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Michael Chekhov

October 25, 1937

IMPROVISATION  
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SIGNIFICANCE  
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STYLE

Twelfth Night  
Hamlet  
The Inspector General

IMPROVISATION:

Improvisation on Twelfth Night:<sup>1</sup> The scene is at night when Olivia is sleeping. It takes place in the cellar where the room is full of wine bottles and goblets. The characters come ~~in very carefully and quietly, but when they meet and begin to~~ drink a little, they start to make much noise.

ATMOSPHERE:

Imagine a cellar which is round and which smells of wine and beer. There is a very small lamp which makes the whole atmosphere very mysterious in a funny way. Everything is in great disorder - chairs and barrels, and there are sticky spots everywhere which nobody cleans. The friends love each other tremendously - they enjoy each other, their costumes, their movements, their speech - nothing is bad in the whole world for them, everything is gay and funny. Each button, each nose, each finger is funny. The soul of this society, the master of it is Sir Tobey Belch, who will be played by Blair, the Fool by Paul, Maria by Beatrice, Aguecheek by Peter, Fabian by Henry - he is a very young servant who enjoys everything more

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than anybody else. Everything seems to him to be absolutely the climax - everything is always open with him - even his mouth.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE:**

The task is half rhythmical - it starts very pianissimo, and ends with fortissimo. On the basis of the psychological gesture - you must imagine that you are rolling yourselves as if you were a roll of paper. Imagine that you are rolling more and more into a small thing which is not possible physically, then begin to unroll more and more until you are absolutely open.

The style is comedy, near to circus. It must be very light, and everyone believes in his own jokes. They don't know how to feel ashamed. Gradually they climb up from the quiet silence of their entrance, to the unbridled levity of the end of the scene.

**SIGNIFICANCE: Criticism:**

Everything must have significance. Repeat the scene with this additional condition. Every movement must be significant, then you will really coax things from each other. We can take an objective which would be to use every opportunity to get pleasure. The secret of humor in this play is to do only business. In another comedy it could be very serious psychology, and then you will get humor, but you must never

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try to make the audience laugh. You have done such stupid things and they are so funny because of your attitude of mind, because you did them as business. If you would make each thing a significant thing you would increase the humor. Repeat the scene, increasing the humor of everything - each exclamation, each movement must be significant. Now try to do everything for the others - everything must have significance for the others. Elaborate everything to the last degree. If you know the right approach through the Method, you will find it much easier.

I am very happy about the tremendous improvement in what you have done. Perhaps you do not know how difficult it is to get such qualities as you have got now. In the real theatre I have always had the greatest difficulty in producing this scene, because the actors had no idea of how to achieve this easy "nothing". In doing these things, with many mistakes and not quite fulfilled, you are yet already many heads above the usual actors. You must not underestimate what you have done. It is much easier to act drama - what you have done is very difficult.

How important it is to do the exercises in improvising. If you are able to improvise such things - imagine that we have to produce this Twelfth Night and the director gives you some tricks. You will take them easily because you have already some ground prepared. Therefore, improvisation is one

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of the widest doors to each performance. In our future theatre, when we start our rehearsals we will combine improvisation and rehearsal. In many cases we will approach our future plays through improvisation.

Scene from Hamlet, to be used only as a theme - the style and mood only to be used - it is not necessary to remember the words.<sup>2</sup> The first night scene in which Horatio and the guard want to meet the ghost. Listen to it with your imagination. The basis for the scene is atmosphere - create the scene in the atmosphere. Imagine an old castle with very high towers and big stones - the rampart of the castle. Inside the castle a great banquet is being given by the king and queen. Everybody knows that there has been a wedding and it is not good - which sin has been committed nobody knows, but it makes them unhappy. The appearance of the ghost is a sign for them that ~~Denmark will perhaps meet from now on a very tragic, difficult~~ destiny.

Criticism:

Be more careful with the atmosphere. Sometimes I hear daylight in the voices. Remember this expectant, heavy, cold, unhappy atmosphere. The noise of distance music means that disaster comes nearer and nearer. The atmosphere is heavy with expectancy, like a big wave. From everywhere this spirit can appear - you don't know from where.

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STYLE:

Vaudeville is superficial, but the means of expression is not so far apart. Clowns are as deep as tragedy, but you must divide as far as possible the content and the means of expression. In tragedy the content and means of expression are almost together, therefore in tragedy it is not allowed to use the means which are not in harmony with the content. Drama is heart, and the content is nearer to the means of expression. Comedy is much deeper than vaudeville, but the means of expression are not so far apart. The art of the clown is depth - like Grock. When it always has something tragic in it, then it is real art. The less gifted the clown, the more he relies on humor. Today you have taken your clown improvisation very seriously, and therefore it was something. In the Inspector General the content is almost the same as the means of expression.<sup>3</sup> Therefore it cannot be done in clown style, because it would then have to be taken much deeper, and the distance between the means of expression would have been much farther.