

1391
Michael Chekhov

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CONTACT AND RHYTHM
FIRST EXPERIMENTS WITH RHYTHM
RHYTHMICAL PATTERNS
GROUP RHYTHMICAL COMPOSITIONS
FORM AND "AFTER-FORM"
Myerhold
Moscow Art Theatre

CONTACT AND RHYTHM:

We will continue the exercises on contact in a more complicated way, in a form nearer to real acting, for I have noticed during our "rehearsals for rehearsals" we have lost this contact. After exercises in general, I will give another form which is more simple, and yet more complicated.

The real feeling of contact is the "youngest brother" of rhythm - not rhythm in Mr. Oppenheim's musical sense, but rhythm in our sense. A deeply developed instinct for contact is already there. We will not pay attention at all to how we are acting as actors. We shall pay attention only to whether we are being led by this instinct or impulse, which is contact. For instance, Alan speaks a soliloquy in a certain rhythm, and I have to find different kinds of harmonious reactions to it.

"It is cold, and the clouds are grey, and the trees are blowing."

Follow my reactions and see what I do. I will try different reactions without speech. I will try to find in my reaction different kinds of harmonious reaction.

FIRST EXPERIMENTS WITH RHYTHM:

This is the demonstration I want you to do. A certain rhythm must be given, then it can be harmonious. "Fairy tales

M. Chekhov

February 15, 1938

have a great interest for us - Terry works on them." I gave him the suggestion how to continue, but he did not take it. Now will you please take my suggestion.

This attempt to find the rhythm, the tune, the melody of partners - this is what we must develop as contact. This is the basis for the future understanding of rhythm. We are always speaking about rhythm, but it is too early to touch this question of rhythm because it is a very intangible - yet tangible - thing. The whole question is the preparatory work, and then the ability to use the rhythm will flower of itself. Therefore, it may be necessary to work around this question for a long time. How long I don't know because I have never had the opportunity to work with a group in this way. This is the first time I have been able to touch this kind of question with a group.¹

Try to speak, to feel, to move in connection with one another with this feeling of contact. Now, for example, Paul will be a gentleman who is packing his things in a big hurry, having only a few minutes before leaving to catch the train. I want Alan to be his servant, who is with him. They must find how to compose their different rhythms through contact. We shall make it more complicated by working with them. The master is in a hurry, but that does not mean that the servant must be in a hurry, too.

What do you think? Do it very musically. It was more the idea of certain possibilities. This is very good

M. Chekhov

February 15, 1938

because through this feeling that something is lacking, we are attracting this power. Will you please continue this, but with the condition that you are the master this time, and the servant is so lazy he doesn't want to be bothered with this work of packing the bag. Those watching the exercise must try to be "the conductor." We have pleasure in "conducting," and this means they are doing it correctly. The work of two, three, twenty people is a composition. We must be able to do everything, even the most naturalistic thing so that it becomes poetry; and this is one of the finest ways to escape "naturalism." Not as Meyerhold tried to do by means of curious sets, acrobatics, and unnatural things, but through our understanding of rhythm.

Now, Anna and Terence: They had their own idea, but it was not in harmony. If you have something to say, it is part of the composition. It is in the closest connection with the content; but if we take this into consideration, we will never get anywhere. We do not pay attention to the content in this particular exercise, or how it is done, but only to certain conditions.

We have only to awaken these things, for they are really very near to us. One thing which can disturb us very much is when the content is wrong; therefore, this moment cannot be rhythmical unless it is authentically done.

Scene: Two Street Cleaners

Everybody must be walking on this street, which is

M. Chekhov

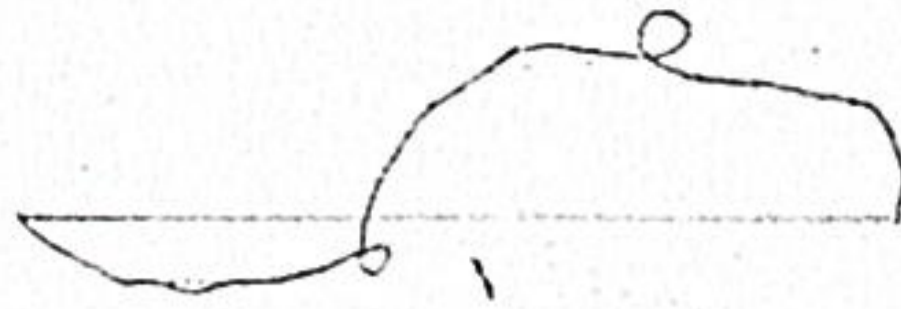
February 15, 1938

very narrow, and must find, without words, the rhythmical connection between themselves and the street cleaners. Try to make music by all possible compositions. We must avoid the real naturalness which is inharmonious.

Now I want you to take another example which is a little more difficult to explore. The scene [in The Possessed] is the moment when the idealist slaps the son. It is in the mother's living room, after the beggar girl has been taken away. The mother asks the son, "Why were you so late?" The son replies, "The last carriage on the train was derailed." This will give the musical note for Blair to finish the composition with the group of people.

By having this instinct developed, the following story could develop. You would have finished your sentences when the idealist was in the room. (This was an empty space.) You would have supported the idealist. The mother would at once find the contact. Everybody should be about to take up the note. It must be musically justified. Everything must be musically justified. Everything must be started with the musical rhythm. As an exercise, everyone must get up as a musical continuation of the sentence of the mother's: "Why were you so late?"

From the rhythmical point of view, there is no start and no finish - no straight line - that is not rhythm. Therefore, we must have the beginning and the end.



Repetition gives the feeling of eternity, but it is not rhythm. Rhythm is something which is accomplished (started and finished - more or less completed). Repetition has no start and no finish, but it is an interesting composition, for it represents eternity.

RHYTHMICAL PATTERNS:

Therefore, by speaking, by moving, it must be a certain definite pattern in order to be rhythmical. You must all be in harmony with each other in order to intensify the point of the lesson: rhythm. When we have this rhythm, it is the same as in opera. The real form will never kill the real life, but will increase it. When Elsa [opera studio student] will sing on the basis of many exercises in imagination, objective, etc., she will sing with a much stronger impression than if she simply sings without such a basis.

The really developed sense of composition in music will give us the possibility which I want, not to cling to something definite, but to be able to create in this form different things - to be free. To achieve this freedom, we must do these exercises.

Now, take it much more simply, the same scene. I affirm that it is very strange and very difficult

M. Chekhov

February 15, 1938

to believe in theoretically, but I have observed through many years, and I have seen that it is a fact that notes really begin to serve us greatly. They change their shape and weight if necessary. It depends on what kind of rhythm lives in the actor. This is one of the parts of our actor's being. Through this ability of rhythm we will re-create even our surroundings. You must use even the sound of a chair - it must be found.

The actors in the Moscow Art Theatre had this thing instinctively in them. They had their rhythm inside of them. They knew how, if the character was a very big fat man, to manage the stomach, etc. Without this artist's nature sitting inside, the art falls down into naturalism, worse than photography, for photography can be an art, but naturalism is not art.

Although at first this work of rhythm may seem to us quite mechanical and not really rhythmical, this is only the form. It is a staircase on which we can climb to the next level, which is the real rhythm based on this form.

The real form will never kill the real life, but will increase it.

For a short time it may seem dead, this form, but when we overcome it and reach the "after-form," then it will be rhythmical. We must not be afraid of this stage and run away from it. We must be able to create in this form definite things. This is the aura on the stage.