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Michael Chekhov

THE ACTOR'S PROBLEM

Preface to the Memoirs of M. A. Chekhov

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The autobiographical notes of M. A. Chekhov have no narrowly historical significance. Of course, the history of the Arts Theatre and of No. 1 Studio ^{First Studio} cannot dispense with the valuable historical and descriptive data with which the memoirs are filled. But their significance is immeasurably wider. They represent a grippingly interesting human document, a history of the soul of a remarkable Russian actor. Besides, they are deeply instructive and modern. They present an exceptional interest for the solution of the acutest problems of the modern theatre.

The chief worker of the theatre, its creative subject, the chief producer of theatrical values is the actor. Upon his understanding and interpretation of the intent and subject of the dramatic production, of the general task of the theatre, and the intentions of the producer, depends the aspect of the theatre. The actor represents the epoch. The peculiarities and the cultural qualities of the actor, his intellectual and moral outlook, his philosophical and political views, the degree of activity of his awareness of the world, and his connection with living reality are the foundation, the basis for

the interpretation of the material which is given to the actor by life, surroundings, and the playwright.

Our epoch demands of the actor not only a perfect and all-embracing technical mastery of his art. Our epoch demands that the actor should stand on the level of modern political, philosophical, and artistic thought; on the level of modern culture. The actor must not only master to perfection his body and his voice - he must master to perfection the cultural material of the epoch. Without such an actor there cannot be any modern theatre.

Therefore, it is clear that the heartfelt confession of one of the greatest actors of our time, occupying a most prominent place in the system of the Soviet theatre, must present a first-class interest.

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A. A. Chekhov went through the school of Dostoyevsky. He went through the "inescapable heaviness" of a pessimistic outlook, an acute feeling of shame and despair, contempt toward men and disappointment in himself. He lived through the painful contemplation of death and looked suicide in the face. With passionate fatalism he hastened his life, in order to live through it quickly and perish. Restlessness, lack of mental equilibrium, incompleteness, and instability - such is the usual state of his soul. Not the congealed serenity of peacefulness, but unrest; not the normal flow of life, but agonized delirium,

feverish sharpening of the senses, the alarms of the restless elements live in his soul and in the images created by it. To live is to burn in restless alarm and confusion of the spirit, ever to seek and ever to be unsatisfied and demented, to shake with terror before the inexplicable elements of the world, and to the end to struggle with this inexplicability. For this reason, Chekhov meets with such passionate enmity the easy and simple solution of contradictions and discrepancies with which the life and world of the human soul are filled. He is irritated by "direct truthfulness" of peaceful people who see the sharp outlines of the world; he does not believe in "straight and simple psychologies."

His acting is a pained introspection, a laying-bare of the complexity and contradiction, of the pained acuteness of a passionate and alarmed soul. Chekhov always acts a man condemned to perish, in the power of elements strange to him, of fearful and fatal external forces. A feeling of catastrophe, of fatal condemnation, of unavoidable death, are the fountain-head of his tragic pathos.

The name of Chekhov is associated with E. B. Vakhtangov and Alexandre Blok. Yes, Chekhov is a typical and finest representative of that generation of the Russian intelligentsia which was full of forebodings of the greatest upheavals and catastrophes, which flew, condemned, between two worlds - between the shameful lies of the old world and the elemental forces of the revolution.

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Chekhov's memoirs tend to show that gloom and despair, contempt toward men, cynicism, and egotistical asocial individualism of his former life are associated with his previous materialistic, irreligious outlook, with the overcoming of which commenced his new enlightened life. It is true that even in the period of spiritual renaissance, the senselessness of human sufferings and the reign of blind chance in life remained inexplicable and unredeemable. But if the results of biological processes remained joyless, an outlet could be found in these very processes, opening up a new life-giving energy in the depths of the human spirit. The insight commenced with the "feeling of possibility of creation within oneself." Within was opened up a fountain of inexhaustible spiritual energy, capable of creating worlds and systems. The highest and joyous force dwelling within the limits of human personality, independent of "natural inclination," could receive within itself the highest satisfaction and justification.

The problem is to master this creative energy and to transfer it to within, on to oneself, in order to transform the old and to establish an unprecedented new life there. Chekhov is clear in his juxtaposition of creation within oneself against creation outside oneself. Creative art, in his opinion, should arise from the depths of the subconscious life of the artist, who should view himself objectively and not interfere

with the work of the subconscious. The enlightened consciousness of the artist in creative art sees the existing creative forces of the world, sees the equability and justice of the world order, which formerly the artist did not see, did not feel, the absence of which nearly caused his consciousness to perish. From that time the malady was conquered, and "health spoke" in the life and creation of the artist.

The very process of artistic work received a totally different significance and character. Chekhov tells many interesting things about his principles of method. He has a completely negative attitude to the accepted systems of voice production, diction, plastics, and movement. The materialistic education of the actor, the development of the psychophysical material of the actor on reflexological and exactly biological lines, are radically rejected by him. In his opinion, it is necessary to approach the anatomy and physiology of sound from the living tongue and living speech and not vice versa. One must feel the "living soul of the letter," of the sound, of the word. In movement the most important thing is to concentrate attention upon one's body from within. Here, there is "necessary to work out a certain aesthetic conscience," an internal concentration, a spiritual integration of man.

The self-creation of the artist, his saturation with the creative energy which permeates the world, establishes a

new, joyous link between the actor and the public. But this is not a feeling of comradeship, solidarity, a spiritual dissolution of the personality in the mass, not a sympathy based upon the conquest of personal exceptionalism and the filling of the spirit with the feelings and experiences of others, not an expression in oneself of collective hopes, leanings and passions, but a frenzied self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, a sacrificial abdication of personality.

During his illness and pessimistic moods Chekhov was afraid of human crowds and was stifled by human presence. When he was once travelling by train to Moscow, his presence amongst the other passengers seemed insufferable to him, and he leapt out of the moving train on to the track. Now he gives himself in sacrifice to the public, to the spirit of the times, to the epoch. And in this he finds the unquenched joy of self-abnegation.

This joy is sad, and this acceptance of life is tragic. In it is felt a lofty exaltation, a taut string which is liable to break. Blok accepted and blessed life thus also, and in this acceptance was not only a passionate and sad adoration, but an acceptance of responsibility for all, a dreadful feat of sacrifice. "To torture, to perish - I know - it is all the same: I accept thee." And, therefore, he burnt himself out in great agony (and in hatred, and in love it perished and burned, that soul).

Life does not need a sacrificial abnegation of personality, but it needs a sacrifice and an abnegation, not pitiful passive love, but a free and full confluence of the personality with the active and life-creating part of humanity.

A living man struggles, suffers, hates and loves. The actor who "loves any public" and sacrifices himself to "any public" is concerned not with living people whose enemies one should hate and destroy, but with the salvation of his own soul. And what pride there is in this sacrificial denial of self in favor of the "spirit of the times" and the epoch! A way is found, not to life and to living people, but to one's own soul, enlightened by the presence of the creative forces of peace and justice for all. Spiritual wealth is not to be found outside oneself, not in absorption by other people, by the living man of today, but within oneself, in sacrificing oneself to a non-human world. It is not surprising that Chekhov confesses that in this period of enlightenment he became "not such a stranger to religious moods."

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Yes, life and the actor's profession are intricately bound together. We have a remarkable, I would say a tragic, document giving us real knowledge about a most interesting actor and a significant theatre of our time.

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The memoirs of Chekhov are especially interesting

in the part relating to craftsmanship and the theatrical education of the actor. Whatever our attitude to the philosophy of Chekhov - artist and man - we must acknowledge him to be a great actor, a master of tragedy to a degree exceptional in the history of the theatre. His stage experience deserves thorough and attentive study. It need not be repeated, but one must learn from it. Some of his comments should become the slogans of the actor's culture. His protest against dilettantism, lack of education, and ignorance, which are cultivated in theatrical schools, should be heard. His demand for the scientific study of the questions of form and style should be answered. We must repeat and thoroughly emphasize his thought: "One cannot be a cultured actor while remaining an uncultured man." We devote an unforgivably small amount of time to the artistic and political education of the young actor, when in the building of the new theatre the main attention should be devoted to the preparation of such an actor. It is the actor who expresses the modern theatre and the epoch.

The amazing technique of Chekhov the actor and his system of acting (his teaching of the integrity of the image, which predetermines all the details, of the internal collectedness of the actor, etc.) should be studied and investigated separately.

the tragedy of life and art not in a social, but in a personal sphere. His sacrifice is an expression of the same fatal, individualistic "condemnedness" which once reduced his soul to ashes. His conceptions of materialism are superficial and naive. He confuses the mechanical, psychological, individualistic, vulgar, middle-class materialism with the dialectic, collectivistic, dynamic materialism of the proletariat.

His book is talented and truthful. It expresses his artistic and philosophic attitude to the world with exceptional clarity and sincerity. It is not a simple autobiography. It is a confession. In it the problem of the actor is presented with astounding power.

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