

"THE ACTOR IS THE THEATRE"
A COLLECTION OF MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S
UNPUBLISHED NOTES & MANUSCRIPTS
ON THE ART OF ACTING AND THE THEATRE

by Seirdre Hurst du Prey

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THE ACTOR IN THE PLAY
A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS
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OF THE ART OF ACTING AND THE THEATRE

by Baird Hurst du Prey

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INTRODUCTION

The work I am preparing for publication comprises a collection of unpublished notes and manuscripts relating to the theatre career of Michael Chekhov - actor, director, teacher - in Russia, Europe, England, and America during the first half of this century.

Constantin Stanislavsky wrote to Xenia Chekhov in 1930, in the dark days when Michael Chekhov and his wife were émigrés in Berlin: "Be brave, hopeful, and preserve for us the great artist and actor, Misha Chekhov." It is in the light of such an admonition from that great man of the theatre that I hope to help, through the publication of my work, in preserving the legacy left by the theatre genius that was Michael Chekhov, before those few persons who were intimately associated with him have all passed away, and the evidence of his unique gifts is dispersed or lost forever.

To extend the understanding of Michael Chekhov's philosophy concerning the theatre and the art of the actor, I have transcribed shorthand notes of lectures, lessons, criticisms of rehearsals and performances, demonstration classes, interpretations of plays, ideas for original plays, training courses for teachers, and classes for professional actors. These verbatim notes, the basis of my work in progress, were taken by me from 1936-1942 when Chekhov was director of the Chekhov Theatre Studio in England and in America, and I was associated with him as student, teacher, and assistant.

Stanislavsky's System, because at that time he wrote an article entitled "The Problem of the Actor," which appeared in Hearth, a Moscow periodical published by Proletcult, in which he set forth the importance of a system for the actor's training. In Stanislavsky's Protégé: Eugenio Vakhtangov, Reuben Simenov quotes an article written by Vakhtangov in March, 1919, entitled "To Those Who Write About the Stanislavsky System," in which he criticizes Chekhov's attempt to "cover the application of the Stanislavsky Method in three or four pages of a magazine article." In 1935 the Group Theatre in New York translated an article by Michael Chekhov entitled "Stanislavski's Method of Acting," the date of which is given as 1922.

Although it is difficult to do, it is important, for many reasons, to substantiate just when Chekhov began to question certain aspects of Stanislavsky's System in the light of his own development and experiments. In his autobiography, The Path of the Actor (Put Aktora), first published in 1924, and reissued in 1926 by Academia, Leningrad, and translated into English at Dartington Hall in 1936, Chekhov refers to certain of his own exercises which he gave to his students in Chekhov's Studio during the period from 1922-28 when he was director of the First Studio of the Art Theatre (which became in 1924 the Second Moscow Art Theatre). We know that he ^{worked on his book} experimented further with these same exercises and principles in the theatre classes which he conducted in Latvia and Lithuania from 1931-35, and in Paris with Le Théâtre Tchekhoff in 1930-32. Frequently re-stated in his book, these exercises were an important part of the technique he taught students in England and America.

At the conclusion of his book, The Path of the Actor, 1924, Chekhov states:

I would like to say a great deal about the relationship of the spectator and the actor, but this topic will enter into the contents

of another book of mine, especially dealing with the questions of the theatre as such.

I speak a great deal of the new acting technique. But do I have this technique? No, not yet. Here is the dividing line on which I now stand and from which I glance at my past and my future. I am preparing myself for the acceptance of the future new technique; I await ~~and~~ and long for it.

A few attempts to master it have shown me its immeasurable depth and value. I look ahead with hope and faith. Inwardly I have finished with all that is old in the theatre, and I find it painfully difficult to outlive the remainder of the old and to struggle with obstacles which stand in the way of the new. In reality, I have not yet played a single part as it should be played, and if I were asked which of my parts I consider the most successful, with all sincerity I would have to reply, "The one which I have not yet acted."

When visiting Xenia Chekhov in Los Angeles in 1969, we discussed the question of when Chekhov first began to work on a book concerned with his ideas for a technique of acting method. Mrs. Chekhov recalled that he had worked on the book in Riga, Latvia, in 1933, and that in 1934, when he was producing, acting, and teaching in Lithuania, he had given instruction in his Method to a group of actors there. In America, during the summer of 1935, he once again returned to working on his book.

After completing the initial Version No. 1 at Dartington ^{in 1937} and submitting it to Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst for their opinion, Chekhov was encouraged to develop his ideas in greater detail, in Version No. 2. He continued working with me on the book after the Chekhov Theatre Studio began the second phase of its life in Ridgfield, Connecticut, in 1939. At one point, Hurd Hatfield, one of the members of the Studio, assisted Chekhov in writing a chapter on speech, but the work was not completed and was not included in the final form of the book. ⁴ In 1940, Paul Marshall Allan began his valuable work,

collaborating with Chekhov, editing and giving form and structure to the book. Version No. 3 was completed in 1942, with Paul Marshall Allan and I working together with D. Chekhov on this final form, which became known as the 1942 Version.⁵ Final corrections and insertions were made after the Studio's existence was terminated and Chekhov departed for Hollywood, taking typewritten copies of the manuscript with him.

The 1942 Version of the book was submitted to several theatre authorities and publishers in New York, among whom was Stanley P. Young, Editor of Harcourt Brace. Mr. Young was enthusiastic about the work, and considered it a valuable contribution to theatre literature. However, he doubted that any publisher could consider producing it under prevailing war-time conditions. He cautioned against changing the text too much in order to achieve a more correct English form, because he felt that Chekhov's inimitable descriptive use of the language would be sacrificed, and the unique character of the work be lost.⁶

Chekhov showed the manuscript to a number of theatrical people in Hollywood, but because of some of the reactions he received he decided to rewrite the book in Russian, convinced that in his own language he would be entirely responsible for its meaning. "It will be my testament," he wrote to me. Adhering closely to the form of the English text of the 1942 Version, he published the Russian edition at his own expense in 1945, distributing it to public libraries and college and university libraries throughout the country where there was a Slavonic department.

After this was accomplished, Chekhov decided, in 1946, to translate the Russian version into English. Two translators, Jay Loyda and Sergi Bertensson, co-authors of a biography of Sergi Rachmaninoff, were chosen for the task. A number of chapters were translated and submitted to publishers, without success. Some chapters were submitted to Theatre Arts Books, Inc., where the work met with a critical reception, to judge from the letter written to Mr. Jay Loyda by Mr. Robert MacGregor, its editor.

Chekhov was very discouraged by this development. He sent me copies of the first four chapters of the translation, and I, in turn, showed it to the playwright, Arnold Sundgaard, who had worked with Chekhov on themes for plays, and was co-author with him of the children's play Troublemaker-Doublemaker, which was part of the repertoire of the Chekhov Players. Consequently Sundgaard was very familiar with Chekhov's style. We agreed that the translation by Loyda and Bertensson was not as clear or as well-written as the original 1942 Version. As matters turned out, the translators, because of other commitments, were unable to complete the work.

Chekhov began to work again upon the material contained in the Russian edition of the 1942 Version, with Charles Leonard undertaking the editorial work. When, in 1969, I inquired from Mrs. Chekhov whether the English 1942 Version had been used in this work, Charles Leonard advised her that he had never seen the English version, and that Chekhov and he worked directly from the Russian text.

When I was in Dartington in 1961, Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst discussed with me the possibility of publishing the 1942 Version of To the Actor, which they,

and many others, considered a more comprehensive work than To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting, published by Harpers in 1953. It was decided not to try to do so at that time, because of the possibility of encountering copyright difficulties. It is to be hoped that some time in the future, this remarkable work -- revealing as it does many of Michael Chekhov's most original creative ideas -- will be published. He affirmed his faith in the book when, in 1946, he wrote to me about it: "Books, like human beings, have their own destiny."

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THE ACTOR IS THE THEATRE, BY DEIRDRE HURST du PREY

Even greater than the task of working on the book was the task which Chekhov assigned to me, that of taking verbatim shorthand notes of all the lessons and lectures he gave during the lifetime of the Chekhov Theatre Studio, from 1936-42. Even as early as 1935, while he was performing in New York with the Moscow Art Players, he gave lessons to Beatrice Straight and myself, with the help of Mme. M. Tamara Daykaranova, who translated for him, as Chekhov knew no English at that time. It was then that he discovered my ability to take shorthand notes, and he recognized the value of such records in relation to gathering material for his book.

When the Chekhov Theatre Studio was being organized at Dartington, Chekhov's grasp of and concern for every detail was astounding. Beatrice Straight and I worked closely with him and were assigned our separate tasks. She was to handle public relations, ^{assist in matters of policy} oversee the work being done on the theatre, the rehearsal rooms, the living quarters, etc., so that all would be ready for the students; while I was made Chekhov's personal secretary, and worked with

him on selecting group scenes, dialogues, soliloquies, etc., from plays, to be used in class work. This material was taken from Shakespeare and other great writers, and Chokhov even translated scenes with my help. I was to take shorthand notes of all the lessons and lectures given by him, and later to work on his book, To the Actor, when he would make use of such recorded material. I immediately began this latter task by recording the series of 18 Lessons to Teachers given by Chokhov from April to June 1936.

When the Studio opened on October 5, 1936, I began the work of taking notes of every class, lecture, rehearsal, recording everything that Chokhov said except when I was participating in the activities themselves. The problem of transcribing and typing the notes was a greater one, because I was taking the full acting course, acting in scenes, directing student scenes, assisting in teaching new students, and as one of the directors of the Studio dealing with problems concerning its artistic and social life, being present at auditions and all meetings involving policy. I mention this as it gives an idea of the degree of dedication which Chokhov required of all who were associated in creating "the theatre of the future," which he envisioned while working both at Dartington and at Ridgefield. I was the only one permitted to take such notes, with the exception of my sister Phyllis Hurst, who joined the Studio to assist me during 1937, and again at another time when the Studio was in Ridgefield. We worked together on the transcription of the notes, but the material was considered my responsibility and had to be worked on by me as I had the necessary understanding of the subject, being at the same time student and assistant to Chokhov. Several volumes of notes resulted from this close and fruitful collaboration.

All my shorthand notes relating to the artistic life of the Studio were retained by me, together with the volumes of transcribed material; although while Chokhov was alive they did not seem very relevant, but after his death and with the passing of time their importance became more evident. Likewise, my work on Chekhov's book, To the Actor, which officially ending with the disbanding of the Studio in 1942, went on for some time, and Chokhov kept me in touch with its development and with his ideas until his death.

At Dartington, Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst were eager to collect all the existing material on the history of the Chekhov Theatre Studio, to add to the material amassed in the archives there. Consequently, in 1961 I spent several weeks at Dartington, going over the collection, ascertaining the extent of the material, and estimating what was missing which could be supplied from my collection of the notes. At that time I left at Dartington some important archival material, together with a set of the twelve tape recordings of lectures which Michael Chokhov gave in Hollywood shortly before he died. The plan was for me to work on the un-transcribed notes in my possession so that they might be added to the existing collection and provide valuable primary source material and the elements of a history of the Chekhov Theatre Studio both in England and America, as unfortunately by this time the records of the Studio had become lost, with the exception of those in my possession and those at Dartington.

This proved to be a formidable task until I was able to free myself from my teaching activities in 1971, and devote myself to transcribing these notes which had never been touched, and checking and verifying those which had

been transcribed years before. All of this has resulted in the present collection of over 500 lessons and lectures, together with the appended supporting material, to be found in the manuscript which I have called The Actor in the Theatre, this being a quotation from one of Michael Chekhov's lectures, as well as a statement of his belief.

As for the part I played in this aspect of Chekhov's struggle to set forth in words his ideals and theories and a practical technique for achieving the theatre of the future which he dreamed of, I refer to Chekhov's own words. In a letter to me, February 21, 1946, he wrote: "My English is as bad as always, and it was only my confidence in you -- that you would understand me -- which gave me the freedom to express myself without any inner difficulties." And later that year, August 12th, 1946, in writing to tell me that the Russian edition of To the Actor had been published, he said: "Your name is in the Preface, where you are described as my helper in creating the book and as a qualified teacher of the Method." To have been chosen to be a helper to a great artist engaged in a task of such importance is a privilege accorded to few, and it is one for which I have always been deeply grateful. My association and work with Michael Chekhov enriched enormously my own life as artist and teacher.

- Deirdra Hurst du Proy