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Michael Chekhov

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OPEN CLASS HELD AT RIDGEFIELD ON MAY 2, 1939

STACCATO AND LEGATO MOVEMENTS
FEELING OF EASE
FEELING OF FORM
WRESTLING
GROUP FEELING - ENSEMBLE
ATMOSPHERE
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STACCATO AND LEGATO MOVEMENTS:

We shall start with the simple exercise which we call legato and staccato movement. The meaning of this exercise you of course know - it is to get the first idea about the conception of our bodies, so that we feel our body always as an instrument for conveying to our audience all our feelings, our will impulses, our ideas, and so on.

We commence with a very simple exercise - we move our body very sharply staccato, and then very softly legato. These are the two extreme from which all other movements are somehow distributed.

Imagine what is actually the idea of the exercise: That you must give out everything you have by the means of your body and movement. It is not only a bodily exercise - it is at the same time a psychological exercise. You are sending out your power and giving it to the audience.

Do it again, trying to stress more the psychological side of these exercises so that your bodily movement is not as important as your desire to give out everything while doing

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the exercise. Send out your own being.

Will you try to appreciate much more the direction in which you send out your power. For instance: by kneeling down, try to get the feeling that you are disappearing under the earth somehow, so that your psychological activity is not more in your body, but there below somewhere. When getting up, get up entirely, so that you will feel yourselves being able to move more widely than your body can. The body is only a sign, but psychologically you are flying, and in this way we go up and down.

Now, do the same only in your imagination - that means by the power of your soul, of your spirit, and don't move the body at all. Again, in reality send out your whole being.

Now, with just the same inner technique, you have to send out your whole being by the means of the body which moves in legato. Every point in your body must move - nothing is stiff - everything moves and at last you have the feeling that each point in your body moves like water.

Now, do it just the same in your imagination only - much more decisively. We have decided to send out our being entirely - nothing for us - everything for the audience. Now just the same with your bodies.

Again, staccato, and I will then do something to it. First, we are going to send out our power by means of staccato.

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Do it psychologically first, then in reality.

We can use our bodies, and sometimes must use them, giving the impression that we are making powerful movements, but we know that as artists we have always to make the impression, but not to do it in the real sense of the word. In this case, it means if we are doing a powerful movement, we must not actually strengthen our muscles as we would in wrestling, otherwise we lose our artistic effect. If we are tense, we lose our artistic means. If we make the impression that the movement is strong, but not really, then it is one of the means that makes us free on the stage.

Make the staccato movement with the impression that it is absolutely strong and powerful, but try to have free muscles.

1. In imagination.
2. Now do just the same in reality, giving the impression that it is strong.
3. Please repeat it in your imagination, and remember that the exercise is more psychological than physical - free bodies.

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FEELING OF EASE:

Another exercise: Feeling of ease:

We know that an actor on the stage must always have certain qualities which he can use in all his parts, in all possible situations on the stage, and one of these qualities

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is what we call the feeling of ease. Everything must be done easily and lightly.

Will you start with the simple exercise of lifting your hands up and down, trying to get this feeling of ease.

Kneel down and get up with the same feeling of ease.

Lie down and get up with the feeling of ease - without any noise, without any feeling of weight. (It is impossible to do it without any noise, but take it as direction.)

Now, will you please by going down, say the sentence: "I am getting down," and in the same light, easy way, say the sentence: "I am getting up." Now, do it only in your imagination, and speak the sentence only in your imagination.

FEELING OF FORM:

Another quality which we try to develop is the feeling of form. It means always to be there on the stage, even if we are acting a scene which is formless and chaotic. We must, in this case, feel ourselves always forming our own bodies, our own words, even the air around us.

Exercise:

Lift the arms up and then down. First try to realise that our bodies are already forms. We must appreciate our own bodies as a form given to us, and if we try to think of our body (to feel through our own bodies as a form), then we will be able to move this form much more beautifully and persuasively

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for the audience than if we do not know. The body is a form; the round head - it is not square, it is round - quite a different psychology, quite a different kind of movement. Then we have the neck on which this round small world is sitting; the shoulders, - a beautiful composition between this round world and the neck and shoulders, and two wings to move. Two forms: the chest and legs and feet. This is our form.

Will you lift your arms and hands with the feeling of form. If you will feel the form, then we (the audience) shall feel.

The actor must never have to "persuade" the audience about things he is doing on the stage. As an actor, one must be persuaded himself, and the audience will follow. If we will try to "persuade" the audience that we are gay, sorry, sitting, or standing, the audience will be very angry with us - we must be sure that we are sorry, we are gay, we are sitting, etc.

Now, again with the arms and hands. Move three steps forward and three steps back, with the feeling of form.

Now, will you please combine two things: feeling of ease and feeling of form, and move forward and backward.

WRESTLING:

Will you combine these two things - feeling of form and feeling of ease - by the means of wrestling - girls with girls - boys with boys. Pretend that you are wrestling power-

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fully, but try to be easy, without tension in your muscles. Take it as an exercise where you have to explore the feeling of ease and the feeling of form. Free bodies.

Now, do just the same with a musical sentence, and after each sentence there will be a pause. If you are doing it in the right way, with the feeling of ease and form, when we stop, each group will be necessarily beautiful. If it is ugly, that means either that you are too tense, or that you do not care to create the form.

Now, will you please give the impression that you are wrestling for life and death - powerfully, but absolutely free. Radiate.

GROUP FEELING - ENSEMBLE:

Another quality, the ability for which we are trying to develop in our actors, which is called group feeling. That means that not one of us is ever on the stage egotistically. We consider our art as a group art, where everybody depends on the friend, whether this friend is on the stage or not. It is humanly important to feel ourselves as a group.

The simple exercise for this group feeling is a circle. Do the simple psychological gesture, as it were, which is, first of all, to realize, to be aware that here are our friends; simply, humanly, without "I am" not alone but aware; without making any strenuous efforts with your body - simply, psychologically aware - a simple fact - it is only necessary

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to be aware. Being aware of the "we-are-ness" we open humanly our being to everybody. We do it so many times a day, very often unconsciously, but here during this exercise we do it consciously, to invite everybody to our soul and heart, and not to be afraid. If we are strong enough, we can accept everybody, without any sentimentality at all - seriously, humanly - "We are."

And now, keeping this "open heart," as it were, will you please try to increase this group feeling by the simple means of taking hands (again without any sentimentality - if it is sentimental, it is wrong, for every person who is sentimental is a closed person) - very seriously take the hands of one another, and realise that by the means of having the hand of my friend I get certain help for the gesture of opening my being to everyone. Free body - free mind - bravely open heart - without any sentimentality.

Now, when I ask you, will you drop your hands, but while you are dropping your hands increase your contact. We can increase this friendly feeling because of the lack of physical contact.

Out of this group feeling, which is quite natural and quite human, I will give you a series of tasks, and the order of these tasks you will find yourselves by trying to guess what is going on in the group, so that nobody is going to miss anything, and everyone is open enough to guess what the group will choose:

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1. Walk about.
2. Run about quickly.
3. Lie down on the ground.
4. Speak.
5. Laugh.

The order of these nobody knows. Through these exercises we hope to get what we call an "ensemble performance," where everybody is a star, and nobody is a star, but the performance is the star.

ATMOSPHERE:

In our exercises we try to create on the stage what we call the "atmosphere". We distinguish between "personal" feelings on the stage and the atmosphere which embraces the whole scene. For instance, there can be on the stage many persons in quite different moods and feelings - one is angry, one is happy, but the scene must always have the atmosphere, which includes everybody, with all the possible differences of personal feeling, and to create this atmosphere we have the following means:

We imagine that the atmosphere which is desirable for this scene fills the air around us, as it were, and while acting, walking, speaking in this imaginary atmosphere, we gradually get it inside of us, and, as it were, we radiate it back, and then the whole scene is led by this atmosphere.

Now, will you please imagine a room filled with the atmosphere of, let us say, fear, but very quiet. I want you to walk about, and speak to each other, and do whatever you

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like, trying to move, to be in this imaginary atmosphere, and we must get this feeling of change by imagining this atmosphere everywhere.

Take another atmosphere: it is the expectation of something which shall happen, and if it happens, it is tragedy.

Now, another atmosphere: emptiness, everywhere inside of us as if somebody had died and we are left alone. Fill the whole space with this atmosphere of emptiness. Also speak if you want to.

THE OBJECTIVE:

Another of the exercises will be on the objective. The objective is the direction in which the will of the character on the stage is streaming, or going. To "take an objective" on the stage means that we try to awaken this desire to do something - we try to awaken it in our whole being, and in our whole body. For instance, I will give you a simple objective: to touch a point on the floor. To get this simple objective properly means to awaken the desire to touch this point - we must want to touch this point with the whole body, feet, chest, heart, and hands - everything in me is wanting to touch this. Take the objective with your whole being - to touch this spot with your fingers, so that you feel this desire in your whole being. Now drop the objective when it is fulfilled.

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Remember we have done once or many times the sketch we call The Fishing Scene. I want you only to imagine that a fisherman is there, far away, and you see him. Now take the purely psychological gesture to save him, to rescue him. You are here, and he is far away. Take the objective with your whole being - to help him with your feet and legs and body - then you will find the objective as a power which leads your activity - you cannot speak because you are following this tragic fight with the waves.

Now, try to do it without any movement - but have the objective in your whole body. Run forward to rescue him - with free bodies filled with this desire.

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In the Theatre:

We are now going to show you one improvisation and three sketches.

IMPROVISATION:

Improvisation is the following thing: We give our students the theme and ask them to take certain "grounds." As a "ground" we can take, for instance, objective, atmosphere, or psychological gesture - there are many different kinds of "grounds" to be taken.

The following are the atmospheres given for the scenes:

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- 1. Longing - dullness.
- 2. Tense Expectation.
- 3. Religious - mysterious - pious.
- 4. Hot - unbridled - licentious.
- 5. Secret - dark conspiracy.
- 6. Desperate struggle - life and death.
- 7. Destruction - emptiness.

These atmospheres were given to the students and they were asked to improve the scenes, having in mind these atmospheres. All the words are created by them. All the movement, everything must be guided by these atmospheres.

The Robbers

Lower Depths - 2 scenes

Peer Gynt

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