

Michael Chekhov

December 4, 1937

ADVICE TO PLAYWRIGHTS
ATMOSPHERE AND ACTION
IMAGES
THEMES

Suggestions Given Miriam Garthe About Her Plays:

First of all, you must follow the suggestions I have given to all playwrights with regard to action and counter-action, and dialogue out of atmosphere.

ATMOSPHERE AND ACTION:

In your fairy tale you describe only the facts, never the atmosphere. You must understand once and forever what it means to write a play with atmosphere. It is not enough if you say, for instance, "This is the throne room," because this could be done in many ways. Also the composition of the words and sentences do not give any atmosphere in your fairy tale - only facts. This is not yet playwriting. The playwright must give action and atmosphere; this is what your play lacks. For instance, when the king and the beggar are walking along the road to heaven, there is no atmosphere - only facts. There is nothing to act. First of all, the sounds must be the right ones, as in poetry; and second, you must find the rhythm of the sounds - it must not be verse, but a certain rhythm must be there. You must manage the prose so that it is full of atmosphere, through the different accents which the playwright puts in certain places.

IMAGES:

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You have made another mistake. Your play is not lacking in imagination, but you have not elaborated it enough - it is too primitive. For instance, you take the simplest, easiest and least interesting images for conveying your ideas. For the earthy king you could find other things for him to do besides eating, which is so obvious and so much abused. You must be much more subtle when creating your images. They are too primitive. Don't use such primitive things. The fairy tale world is so rich in images, and yet you take the most usual and intellectual things. You must criticize yourself more. For instance, when the king and the beggar are walking to heaven, everything they speak about is in the same low level of interest. It is all too obvious. Find some image which, like a veil, covers the obvious things - don't speak of them.

THEMES:

In the first version in which the beggar gives his clothes to the king, you have touched on a very deep theme, but you spoil it when you describe the garment as dirty. It gives nothing and really detracts from the idea of giving, which is good. At this point we touch on the content. If you will think about the deeper meaning of this idea, you will see that the clothes must be thin, but not dirty. The clothes should be so thin and unearthly that the king, who is so very earthy, is not able to keep this thing which is like air.

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From the point of view of the idea of the play, the garment must be thin, yet it is everything for the poor man and nothing for the earthy, rich king.

Sometimes the themes you take are very good, but you don't lead them to the end because you don't understand their meaning. You confuse them. You must know what the theme means in its spiritual sense. What is the spiritual content of the theme of a beggar or a king? It cannot be a naturalistic beggar because then it would be a newspaper story and not a fairy tale. A fairy tale has always two meanings: the meaning which the images give, and the meaning which is above all images. Therefore, you must listen to the music of the fairy tale. It must be organically put together - from the point of view of the rhythmical interest of the audience - to laugh and to cry. The theme may be right, but it must be an organic part of the whole play. You must justify it.