

Michael Chekhov

October 18, 1938

OUR METHOD
THE THEME
IMPROVISING ON A THEME
THEMES IN HAMLET

The Inspector General
Stanislavsky
Hamlet

OUR METHOD:

Being an obstinate person, I will continue with the Method, and this time I will add something to the idea of taking all the points of the Method and turning them into something, so that you yourselves will want to take objectives, atmosphere, etc. etc.

THE THEME:

Another point which is very important is that there is a theme which is always given to us by the author, and we as actors - especially old actors, but young actors too - make the same mistake. We always feel, when acting our parts, that we are being crushed under the weight of the themes given. We feel that the theme, whether it is given by Shakespeare or whomever you like, is something which makes our activity contract.

The same is true with the Method. Actors who have no method also have the same torture with the theme, because they consider it as something coming from the outside and oppressing them. We have two oppressing things - the Method which we sometimes hate, and the theme.

Now I want you to do a psychological exercise:

M. Chekhov

October 18, 1938

try to approach the theme in the same method. If we do not hate the theme in the very beginning, we do so in a few rehearsals. This is wrong, and no one can help us if we do not find the point where we can say we don't hate the theme, but rather that we want it. It is a purely psychological thing. There is no other way than to find this new approach to the method and to the theme.

Once Stanislavsky was in tears - being already a great person - saying, "Why should I be an actor? Why should I be an actor? I have a factory and I don't need to do this, and I hate it." ¹ It is our actor's nature, but as we grow up and want to be actors, it is really worthwhile to find a new approach, otherwise ninety percent of our work and our inner life will be crying, "Why should I be an actor?"

So now apply the same psychology to the theme as we do to the acting. Even in the form of a simple sentence, try to suggest to yourself, "I want to be King Claudius." Don't think you will get this psychology at once, but take this suggestion which I give you from the inmost part of my soul. If you are patient enough to do it continuously as a very professional exercise. You must say at once to yourself, "I want to take part in this theme." The scene is the one in which King Claudius sees the performance of "The Mouse Trap." Please accept it, although we shall exercise without Shakespeare's words.

I will tell you to enter a room, and you must accept

M. Chekhov

October 18, 1938

this at once by suggesting to yourself, "I want to do this. I will create this anew." Later, when you get the text, it will be the same thing. It is absolutely possible to say to yourself, "I want to speak these words, and not others," and this psychology will open to you if you are patient enough to do it.

Then you will get the real freedom from the other side. Freedom from the Method, and freedom from the theme. You will not only be free from this pressure, but you will also get a certain amount of creative power which is now lying under this heavy stone. We don't know how gifted we are, because we are under the weight of this stone.

Many actors I have known have become very flat and common or ordinary actors only because this pressure was lying on these themes, and they could not free themselves. They wanted to run away, to acquire about forty tricks and with these tricks they went their way through life. They were very gifted, but they could not throw away this weight of being oppressed by the theme. Those who were happy enough to overcome this by instinct, or with help, had an entirely different life.

My own experience with this problem² was when I got the very famous part of The Inspector General¹. I was a young boy when I got this part from Stanislavsky. It was a very great honor, and a great responsibility to play this part in Russia, where the theatre is worshipped. The first I

4268
M. Chekhov

October 18, 1938

got was the feeling of this weight upon me. One of our old actors noticed this, and told me in his own way, "Try to forget that the part is famous."

I have understood the psychology at once and from that moment I got the part in my own way. I got freedom, because I felt that I was an actor, and this was the part, and nothing in between. I understood what this old actor had discovered for me. A little change in the psychology and everything became easy. My own experience gives me the right to say that it is not only a theory, but it is a fact. The theme is a very famous one - forget all about this - I am an actor and I have a theme, and there is nothing in between.

IMPROVISING ON A THEME:

In the scene which we are going to do, Hamlet and Horatio are in the room, and they are planning to reveal King Claudius's dark spirit by showing him something which is near to his own dark crime. Improvise quite freely. There is no one to criticize, only you and the theme - not even you and the Method. I have the impression that what you have done was ninety percent right. We have seen this light and easy approach - no part in the world must be approached with tanks! When you get a certain fear, then without applying certain things from the Method you can escape this fear, by simply accepting what you are doing. There is a director, there are many things which will correct you, so why should

M. Chekhov

October 18, 1938

you not make mistakes? Therefore we have our rehearsals. Artists draw and paint by themselves, with many mistakes which they erase. Why should we not do the same, accepting even our mistakes?

Now back to the theme: The King and Queen enter the room, and the king is very suspicious of everyone and everything, because he is guilty. They take their places and wait for the performance. The Queen is under the influence of the King, even under the magic influence of the King, not only the influence but a very conscious control which the King exerts over her. Accept only the entrance of a person who is suspicious of everyone and everything. When you find this point in your soul, then you will at once be happy on the stage. Forget all other points of view for the moment. You must enjoy it because you have accepted it.

Theme: We hear the march which tells of the approach of the actors who must walk a long way through the castle. During this time Horatio has two things in his mind - how to organize things better when the actors enter, and second, to ascertain whether Hamlet will have enough inner power not to give himself away.

Hamlet's theme is to organize things so that the King will get the impression that Hamlet wants, and secondly Hamlet is watching the King. Purely psychological for the king - when he hears the march he is more and more suspicious, and when the actors enter it is almost impossible for him to hide

M. Chekhov

October 18, 1938

the tremendous fear which is always living in his soul. The Queen is unfortunately absolutely one being with the King, being hypnotized by him, and she experiences absolutely everything that he is feeling, without being conscious of it. Therefore she has two things - to experience this tremendous fear which comes from the King, and secondly to find out what it is that she is afraid of. Now, we must accept these inner psychological themes, just as we have accepted the dialogue, etc. This is the purpose of the rehearsal, and the approach must be this one.

Another theme: the actors enter to play the prologue - the King, the Murderer, and the Queen. The first part of their theme is to bring a professional atmosphere into the court, secondly to organize everything, and thirdly to retreat somewhere and wait for the sign which Hamlet will give them to start.

Theme: Ophelia enters; her psychological theme is to find where is the point which will comfort her. Her soul is floundering like a dying bird. Left for a few moment and something will happen to her. Therefore, she is looking to everyone to find her salvation - the King, the Queen, the actors, Hamlet, the chairs, the atmosphere - she grasps at everything. Her theme is purely psychological.

For Hamlet his theme is not to put her being away from him - he and Ophelia are on thing - when they are separated one goes mad and the other dies. But for a certain time

M. Chekhov

October 18, 1938

Hamlet tries to keep all the best part of himself by separating himself from Ophelia, and at the same time watching the King. Horatio is ready to do everything to help Hamlet. The actors' theme is to convey to their audience the best of their abilities. The King and Queen become more and more suspicious, and their guilty consciences are shown when the dead King is not yet awakened. The Queen is gradually awakened as she watches and in this way she becomes free from the King's influence. As she begins to understand, it awakens her so much that she feels she is two persons - herself and the King. When this happens she begins to understand everything.

In the dreadful pause which occurs after the actors have prepared the stage, Ophelia enters. During the pantomime the themes are developed. You must always be very aware of the theme, otherwise if it is vague there is nothing to accept. The only aim of the exercise is to learn how to accept the theme, and to handle it in a conscious way, because it is your own desire. Now do the whole scene. Now realize what was really going on in you. It was very interesting to watch.

Change the theme. When the performance of the pantomime starts, when the Murderer pours the poison into the ear of the actor King, develop the following theme psychologically and inwardly. King Claudius receives a terrible shock, and when the actor Murderer starts to take the actor Queen away, everything bursts inside him. He runs away from the room so that he can enter the chapel and come to the point

M. Chekhov

October 18, 1938

of, "My offense is rank." At the moment the Queen sees this she wants to get back her former state. What it was she is not quite clear, whether the King has gone mad or whether she has been hypnotized, but she tries to get the King back psychologically and physically, and with him her former dream. She runs after him because she wants to recapture him. More and more she feels the distance growing between her and the King, but she tries to bring him back because the dream was so happy.

For Horatio the theme is to bring order everywhere, and to keep Hamlet calm, and to save Ophelia. His idea is to bring everything in order.