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MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S SECOND CLASS FOR PROFESSIONAL ACTORS
"QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS"

- ATMOSPHERE
- INFLUENCES
- THE INTELLECT
- THE WILL
- THE OBJECTIVE
- THE IMAGINATION
- CONCENTRATION
- THE IMAGE

Stark Young
 Stanislavsky
Twelfth Night
King Lear

ATMOSPHERE:

Question: Does the actor create the atmosphere out of the objects, or is it a separate entity?

Answer: The actor must imagine the air filled with the atmosphere which has been decided upon. Therefore, it is the actor's work.

Question: With regard to the atmosphere of the street accident - when the quantitative change takes place, the qualitative one takes place also.

INFLUENCES:

Answer: On the street it is done unconsciously, but on the stage we must create certain atmospheres consciously, in order that we will get what we want. But I also believe that there is something more to it - a certain influence from somewhere else which we do not know about. I believe this. I mean that there are influences around us in the world which cannot be

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found out by analysis or any psychological means. Certain influences on which we depend more than we think, and the atmosphere is just an instance of these influences being strong enough for us to realize them, without being able to say what it is or where it comes from.

Question: But if we don't understand them, we can't use them.

Answer: Of course we can. These "influences" are longing to come to us, and if we call them by means of creating the atmosphere consciously, "they" are here. They are not running away from us - they are coming to us and trying to influence us in all possible ways. But they cannot reconcile themselves with our intellect - that stops them. But if we are open in our hearts and wills, and the intellect is a servant, then they are here to help us.

Question: Can you make it a little clearer, even though we are speaking of intangible things?

Answer: Two things always happen in such cases. If you close yourself, the influence of these "beings," let us say, is lessened. Secondly, he who closes himself to the influence of these "beings" excludes himself, so that both parts are suffering somehow. This disharmony affects both parts. This does not mean that if we submit to the atmosphere we have to feel just what the atmosphere dictates. We have to have personal feelings which are different but still the general atmosphere is there. However, if you reject it, it cannot force

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itself on you.

Let us imagine an atmosphere - created by us as actors - in which we are waiting for somebody to enter the room, somebody who is very unpleasant. The moment we begin to lie, everything disappears. Now imagine we are waiting in a tense, unpleasant atmosphere. If we are true, the atmosphere is there, but the moment we begin to lie and exaggerate, it disappears immediately. So there is one absolute condition - it must be true, otherwise there is no contact between the actors themselves or between this "influence" and the actors.

Question: It seems to me that the atmosphere is a result of something you achieve from something you have done. Through really doing something the atmosphere is achieved. So as an actor what is important to me is that I am really doing.

Answer: Yes. Imagining the air filled with atmosphere is also doing - the doing must absolutely be there. Doing is absolutely important on the stage.

Question: You have said that if we allow the dry, cold intellect to creep in, it would kill the performance. When writing the play, the playwright must have an idea - that is the thing which forces him to write. So the actor must understand what he is doing in terms of the content of the play and the part. Also he must be clear intellectually about what he is doing on the stage. But I gather that is not the cold, dry intellect of which you speak.

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THE INTELLECT;

Answer: Of course the actor must know everything he possibly can. But the difference is how he knows it. That is the whole difference between the cold intellect and another kind of thinking which does not disturb the actor. The cold intellect is the kind in which we do not see anything but facts. But if our "knowledge" is at the same time an imaginative picture, then everything is all right because all real imagination is filled with emotions and will-impulses, and the intellect is still in the position of a servant who carries a candle, and does nothing but throw light.

Question: Otherwise I feel that although you might react in general to what was going on, it would become vague and diffused.

Answer: Emotions without anything to direct them are even more terrible than doing things by means of the cold intellect. The intellect must be turned into a vision.

Question: Is the intellect more like rationalizing - a very intellectual process which you don't participate in, and which does not flow into the three levels of experience.

Answer: Of course. I have meant just what you described.

Question: The actor must not be a critic. If you use the intellect only, you are not creating.

Answer: The main disturbing thing in our meaning of "intellect" is that we think of it as analyzing, criticizing, or punishing.

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It is a negative thing. The Russian work means just "nationalizing." It is much narrower than the intellect.

But I also think that if our "knowledge" and understanding of what we are doing on the stage - the more we really understand in the good sense so that our imagination is awakened and we see things immediately - then a strange thing happens. The more we know, the more subconscious or super-conscious things are coming upon us, so there is no danger. The subconscious region opens itself.

I think it is important to clarify these terms. I have always felt this, and the other day Stark Young confirmed my belief when he explained to me that we have to go through this stage of confusion until we find out what we actually mean when we speak about "atmosphere," "feelings," "intellect," etc., so it is useful to define the terms we are going to use.

Question: I am not completely sure of what you mean by "will impulses".

THE WILL:

Answer: Of course I must come back again to the same themes from different points of view. About the will; in our sense it is a very simple thing. It is nothing other than the anticipation of what shall happen, and that is at the same time the objective - not quite as it is described by Stanislavsky who invented it, but with a little nuance which I suggest.

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THE OBJECTIVE:

I suggest that we do not try to find out the objective as the pure understanding of what we want to do, but to see the result achieved. That is the objective for me and that is the will on the stage. If I want to shake hands with someone, for instance, I may say that I want to shake hands with her, but if I don't see myself doing it, then how shall I do it? Then it is the intellect. But if I see that I am shaking hands, then I see a picture which leads my will. To anticipate, to foresee, that is the real objective.

When I was a young actor under Stanislavsky, I could not realize this difference for a long time. Then I realized that I must always have a picture before me, and after that, all went well. I would also add to this not to try to find the objective before first acting freely. First act freely, even badly, and then ask yourself, "What have I done?" Then you can correct it, and also with the intellect, etc. This is the way to find the objective.

Question: When starting an objective, if you feel very flat and don't know how to get warm, it helps to take an objective which has some connection with the whole scene.

THE IMAGINATION:

Answer: It may help very much in your case, but in this case, I would say that you should choose the most simple, the most obvious objective. The easiest way to get the objective, and,

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at the same time, to become warm is to appeal to our imagination. For instance, let us take Sir Toby entering the cellar in Twelfth Night. If I can see him entering the cellar in my imagination then I can find the objective. If I cannot see him, then I am not an actor. When I see him, immediately the objective will come. It can be developed, of course, but it must always be a kind of vision. Nobody else in the world can see my Sir Toby, just as no one can see himself. The imagination is nearer to us, and is what leads us soonest to the state which we may call "to be warm" or to be ready to act.

I always feel very unhappy when someone says, "But that is not Shakespeare!" How do we know what Shakespeare thought or saw? I have my Shakespeare and you have yours - no one has the right to criticize it.

Question: But does it not seem that we develop certain associations around certain images, for example, a fat Santa Claus? It seems to me that the whole problem of the cultural image is something we are afraid of.

Answer: We make one big mistake - we discard one thing or the other, whereas both are true. Santa Claus is there, even if one has a beard a bit shorter and the other a bit longer.

Question: You speak about and demonstrate the ideal actor who can laugh or cry at will. You say it is not necessary for the developed, mature actor to think of his "dying grandfather". It makes sense to me, but I don't know how, although I have

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understood everything you have said about what we want to achieve - the goal. But perhaps I have to use my "dying grandfather". because that, is the only way I can get at the goal I want. My problem is, what should I use in place of my "dying grandfather"?

Answer: There are two things with which we can replace the "dying grandfather". First of all, a developed, flexible, emotional life. If it is developed, it includes all the "grandfathers" in existence. We don't need any one particular image. In it are all "Lears," all "fathers," all everything - if the emotional life is developed, it is there forever. That is one thing. There is another way, but it seems to me a little dangerous. If we take the real image of our real grandfather, it becomes too personal in the wrong sense. You will get certain feelings, perhaps strong ones, but they will be of a different kind than we are aiming at in our work - they are not to be shown. They will have a certain personal color which makes us a little smaller and makes the audience suspicious whether consciously or unconsciously, and the actor can become hysterical after a certain period of time if he works in this way, because we do not allow our nature to forget the "grandfather" drama in our life to the extent that our psychological life requires. We always take him out of his grave and cannot forget him, which makes us psychologically ill after a time, because we force our nature.

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Question: If an actor has a very strong imagination, that imagination is all inclusive. One does not have to depend on a specific incident, but one can gather that feeling from many incidents. Our problem in creating feelings lies in the inability to really concentrate to the point where the imagination is strong, without being disturbed. If our concentration is so strong that we can actually and truly imagine, our responses would be stronger.

Answer: From my point of view this is absolutely right.

Question: What I am driving at is this. You, for example, are a mature actor, but that is not true of me. Some things I can do, others not. What I am trying to find out is how to deepen the experience and manage that place where I am not so strong. One way may be through the experience of my "dying grandfather". What I am looking for is a concrete way to overcome these weak spots in me. You may say concentrate more, but that is not right for me. When it does not happen for me, what do I do then?

Question: The imagination of an actor is not that of an ordinary person. I want to know how to do things which I am not able to do.

Question: What I understand is this. We have all relied on our "grandfathers" and our personal lives in relation to a part, instead of fully exploring the play itself. Instead of doing that, we have relied on our personal feelings. If we concen-

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trated and worked upon the imaginative possibilities of the characters in the play, it would come.

Question: We are all here because we want you to show us a way by which we can go away from you better actors.

Question: Is it true that you mean that there is a technical equipment which makes it possible for me to use all the "grandfathers"?

Question: I understand what you mean but I cannot do it. Perhaps I was not born an emotionally developed person. I have tried to find my way to it and the first step is to turn to the things I know best - or whatever image moves me.

Question: You use the phrase "a flexible emotional life". I have tried to remember something which made me laugh or cry, and I have not been successful. Later on I was able to do it. If I trace it, I find that in life I have been differently moved in different experiences, and this has worked into my technique as an actor.

CONCENTRATION:

Answer: This may cover all your questions. First of all, it seems to me that there is no contradiction in our understanding of the theatre. The whole difference is that you say that when you think of your "dying grandfather," he leads you to bigger things. This is just the opposite to what I have just said, which is that it makes you smaller. If we accumulate enough experiences from our "grandfathers" and then forget them, we

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will not need to remember our "grandfathers." You need only to remember the atmosphere, to have a spark of anticipation of what it should be, laughter, sorrow, and so on. The same "grandfather", if he has been forgotten and gone his way, will return as an artistic emotion. I am speaking against remembering things which are still too personal.

The whole question is, can we develop in ourselves the power of imagination and concentration. I am sure we can. Therefore, the whole question is, are we going to develop them? If we do, it means that we move towards the aim which is actually the same one. But the question is, can we take one step nearer to the ability not to remember our "grandfather" or do we still have to remember him? If we can only remember him and nothing else, then we are not artists. But we assume that we are artists, and the question only remains whether we want to develop certain abilities or not.

Here I think that the ability to concentrate is a very important point. Unless we develop this special ability we cannot accumulate many things, and we don't see many things because the life does not enrich us to the extent that we need. Without this golden key we cannot do very much. Nothing can be done without this special kind of concentration.

If, for instance, we imagine King Lear, we can imagine him only because we are already rich enough inside ourselves with all the "grandfathers" which we have forgotten.

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But we cannot imagine King Lear if we have a concrete grandfather who is still tearing our physical nerves and heart to pieces. Concentration makes us accumulate more "grandfathers," and digest them more quickly.

When my own father was dying, I concentrated my attention on him to such an extent that, although it was very tragic and painful to me, I digested the whole event to such an extent that I could use it in King Lear - in fact, I had to use it. If I had not completely concentrated at the moment of my father's death, I might have dragged it with me for many years, and been unable to use it subconsciously. When I cry, I am, of course, crying for my father, my mother, my dog, and all those things and people whom I have actually forgotten, but they are crying through me.

So it is just a question of concentration. If we are able to concentrate to such an extent, and by the means which we will work upon, then the ability to laugh, to cry, to be influenced by one's own imagination will come more quickly, and more easily. It is only a question of developing and training.

I believe that we are all more talented than we seem to be. Actually I believe that we are all geniuses, but we don't know it, and we are afraid of it and believe that we cannot do this or that, because of inhibitions, under-developed imaginations, etc., therefore, we have to use clichés. If one

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thinks back over one's own life, one will find moments when there are signs of genius. For the experienced actor it is only a question of cleaning one's own inner life by the right means, with patience and great effort, then we will discover many things which we cannot even believe are there.

How can we, for instance, dream such strange things - such strange interplay of characters, atmospheres and emotions - we cannot do it if we think we can only do this and no more. We must say to ourselves that we can do much more, if we only discard certain things and develop others. Of course, it takes time, which is unpleasant, but we have to pay for the result.

Question: I think we all desire to hear from you a simple system of technique for doing certain things. You have said something which I feel is an answer to this question of technique, and I would like to explore it further. That is the idea of conceiving the finished picture before it is finished. I was warned against this in the previous work I have done, but it attracts me and I like it. It seems to tie up with your other conception of the will impulses, which I think is a much larger development of the idea of the objective. I would like to have that developed further, because for me that is the "how".

Answer: As long as we have to speak about this method, it will seem a little difficult, because we have to do it in order to understand. But when you come to do it, you will find that it

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is very simple. All the points I have mentioned one by one are really brothers and sisters and are actually one thing. There is really only one button you have to press inside, and all of these brothers and sisters will become alive, but to become acquainted with them you must speak with each one individually. Actually, it is a very simple method. We will come to the point where we have spoken about so many things - concentration, imagination, radiation, etc., etc., and you will be astonished when you find that at the moment you really concentrate you will have everything there, because real concentration cannot be done without will impulses, imagination, radiation, atmosphere, and so on. Just the same is true of atmosphere, when you want atmosphere and really create it, then everything else is there. It is one thing. So a great mathematician may arrive at a certain mathematical formula, after many years of writing many formulas which he could not bring together. Suddenly it comes, and this pleasant moment is inevitable.

Exercises on Concentration:

Very often in theatre schools, we start by using two main organs - the eyes and ears. For a certain stage in our work that is all right but we must go further. Let us say we want to concentrate on some object. We have to see it, and that is the first stage. We can even describe it in details

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to support what we see with our eyes. Then we must do the following things: Without moving physically, we must move with our whole being towards the object. For instance, when we love, we concentrate on the person to such an extent that we are continuously moving towards that person. So by our will we must move inwardly towards the object of our concentration. The physical body remains quiet but something moves towards this object. When you are with the object, the physical body must remain free and relaxed. Then you will feel that your looking and seeing is of secondary importance.

Now you have the object not with your eyes only, but with something else which is much more important, much more "taking" the thing than your eyes. The last step is to "take" the object and keep it - to such an extent that you will not know whether the object has you, or you have the object - you become one with it. And when you become one, a miracle happens - you know exactly how heavy it is, what shape it is, what noise it makes, what shape it is from all sides at the same time. With our eyes we see the surface. When we approach the object with our physical body we know it somehow vaguely, when we "take" it, we know it better, and when we are "taken" by it, all the qualities of the thing we know and experience. Take two objects - the more we do this process of merging together with these things, the more different they become until they are incomparable, and they can

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show us so much that we may even become frightened, but it is the only real way to know things. This process of concentration, of "merging" together, is the only way to really know things. Whether it is a box of matches or a human being, the process of concentration, of merging together without the physical body is the same. Whether it is the Moses of Michaelangelo, a real person, a sound in the street, etc., the power of concentration has to be just the same in all cases.

If we are able to get so many interesting things from simple objects, how much more enriching and interesting will be the work on the part we are going to play. We can concentrate on our part if we are able to concentrate to the point where we no longer need to look at the object. Then it makes no difference whether it is an imaginary character - Sir Andrew Aguecheek, or the actor whom I see on the stage with body and costume. The imagination becomes so concrete and through the power of concentration makes immediately the world of imagination so real and concrete that there is no need to remember the real "grandfather," because the imaginary "grandfather," which is shown the actor as King Lear, Claudius, etc., etc., is just as concrete. More than that it is so free from the actor's nerves and physical pain, which is not so if I think of my not-forgotten father or mother or grandfather.

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THE IMAGE:

This begins to show us how much it is all one thing - concentration makes imagination concrete, and imagination, if it is concrete, cannot be produced without concentration of this kind. Another and last result of this exercise will be that the images which we are going to act by such kind of concentration and highly developed imagination, will appear before us while we are working on the part. They will appear before us absolutely concretely, so that although we cannot see them with our physical eyes, we can describe the spot on which Hamlet stands, the wrinkles in his face, etc., etc. These will come of themselves. I know of one case when an actor was reading a book which had nothing to do with the part he was working on. Suddenly he felt "he is here," but the book interested him, and he did not want to look at the image. There was a real fight between them, but the image was so strong that the actor stopped reading and gave in to the image. The power of such imagination is incredible. It is stronger than a real person, because the means by which this image insists on merging with the actor is of such a nature that he cannot say "no" to it.

But the means to this imagination is to develop this kind of concentration which is by going out of one's physical body as it were, and "taking" the image, the thing, or the sound, and merging with it. While exercising, it is important

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not to allow oneself to break the concentration - of course, it will happen but then one gets to the point where one can grasp the image and keep it without breaking the connection. Let us do it by concentrating on the object and being with it. Then we can go on smoking and talking, and still we will have an unbroken connection with the thing.

CONCENTRATION:

Question: I can force myself to concentrate on the simple qualities of the matchbox, but actually I only find it interesting if it is related to something else which arouses my interest and excitement. I cannot get excited about it unless it is more than just the simple object.

Answer: If it, the object, remains only the object, then this is not experiencing a developed concentration. This becomes only an intellectual thing of observing and watching.

These are only two variations of what happens when you are really concentrated. But there are many more. In the process of real concentration, you experience many things before you are able to pursue your aim. You will meet so many things that it will seem that each one is different, but there are so many rooms to be gone through before you get a real grasp on concentration. One day you can go one way, and the next day another, and each time you will find different ways - all are true. For instance, you may start with a simple object some time, and suddenly you will see your own

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immediate future, and you will think you are crazy, but because you are going so deeply into yourself you see yourself in the future, in the past, etc. On the other hand, you can really remain with the image, and can do so well that you are almost "taking" it. From the beginning, it may seem different, but it is always the same.

Question: I think concentration means something else. I feel that my concentration would be dissolved if I allowed myself to go further than that.

Answer: If you have the power of concentration - which is not the object at all - it is what comes to you through the power of concentration that we are aiming at. You must distinguish inwardly whether you are floundering, or whether your concentration on a certain object has led you somewhere where you want to go. It depends on you. From your experience you will know whether you are floundering [or following].

Question: What is the proof of concentration, when you have such a varied collection of experiences? How do you know if we are concentrating?

Answer: I cannot know whether you are concentrating, but there are certain symptoms which show it.

Question: And whatever happens as a result will tell you?

Answer: Yes. As a practical suggestion, I would say let everything happen. Let it be right or wrong, and don't worry about it. Have only one aim - to go out, to grasp, to merge

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and to hold. After a few days it will become obvious, but the only aim is to concentrate in the way I have suggested. All the symptoms are there because of the attempt to concentrate the attention, as we mean it. All these questions will disappear in time.

Question: This may have something to do with day-dreaming. I have been told that this is wrong, but you say that it is right. If you concentrate to the point where the situation becomes concrete that you actually feel it and respond to it, then is your concentration right?

Answer: Not quite. It is the ability to flounder, but not yet the ability to concentrate. The ability of concentration is the ability to exercise your will. You will not confuse it with day-dreaming, because if you are only drawn into imaginary things, you are the victim, and not the hero. Is it your own will to concentrate and then to follow the thread, or are you led weakly by accidental imagination?

Day-dreaming is not concentration as we mean it. When I told you that the part can appear before you even against your will, it is not day-dreaming, but it is because of a strongly developed imagination and concentration. The image comes filled with your own will, therefore, you cannot fight it. If you will do the exercises you will see how many things will become quite clear, because of the effort to concentrate alone. Very soon you will be able to distinguish between right and wrong.

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Question: I am not clear on the purpose of concentration. It seems to me that when I try to concentrate, the purpose is to release whatever can happen. Probably nothing much happens as a result of this communion, but it shows that one is waking up inside.

Answer: It is true, but there is a danger. Let us imagine, for instance, that someone is going to hypnotize another person. For this, one needs a very strong concentration, and you can't do it if you are not able to see the person doing the thing. If you are doing this thing by means of the person, then he immediately gets up and does it. But in the middle you may think about his sister, and while you are still in the process of concentration, the purpose is lost. It is a question of your own inner household - what you are aiming at. You may want to flounder a little - then flounder. You may order yourself to remain with the object - then you can remain.

It is your business how you use this power of concentration. You may want to have a very strong imagination about something. You concentrate on the image and follow it. Another time you concentrate for quite another aim - you radiate your feelings from the stage. You can use it for establishing contact with your partners, and you can use it when you first enter the stage for hinting to your audience what will happen to the hero at the end of the play. By means of strong concentration you can tell them what will happen at the

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end. For instance, if I am playing King Lear - I am earthy and unbridled at the beginning, but I can send one spark to the audience, and they will anticipate the moment of "Howl, howl, howl!"

For all these "tricks" you must use concentration. Nothing can be done without it, but, of course, dangers are there too. Instead of following one line you may begin to flounder. All these dangers will become very obvious, if you have the patience to go on in spite of the seeming difficulties.

Question: I feel there is a great difference among the people in this room as to levels of concentration, but we have no basis for knowing how good our concentration is. There should be something more to it, it seems to me. You should be able to get from us, by analysis of some kind, just how good our concentration is.

Answer: This is a case in which my help is less and less needed, because the effort to concentrate will itself teach you much more than I can tell you. Of course, I can give you a series of different exercises, but to experience them is something else. For instance, take an imaginary chair and then try to transform the chair - without breaking your attention - into a cow. Very difficult! Terribly difficult! Or imagine that you are pouring tea into a cup, and then try to imagine it reversed. Try to imagine yourself walking backwards.

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In reality, it is not difficult to do, but in the imagination you need a terrific power of concentration to be able to do it.

If your head gets tired when you are doing these exercises, then it is wrong. Real concentration does not occupy the brain at all, so when the head gets tired don't go further. The more we attempt to go out to the object, the more we will get the feeling that the head has nothing to do with it. Real mathematicians are calculating without using their brains. They are working with different parts of their beings, with different qualities. Only when one is learning arithmetic is one tired. They play chess with their hands and feet, and inaudible voices, etc. So only the first stage of the exercises occupies the physical brain, and it must not become over-tired. Again, let us take the example of love. You cannot be tired of love, if it is a happy one. You will be more and more inspired by it. Just so with concentration. When it is right, you will become more young and strong.

I have in mind a sketch. Let us try to do it with a general atmosphere to begin with, and then we will divide it more and more, and then certain simple situations will develop and this sketch will grow of itself, and will become a play. We will start to create really from nothing, and we will start with it next time. Then I will tell you why we take the opposite way, starting from nothing, so that it will be

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our own creation.

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(INSERTION AT THE BEGINNING):

Question: The moment I begin to concentrate on the object I begin to use my imagination, and it becomes something else.

Answer: That is the thing we are aiming at. If by concentrating, our imagination is aroused, then we have achieved our purpose.

Question: I don't think that is true.

Answer: The purpose of concentration seems to be going out of oneself, but actually it is going into oneself so deeply that you will find all your abilities trembling and willing to obey. Concentration alone is opening the door of your own creative ability. You can direct this the way you want, but it may happen that it will be the way to your own creative individuality. Nobody knows what it is but you yourself.