to get angry, and the right way is to realize that you have been taught to have presence on the stage.

Stanislavsky¹ was a very torturing director - there is no other director like him in the world - he would persist on one single word for hours and hours, torturing the actor because he could not bear this lying on the stage.² His whole Method is the way to be truthful on the stage.

I remember when I was rehearsing The Inspector General, and Stanislavsky was directing the play [Moscow Art Theatre Production in 1921]². He has tortured me for one small scene, one small

M. Chekhov

November 7, 1938

sentence, and finally I got absolutely angry and hated him tremendously at this moment. In the scene I was sitting and saying some funny words, being drunk, and at that point I got angry and became like an immovable stone. Stanislavsky asked me why I did not answer. When I got this evil spirit in me and hated him, at that moment I got some good results, because I was so present on the stage that I got many things which I could not learn before. This is the way that I learned that presence on the stage must be first, then try to be an actor. The task for both of you is first to go through the whole play with partners, and, second, to fight this tendency to be untrue.

Paul and Hurd: For Hurd, always try to make a fool of the other person; always make everything clever for himself, and stupid for the other person. With a little romantic quality. Try to add to these qualities another; try to get more activity in his answers to the manager. More activity against him. Paul: Add to this the quality that you are saying everything for the hundredth time. Hurd: Always have the objective to prove that the Manager is stupid. Both of the characters are very persistent and obstinate. They must both keep the same intensity in the scene. Build up the scene for the appearance of the people.

Hurd must get the quality of the music as being the most important thing in his life, and his speeches are second. Work them up to a crescendo. Find the quality of having a whole world bright and shining behind you, but do not let yourself be anywhere

M. Chekhov

November 7, 1938

without an objective, having a certain focus, all in the style of comedy.

Faul: It is till to obvious. Go on in this way, and then we will take away the things which are too much. Go on without any criticism except for one thing - the words were not clear because of your characterization. When the time comes, we will take out the things which are too much.

Hurd: Have the psychology of placing something before the person like a tray, and with poetry.

Terence: The tempo of everything must be very quick; the bravery remains in the moustache. His nature wants to be calm and quiet, but he has the necessity to be brave. Shooting the small pistol at what no one knows all these imaginary dogs and devils are following him; perhaps he will only say, "Bang." This quality must be hidden in him when he presents himself as an actor; he is an elegant fop, but very modest. We will be able to take away many things, once they are established in you.