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Michael Chekhov

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FLAME - FIRE - TEMPERAMENT
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FLAME - FIRE - TEMPERAMENT:

In the exercise that we have done for the feelings we have tried to make an effort to penetrate into the inner life of the character in our imagination, and to get a flame from it, and incorporate it. We have done this to a certain extent, and now we must add something more to the exercise. The task is to take the same scene from King Lear - "Blow, winds...", etc. - and, by trying to penetrate into the inner life of the character, absorb the flame and give form to this flame. You must direct yourselves. You must manage this flame; govern it. In the past you have sometimes been exhausted and overpowered by this flame; now you must master it. It must still be flame and not only warmth or clever distribution of power. But you must shape the flame. In the past the flame has consumed you; and without form the flame will always overpower you. I once knew an actor who could only act when he was mad with temperament. This was like a narcotic with him. It was his manner to act in this way, but it was very frightening. You must have the same flame, but you must master it.

IMPROVISATION:

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I want you to improvise a scene in the style of vaudeville. The basis is the objective, but you must add everything that you know from the Method. Follow me with your imagination and act everything you see. This scene is a small provincial town in a southern country. There is a village square around which are many houses with many windows, all the shades of which are shut because it is the hour of siesta. In your imagination look through the windows into the rooms. In each room you will find at least two persons, one old and very tiresome, the other young and full of life. The old person sleeps after lunch, while the young person suffers being forced to sit in the closed room, while he waits until the old person is sufficiently asleep to allow him to leave his room and enjoy the life outside.

Approaching the town is a man leading a caravan. Clouds of dust follow him as he enters the town square. He is no longer young, but tired, and perhaps very hungry and unhappy. The caravan itself is very gaily painted with pictures of animals eating people, and people eating animals. In these pictures we see the man looking very brave and very fierce. He has an assistant who is at the same time a musician and juggler. In the caravan we see many things which appeal to the imagination, like sticks and balls and ribbons, etc. The music is very strange. An instrument made up of sticks and china and pots and pans, which makes very strange sounds with which they hope to call the attention of the awakening people. They arrange every-

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thing in the square so that all will be ready when the people awaken. Try to penetrate into the inner life of your imagination.

STYLE:

The town is clearly divided into parts: old and young, happy and unhappy, gay and sad. The style is comedy, near to vaudeville. In improvising, try to elaborate the collision between these two parts: how the old and dying psychology and the young and flourishing psychology approach each other, and what variations you can find in this battle between the two. Try to elaborate from the moment when the music begins to sound - one by one the windows are opened and different people appear at them. We will begin with this moment. In each window is one young and one old person. Each young person must find the opportunity to fight not only the old person with whom he is, but all old persons, and try to overcome them.

OBJECTIVE:

(1) The objective of the showman and his assistant is to earn something by means of making the most beautiful and fascinating impression. The performance must always be a beautiful one. The objective of the old people is to get rid of the noise because they want to keep the young people quiet, dutiful, pale and polite. The objective of the young people is to get rid of the influence of the old people. Develop the

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sketch on the basis of the objective: whether the showman is able to capture the interest of the people of the town, or whether the old people will be strong enough to defeat him. You must finish this sketch for yourselves, but the scene must come to a clear, definite end. Through the feeling of contact you must know that the sketch is fulfilled and has reached an interesting and impressive end. (2) In addition you must take some characters which you must perform by means of finding the center. (3) Then you must find the significance of everything - words, movements, situations, etc. These three conditions will make your work very difficult; and in addition to them you must add something from yourselves. The moment that you feel uncertain is the moment when you must go through the whole method and choose something that will help you: (1) objectives, (2) characters, (center), (3) significance, (4) conclusion, (5) additions.

Criticism:

The objective was taken only in the head. Why was it so obvious? If the objective had really been taken, then you would have found many different possibilities of carrying it through. Each one of you started many things which you never finished, and this is a sign that the objective has been taken with the head. Another sign is the repetition of the same means of expression. If a real objective is taken into

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the whole being, it will always show you many ways of carrying it through. The objective which sits in the head will always be as simple as our intellect is.

The characters were the most happy part of the improvisation. But sometimes they were too vague. They should have been clearer. This means that something was wrong, or that you have forgotten it, or that you have displaced your center again with your intellect. The conclusion of the improvisation was quite clear. The weakest point was the significance. In all the many things you did, none were significant except for the showman himself.

CENTER:

The main point, which was not given, but which I hoped would occur, was that there was no feeling for the center; therefore there was chaos, which spoiled everything. For instance, you could have kept the objective better if the center had been walking on the stage from one person to another, from one word to another. You all tried to act at the same time, without paying attention to the center, which must lead the audience's attention. Without this center there is no significance.

Repeat the sketch on the basis of the objective, and try to find the center. Let something become the center, and then, as a group, let it jump somewhere else. This center may be just one movement, or it may be a long dialogue. In this scene it is very simple to create some centers because it is

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not a crowd scene in any sense. There are three different things: the showman, the old people, and the young people. Therefore, it is very easy to distribute the action between [among] these three parts and find which is the center for the moment.

Now try it again for objectives and the center of the stage. Although it was not good from the center standpoint, it was incomparably better than the Dostoyevsky wedding scene, which we tried earlier in the term. Here there was a sense of the center present. This feeling of center is one of the most beautiful things on the stage - to be able to know where the center is, and to help it with everything you do.

Old Students:

I want you to understand the problem of the center, which is walking on the stage. Don't be discouraged by your failures, because this is a series of lessons and we will only get this ability through exercise. This feeling of being sorry if you perform badly for an audience, but in the school you must have the same point of view as a worker. This will help you very much. Try during the next few days to work on this problem of center.

Now establish the contact. Really be brave enough to make this gesture of inviting your partners to enter your hearts. When this contact is established, create by means of the structures this small town in which these people live.

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A dancer must always feel the desire to dance in his whole body. So we must feel the objective. It must permeate your whole body; otherwise it is of no use. The actor's whole body must be filled with this desire to act. I once knew a pianist who had so elaborated the feeling in his hands that when he touched you, there was the sensation of a spark.

Even if you are not acting on the stage, you are still not allowed not to react. If you are absolutely absorbed in your own work, then you can go on because the audience will be quiet about you and will follow the center of interest, anticipating the final result of your action. This feeling of center is very important for the future feeling of rhythm - to mold the space and make cubes, circles, squares, etc., with the space. This play of space is absolutely an obvious feeling, and it is one of the most important feelings for the rhythm in the future, because the rhythm is life which goes on in different spaces and times. You must learn to follow this space and play with it. But we will come to this question when we begin our rhythmical improvisation.

Repeat the improvisation of the southern town. The thing which disturbs you most at the moment is the significance of your words. You are not always sure of what you are going to say, and consequently your words weaken your action. It is better not to speak at all than to speak weakly. Don't speak until you know what you are going to say and you want to say

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it. Then say it definitely and clearly. Repeat this scene again, but in very slow tempo. In this way you will have the opportunity to say and hear many things, and sustain the moment.