

OPYE

315

New York
December 29, 1941

MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S FOURTEENTH CLASS FOR PROFESSIONAL ACTORS:

"CONTINUOUS ACTING"

- CONTINUOUS ACTING
- IMPROVISATION
- THE ACTOR'S CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY
- THE ACTOR IS THE THEATRE
- BRIDGES AND TRANSITIONS
- PERFORMING ARCHETYPAL PSYCHOLOGY,
NOT PERSONAL FEELINGS
- THE ARCHETYPE
- RHYTHM.

Bernard Shaw
Stanislavsky

We must at least believe that there is something going on in us continuously. Will this not increase in us our activities, our self-confidence, our ingenuity, our originality and our ability and desire to grow, day after day, week after week? Of course it will. If, on the other hand, we take the conception that we have sometimes to act when we get a job, but when we are not acting, we are passive and idle, that is not true. If the actor allows himself to believe for a moment that he is an idle person, it really kills something in him, and makes his abilities even smaller.

We must never stop. We are always going on, and if we know it, our inner life, and power, and beauty as artists will grow, will show itself, and we will use our means of expression better and stronger than if we are under the impression that sometimes we are active as artists, and sometimes we are not. If this seemingly simple and not very important idea is digested, you will see how much it will give you and disclose for you, and in yourself things may

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

arise from within which you cannot get in any other way than to change your point of view, and get new conceptions about yourself and your art.

CONTINUOUS ACTING:

This continuous acting can be done by means of exercising. Do you remember when we did gestures with qualities, and then we came to the moment when, after exercising the gestures and qualities, we went on acting and we realized that it could go on indefinitely? That is what our nature desires. Now let us start with some simple exercises and we will come to different things, but you will see that we come to the same idea, which is that we are constantly acting, and cannot do otherwise, because if we are actors, then we are actors.

IMPROVISATION:

By this I am aiming at the process of improvisation. The illusion that we must fix things on the stage is one of the wrong ideas. Never. We can get many conditions and exact things from the director and author, but if we know certain things, we shall see that nothing can stop our ability to improvise, or deprive us of our freedom as actors.

Exercise:

Make the following gesture: the left arm is behind the back, and the other hand on the chin. Now see what will

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

be prompted psychologically by this gesture. Consider it as acting. Now, after you have fulfilled this gesture, make a little pause in which you do not move, but allow things to go on inside your actor's nature. After the pause, drop the hand and arm quickly, and then look up and drop the head. In this way, an unwritten play will be started.

THE ACTOR'S CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY:

Our constant actor's individuality is so rich and unique that we cannot imitate the director or ourselves, if we rely upon our inner creative abilities. The cliché is an imitation of myself, or of some forgotten things which come from the past. Realize that in this little simple exercise which we have just done, our individualities had the opportunity to live and express themselves.

Now let us add a third thing to our simple exercise, which will be to cross the arms sharply across the chest, and take one step to the side.

THE ACTOR IS THE THEATRE:

We can go on indefinitely, with nothing except our actor's nature, which is the basis for everything. So, when you have completed this little series of gestures, go on and see what will come from your actor's nature. The person who does not agree with the things we are speaking about and exploring together, would say that they are without sense,

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

but what you are doing now is really more sensible than anything else. It is clever and wise. I don't know what play it is that you are acting, but it is so attractive to watch because I follow you and am with you, and I see how your psychology grows, because it comes from the true source which is the only one - the actor himself.

The director, the stage designer, etc., are all accessories, but the actor is the theatre. The actor who believes in his constant ability to act. Then the play - even such plays as those of Shakespeare - is for the real, true actor only the pretext to express himself. We cannot express Shakespeare, because we do not know what he was aiming at; we can only express ourselves. Whoever the author is, we are always expressing ourselves. If we think we are expressing Bernard Shaw, for instance, we are wrong. We are expressing ourselves on the stage. We are always ourselves, or we don't act at all and are like puppets. If we are full of clichés or other disturbing things, then there is no theatre. But if we are real actors, we are acting ourselves, from our youth to our old age.

Therefore, it is important to have in mind that whatever the play, we are acting ourselves. If this idea is really digested, it will free us, even subconsciously. If we believe it, and get accustomed to it, and if it goes into the subconscious regions of our being, it comes back as freedom.

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

I have seen many directors in other countries, who did not know what to do with the actors after a few weeks of rehearsal. One director shouts to the actors to be free. How to be free? To be free means to rely upon our ability to act constantly.

Of course, there are things in every play which are "landmarks," as it were, and very often they are without anything which we are able to act continuously, so we jump in a cowardly way from one landmark to the other. For instance, let us imagine that at one moment I am shooting someone and the next moment I am crying. If I am cowardly, there is nothing in between these two things. But if we really know in our subconsciousness that we are continuously acting, we can develop so many nuances in between the shooting moment and the crying moment. How the actor will act, that is our mystery, our talent, our individuality.

BRIDGES AND TRANSITIONS:

Therefore, we may call this ability acting continuously and bravely, without any fear. If we, as actors, know that we are continuously acting, we can never feel that we do not know what to do next, because we can develop bridges and transitions between these two landmarks. Bridges and transitions between two given moments. Whether these bridges and transitions are short or long, they are the things which we are actually dreaming of. How we begin to cry, for instance, and what happens afterwards. How we begin to shoot, and what happens afterwards. Why we all instinctively anticipate the

2P48
M. Chekhov

1815
December 29, 1941

moment before we enter the stage, listening for our cue. It is the most beautiful moment. Instinctively, we want to develop this ability to act constantly, and with bridges and transitions everywhere.

All these landmarks are not as important as they seem to be. Of course, for such a director as Bernard Shaw, only landmarks are important. He thinks that everything he has written, as soon as it appears on the stage, is a series of landmarks, and he kills the play. As a writer, he is a continuous one, but as a director, he kills the play.

Exercise:

The first landmark will be that with a strong gesture and a stamp of the foot you will say, "Yes," then leave it to your inner life to make the bridge and transition and go on to the other landmark, when you will say, "No," with the quality of lovingly and a little ashamed and with the gesture of your hand on your chest.

PERFORMING ARCHETYPAL PSYCHOLOGY, NOT PERSONAL FEELINGS:

Please don't "spy" upon yourself while doing this exercise. Let me do that. Do it bravely and rely upon things in your actor's nature. At the moment when I take things from the other source and show my anger, my feelings on the stage, it is wrong. This personal thing on the stage must be killed in our art, and the way to kill it is to rely upon this source

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

of transformed things, which we have experienced. That means to get to the source where we can continuously act, without any outer justification. As long as we rely upon this ability to act continuously, we are free from our wrong personal qualities.

While we are trying to awaken this ability to act continuously, we are safe and secure as actors, and are killing our personal things on the stage, which are always so offensive to the audience and to the actor himself. For instance, performing the quality of thoughtfulness is much stronger than the actual process of thinking, which is so personal. If I perform that I am standing there being very thoughtful, although I have nothing in my head, it is much more artistic and richer. Now, try to perform it. Then try to actually stand there and think.

Question: Let us suppose I am playing a scene with another actor who says something to me, and I am really thinking of what he says. I am really thinking about it, am I not?

Answer: No. Not really thinking.

Question: Suppose he says it in a different way.

Answer: That is "how," and you are absolutely free in that.

Question: Then what is to prevent me from falling into subtle or obvious clichés? Patterns of behaviour, rather than the artistic impulse.

Answer: Nothing can prevent that. It depends upon the actor whether he is full of clichés or not. You can really think

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

on the stage, and it can still be as much of a cliché.

Question: As an original, individual being, I am likely to come out with some individual, original ways of thinking. Therefore, it is likely to be more real and less of a cliché, is it not?

Answer: In the region of our subconscious there are many more patterns of performance than we will find if we are really thinking. First of all, when we are really thinking we have no time for performance. It will absorb everything, and we will become persons on the street, in a way, and it has nothing to do with art. It has nothing to do with being in touch with the depths of our subconsciousness. If we feel we can lose ourselves if we have real thinking on the stage, and can substitute it with something which may appear as a cliché, it means only that we do not trust our subconscious, which can perform for us "thinking" in a thousand ways.

For instance, if you are acting Othello, and he is thinking, you have to perform it because, if you don't perform, then all the parts you will ever play will only become you. But if, through your imagination, you will find the way to your transformed personal life, to your subconscious, you will find many ways of performing "thinking," and you will know how Othello thinks, how Iago thinks, how Falstaff thinks. There are unlimited possibilities for performing, and you are free to choose.

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

Question: Then what is to prevent me, as Othello, from thinking rather than indicating something senselessly. Why would it be wrong?

Answer: It is not wrong. The "sense" we are speaking about is the sense of your artistic "how." To kill Desdemona is an abstract thing, because as soon as you want to kill Desdemona on the stage, you have to find out - not in your everyday "street" life way - but artistically what it means for you, for anyone, to kill. Of course, it is different. Therefore, your killing of Desdemona will be really original only if you will find it in your subconscious, and the way to your subconscious is by all the means we have spoken about in our work. Simple concentration is already the means to find an original way of killing Desdemona. Imagination, psychological gesture - all these things are the same means.

Question: You can compare this with Stanislavsky's justification. What do I do when the real life, my sense of truth, is not there? What do I do when I can't find continuous acting? Do I go back to justification?

Answer: If you are not able to act continuously, there can be two ways, as long as you do not exercise sufficiently to get this continuous life. So my first answer is for you to work along the lines which will give you this continuous acting life. If it is not there, then you can substitute it with whatever you want, with whatever means you know.

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

Question: Then if you justify everything, you will act continuously?

Question: In my experience, the actors who look as if they are thinking but don't actually think - the thinking which is not happening really, but which the spectator believes in - that is the kind of theatre which I have not liked. On the other hand, there is another kind of acting in which the thinking happened on the stage.

Answer: In the first case, if you didn't get the illusion that the person was thinking, that was the mistake of the actor who could not persuade you that he was thinking. In the second case, you could not even tell if he was acting.

Question: I have looked into the technique of the two kinds of actors we are talking about. As a result, I believe that the actor who moved me was from the school in which the actor really tried to think on the stage, whereas the other was the highest degree of simulation.

Answer: I speak of a third thing. Not of the obvious, real thing, nor of the simulation, but of a third thing which is the performing of the real thing - not real thinking or the simulation of real thinking. There is another region in which we can penetrate, where we can get such performances which will teach us much more strongly than if we think on the stage, which is actually impossible. It is the question of a third dimension.

0028
M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

Question: When I watch a person who is indicating what he is thinking, nothing actually happens.

Answer: For instance, someone asks you a question on the stage, and you have to think before you answer. You can not have the psychology of a thinking person, when actually thinking of something definite. Because as soon as you actually think, it is lost time, and it is not art. The psychology of the thinking person is something quite different from a real concrete thinking person. This concrete thinking person seems to me to be wrong, because it is immediately out of the realm of art.

You are an artist, and you have already experienced this thinking, and you have a storage of thinking psychology, instead of rehearsing thinking at each rehearsal. I doubt very much that you are actually thinking on the stage, even during the first rehearsal. You may have the illusion that you are, but you are not. The real thought does not allow anything else to exist at the same moment. Even if you are thinking, "I am going to buy a cigarette," if you are really thinking of it, you have no more space in your consciousness to think of anything else.

The thinking process is something which absorbs the whole human being, or it is nothing but floundering. It is dreaming in general. But as soon as you are thinking of the main idea of Schopenhauer, nothing else can be done simultaneously. Therefore, if it is real thinking you are speaking

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

about, it cannot be done unless you forget that you are on the stage. The process of thinking excludes everything else.

For instance, you can be angry and you can watch yourself, but the moment you try to see yourself thinking you stop thinking and think of yourself. It is the only process which cannot be spied upon at the same time. So you have half the psychology of a thinking person, and half thoughts. But I suggest that you discard all this, and have only and completely the psychology of a thinking person. Of course, you will have some thoughts and desires at the same time, but they will come from the other region. It is not simulation which is real life, but something a bit weaker. Art is increased life, therefore, it is quite the opposite thing.

When we simulate something, we are weaker than the thing, but when we are acting, we are stronger than the thing we are performing. To simulate one can be paralyzed, but one cannot act being paralyzed inwardly. You have to have your own life, plus another life, plus ten lives as strong as your own.

Question: That is something which troubled me when Peter Frye said that he could not project the thought. If he was concentrated on the thought, he could not be really acting.

Question: Is that true for the feeling realm as well? When you gave the exercise, I tried to do it simply, as you suggested, but I didn't get much satisfaction from that. The second time I added things to it which made it more interesting.

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

Answer: If you do it ten times, you will create a whole story, and that is what we need. If it comes of itself because of the doing, then you have the right to accept it.

Question: It didn't come because of the doing. I suggested certain things for myself.

Answer: Everything that arises in you is right.

Question: But in relation to what we said about thinking, I am getting down into "street" things again. I should be able to do it without any thoughts or feelings which I have pre-determined.

Answer: May I ask you whether you have an imaginary baby? No? Then it is all right. It was an imaginary baby. For instance, if the writer or author did not accept all such suggestions, he could never write anything. But it must not be personal - an imaginary baby is all right.

Let me tell you one more heresy. For instance, all the things we are doing on the stage, whether we are performing thinking, or willing, or doing things, they are all feelings from the beginning to the end, because the whole art lies in the realm of feelings and not in the realm of thoughts at all, and actually not the will in the real sense of the word. One philosopher has said, "Where is the will when we are doing something? It is a great illusion." For instance, I wish to pick up the chair. I think it is my will which I am expressing, but it has nothing to do with the will. The will is so

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

hidden from us that we have nothing but a series of images or pictures of moving the chair. On the stage, and in everyday life, we are without any knowledge of the will. It must be the feeling of thinking, the psychology of thinking. Feelings are the realm of art. They must be absolutely concrete, but without any personal things.¹

Question: If you try to keep it on that plane, is it not the same terms you are giving to the thinking process? Are these two things related to the archetype?

THE ARCHETYPE:

Answer: Very much akin, because in our subconscious region archetypes are boiling in this kettle. Very often I have been asked how to avoid this everyday life. For instance, I am to act a very old man and I see someone on the street who has very interesting things which I want to imitate. Will that be the "street" approach? Of course not. I must take these old things and the posture and everything, but the point is where do I start? If you are empty, and you have no imagination and are just waiting for someone to imitate, it is wrong. But as soon as you have got this magic thing from your subconscious you have different eyes, and you can look at this old man, and it will not be of the "street." The old things will not be a simulation - they will be taken and transformed by the means of your subconscious, into the thing which we can use. It will be used as a piece of art. It will not be photo-

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

graphic. It will be a re-creation. We can use everything, but what actually is the motto? If it is the subconscious work, it is right, but if it is only a small personal thing, it is wrong. We must have the psychology of an artist, not a bourgeois.¹

RHYTHM:

Question: What part does rhythm play in this? If I am acting I must move in a certain way, but if I try to actually think I act outside of this rhythm.

Answer: Of course, rhythm is the highest point of everything, but we have to be absolutely sure that we can leave our personal things behind. Then we can be sure that we can perform rhythmical things, because it is the highest way of receiving and expressing things. But when you are thinking, you cannot feel the rhythm.

Question: Perhaps there is a confusion of terms. When I was doing the exercise, I thought in general - I thought about thinking. How do I look when I think? But later I tried actually to think and it was very difficult to act it, because I did not have time to think of what I was doing, and that is not acting. Perhaps the thing you want us to do is not to not think, but to think with everything we have.

Answer: Right. The process of thinking, we may say, consists of two things. One is the thought itself, the content, and the other is the psychology of the person who is thinking.

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

On the stage we have to have the psychology of a thinking person, but we don't need real thoughts. If you will analyze yourself on the stage while thinking, I am sure you will find that you have no thoughts in the sense that they are absorbing you completely. You are in a state of thoughtfulness, which is right. For instance, once I gave a certain actor the character of a philosopher. I could not get anything from this actor, because he did not know what the psychology of thinking was. He was not able to think at all in everyday life. That was a very strange case. Of course, we have to know how to think, then we will know how to perform thinking, without actually thinking.

On the stage very often we are put in such a position that when we are asked a question by our partner, we give a very profound answer. If we really had to think the whole problem through, we would not have the time to think of the answer. Therefore, the illusion is there and must be. I have noticed that when I am really thinking, someone may ask me why I am so idle. But when I am really floundering and doing nothing, they think I am thinking. Therefore, the performance of thinking makes more of an impression than the actual thinking does.

Question: I find that if I have a scene with someone in which there is feeling and emotion - let us say I have to decide something - I will find that I listen as I talk or move

M. Chekhov

December 29, 1941

emotional questions will come into my being, like an inner dialogue. These are things which I would have defined as thoughts or thought-feelings. The questions are very much in the play, and very specific.

Answer: Then there is no contradiction. You are acting inwardly with feelings and everything. Perhaps I have made a mistake in speaking about thinking, which is really a philosophical thing. The real thinking which leads to certain things is a very painful process, but to perform a thinking person gives pleasure. What I want to point out is that actually we can perform everything - it is only a question from where we get it. If we are only thinkingⁱⁿ general this is the worst kind of cliché, but if you have the substance behind it, even a cliché can be revived and made real.