

1221  
Michael Chekhov

October 28, 1937

CONTACT (ENSEMBLE)  
CENTER  
FEELING OF THE WHOLE  
FLYING OVER THE PLAY

Second Moscow Art Theatre  
Moscow Art Theatre  
Hamlet

CONTACT (ENSEMBLE):

Standing in a circle, take each other's hands and establish contact, then separate from each other and increase the feeling of contact because of the separation. Then take hands again and feel the contact through each other's hands, you must increase the contact psychologically.

Be quite relaxed physically and psychologically during the exercise. Then find the contact between two groups. Enlarge your group feeling psychologically so that you are able to include each other in one big circle, and when you feel that you have found each other, then come together, led by the feeling of contact and ensemble. Be free bodily and psychologically and take the exercises in contact much more simply because it is simple. You must be free bodily and spiritually.

Let us do another exercise with a ball. Without this feeling of contact, all speaking on the stage is only an illusion that we are on the stage. You must find the contact by giving the ball - or by giving the cue - on the stage. It must be rehearsed very consciously. It is not simple to have a di-

M. Chekhov

October 28, 1937

ologue on the stage - if it is simple it is nothing. It must be given, and the words must be taken.

Do the exercise with the ball very consciously, then you will be able to do it subconsciously as an ability in your nature. Be conscious of giving the ball, or the word, or the hand, and be conscious of taking it - be conscious of the two processes. Now do it more quickly, but don't lose the contact. Don't forget that we are a group and that everyone must take part in the game - we are all participants. Add to the exercise some words, for example, "The ball," and when accepting it say, "The ball." You must receive it once and you must give it once. This must be felt on the stage when speaking, moving - in everything. If I am lying down on the stage it means something; if I am getting up it means something; it must be something significant, otherwise there is nothing on the stage.

Now let the old students do the exercise with the ball, establishing contact and using the words, "throwing" and "catching." In our work we must be able to do, to observe, and to teach.

CENTER:

When the group is on the stage there is group feeling and contact, but there is also always a center. A well directed play is always one in which the audience is gathered to one point then to another. The director always knows where the attention of the audience will be. We must awaken this feeling that the center of attention is walking about, but the whole

1261  
M. Chekhov

October 28, 1937

crowd is participating in the process - the ball is the center of the action. To have this ability in our souls means to exercise by means of simple things.

FEELING OF THE WHOLE:

To this you must add the feeling of the whole - the rhythm of the whole movement. It is interesting to awaken this musical feeling. If you break it, it must have meaning. Such a break must be a great event, but if you wish to follow the line dictated by the previous action, and you want to bring in new elements, then you must be in a psychological state to continue. If you break, you break consciously, and that is quite a different thing. Everything must be included in the whole rhythmical pattern. You can vary these things as you like, but you must have this feeling of harmony - we will refer to this later as rhythm. This is the action which walks over the stage and on the stage. You must be aware of the good and bad things, but don't condemn your efforts. Be aware of the good and the bad. Exercise by throwing the ball across the room to one another again.

Now let the new students do the same thing. First of all be aware of one another, then enlarge your being so that you include in your circle everyone you like, and then start the exercise with the ball. The idea is that you are working together, but you are able to lead the attention of yourselves and your audience everywhere you like. When you are standing as a group you have contact, and for actors it is necessary to

1381  
M. Chekhov

October 28, 1937

react to everything with one's whole body. Those who are observing the working group must be working as well, not only with their eyes but with their whole bodies. Don't allow your bodies to be stiff. Your bodies must be full of this music which you see and hear, or you want to see and hear.

Hamlet exercise:

You must regard the setting as a composition of powers - the interplay of powers, as an expression of the whole. For example, where is the strength of the whole - here or there? Which is the longer phrase in time - this or that? This is a continuation of the exercise in contact. Harmony out of contact. Exercise by looking at what is being done. We must do the same thing inside, psychologically. This is a general law - to find the parts and bring them into balance. We must be constantly working inside. One by one you will join the group on the stage; through the exercise of contact you will adjust to one another. You will find out how to play, and new harmonies will come out of the contact. There is no director - you are directing yourselves out of this feeling of contact. Don't forget to include everybody into your circle, then you will get the real contact.

The contact must lead you to the means you must use for expressing your ideas. It means that you will choose as a group the most interesting thing, through contact. When the director does it it means he leads you, but for this exercise

1381  
M. Chekhov

October 28, 1937

you must find, through the group, the means which will lead the whole scene. To try to find this is already the meaning of the exercise. During the rehearsals the actor must always give suggestions from within his being, then the director will find the possibility to give the *mise en scène* or action to the actor, because he knows what the actor wants to do. But if the actor is only waiting for the director's suggestion, the director becomes more and more helpless.

In the Second Moscow Art Theatre I tried an experiment with three directors.<sup>1</sup> I gave them a task by telling them, you are three directors but there is a fourth one which exists among you who will inspire you, so will you please produce Hamlet. What was the result? The result was that each day they found something new and better. One day one of the directors would suggest that they do such and such, the second director suggested something like that, and the third like that. I gave them a rule that they must not find the solution at once - they must leave it. Always they came the next day and what they did included everything - it was more than the composition of the three of them, it was something more. And the next day they got certain inspirations which embraced the whole thing, and yet it was much higher than their suggestions. It is the same principle with the ideal group of actors. If we develop so that we can take suggestions and not produce them at once - not accept them or deny them at once.

1938  
M. Chekhov

October 28, 1937

This is the secret of being in constant interplay, and when we are in contact with each other we will find new means of expression each day, each moment, always new and always richer. And from this point you will understand one thing which is very interesting. The bad actor and the good actor, for instance, both start in the same play, and they play both very well. But in the next performances the bad actor will lose more and more, will get worse and worse, and will act with more clichés, while the good actor will grow in his part, whether he acts nine hundred times, he will always find new inspiration and new pleasure in acting the part. What is the secret? The good actor is in contact with the whole play, whereas others are not in contact. It is possible to keep this contact and he will always get new suggestions from his surroundings. But to develop this ability we must do such exercises as this one we are doing with Hamlet.

FLYING OVER THE PLAY:

Through contact you find some moments, then the transitions between the moments, and gradually the psychology, and then it will become the scene. These points can be changed at any time, but as a method you must always have some sound basis. In the Moscow Art Theatre we have always rehearsed in the wrong way - we started with the first act, the first sentence, so that when we came to the last point we were quiet inside, and had no interest for anything. The method to fly over the whole play keeps the group more alive, and with our imagination we

13081  
M. Chekhov

October 28, 1937

are able to envision the beginning and the end. You can start with something which seems to be the climax, and then when you discover the real climax you can discard the old one. All this gives much freedom - you are not compelled to keep to your first vision.

Continue with the Hamlet scene: it is possible for an actor to expand his power over the whole stage, or to compress it to a single point. To be a good actor means to have the possibility of making changes, but the bad actor will do the same things each evening, and you will have no more crevices in which to push your abilities. We must have a settled mise en scene, but we must leave places for each person to have new action.

Exercise:

Make one large circle. One person must include, one by one, every person into the circle. Each person as he is included must have some psychological reaction to this being included. Then all together run around, fall down, pause all together, from the feeling of contact.

Remember the pause between Horatio and Hamlet? It was in very slow tempo. This does not mean that the pause must always be slow - not at all. It can be in a very increased tempo, and with a light voice. Everything is possible. You can do it in a whisper or in a loud voice.