

Michael Chekhov

October 2, 1939

SPEECH
PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE

SPEECH:

Run-Through The Possessed:

Today the audience is accustomed to actors speaking as they do in everyday life, but we deny this. We will perhaps be scolded in the newspapers for our accurate speech and our intonations, but we must bring this as an example of one of the human abilities. If, as human beings, we have the ability to use high and low tones we must do so, otherwise we begin to resemble robots more and more. If we are criticised for using too much intonation, we must take it as an honor and realize that we will use human speech, with all its intonations, all its emphasis, and the audience will get accustomed to it in time.

Scene II:

There are so many entrances in this scene, and you take it as though it happens every day. You cannot awaken in yourself this astonishment when you see, for the first time, a new person, or a person like Stavrogin. You must try to awaken this astonishment in yourself by means of the feeling of truth when Verkhovenski enters instead of Stavrogin, who was announced. This is a moment of terrible shock. All the entrances were dead today, and this leads the audience astray because they will also feel that there is nothing unusual in

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such entrances. Realize what it would mean to see the entrance of someone who strikes you. Recall that slight movement to Verkhovenski. You can use this slight gesture, but don't try to show it too much. If it is psychologically sound, it will show of itself. Verkhovenski must help by feeling that there is a glass between him and everyone, and he must break this glass with his psychology and words.

Last time you got the ideas and the tempo, and now I want you to add the atmospheres to this. Keep constantly renewing the atmospheres. You have no right to forget anything that has been given to you.

If you will be attentive to everything that is going on during these last fine rehearsals, you will become very fine actors in the years to come. You must be active in these rehearsals.

PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE:

Gesture is such an expressive and strong thing that we must pay attention to it. If we don't, we will always be divided into two parts - one part of us will be dilettantes while the other part, our voices and psychology, will be growing. The gesture belongs to our fine type of education, just as our word with speech and psychology belongs to our type of work.

Verkhovenski must have, in the back of his mind, the

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desire to create gestures which are more expressive and original, or not to make gestures at all, but to have characteristic positions.

Verkhovenski is creating images which are sparkling in his mind and all around him. We must get the impression that he is a little mad. He must be mad himself to be able to say, "Don't you know that gods can be mad?" He makes everyone his listener. He has the objective to create, from the moment of his entrance. His objective is to create an ideal from the very beginning.

This creative quality in Verkhovenski goes through the whole play. This charm of madness stays with him always - as in the end of the meeting scene. We can call it his creative ability - he is possessed. When he is simple, sober, and dound, it is all right. It is not a question of horror at all - just the opposite - this madness sits in him and no one knows what will come next. This madness comes in different forms, in different scenes. This flood of madness runs through all the scenes. The madness is the hatred - if you will understand this hatred as madness.

The entrance of Verkhovenski causes a double reaction and surprise on the part of everyone because they do not expect Nicholas at the beginning, and even when he is expected, Verkhovenski arrives instead. This waiting for Nicholas is the first reaction, then the reaction to Verkhovenski, which is doubly strong because of its unexpectedness.

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Just as with the entrance of Verkhovenski, the announcement, "She is my wife," is taken too easily. It must have great weight, and everyone must find individually his place in this big psychological wheel. The result of making this big psychological gesture is that everyone is crushed. From this moment the whole line of Martha and Stavrogin must be developed, and the fairy tale scene will become quite different. During the process of making the big gesture, Martha is curtsying. Find the possibility to show both physically and psychologically this big gesture. When Verkhovenski moves and when Martha curtsies, Verkhovenski must be very careful because he expects that after this moment something may happen which will necessitate his saving the situation. Everyone is crushed by the weight, the silence of it, and this must be kept until after Lisa's, "Nicholas?"

When Lisa introduces her fiancé, she must prepare more the evil trick which she is going to show. We must feel that there is something behind it - this poisoned trick. At this moment she is similar to Verkhovenski - a desire for revenge - a certain hatred. It is not a light thing, or a dramatic thing - this moment is a tragic one, and in quick tempo - Dostoyevsky cannot stand slow tempo - it is tragic and quick. What pain she is suffering hurts, and he will suffer too, out of her pain she begins this trick. It is a feverish thing.

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Scene V:

This time the atmosphere was either lost or wrong. It was too earthy - there is no sense for Stavrogin to go and breathe this other world air. The mystery of the fairy tale is gone. This is essentially important because the whole meaning of this scene lies in the atmosphere, this powerful atmosphere of mystery, fairy tale, other world. You have to live in this world which is not concrete, which has different dimensions and feeling of time. Time and space are different. This feeling is very tangible, but it must be there, otherwise it is too concrete, and there is no reason for Stavrogin to come there.

For Stavrogin it is very important to diminish the number of gestures he makes. Perhaps one gesture, or none at all. The whole scene must be understood from this point of view. Exercise the following thing - when you are looking at Martha, imagine that she is receding from you and that she becomes a little spot, and then again comes nearer and becomes bigger than she is - getting like a flower or a strange, small creature with great eyes. More flexible in this scene. The bed is not a bed, it is like a cloud or a rock - certain imagination must help you during this scene. Stavrogin sometimes speaks too concretely - "King Abala" must be spoken as a breath which he does not hear himself - a subconscious thing. When he starts the evil fairy tale, it must be beautifully merged

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with Martha's. We must be confused as to who is speaking, then it will be a real imagination which comes out of his soul. But when it is too concrete, there is no mystery, no psychological unhappiness and catastrophe. Martha must discard all unnecessary pauses because if you drag the scene out, it will immediately become sentimental.

There are two sentences in the whole play when Stavrogin says, "I don't need anyone," and "I will get out of this by myself," - they can be said in different ways, but that is his tragedy, his unhappiness, his "spider." These sentences are most important. This is the "spider" and because of it, he cannot get help from anyone.

Scene VII:

When Stavrogin says, "Are you with Verkhovenski?", this is a question for him. He must be more astonished and more powerful. This leads to the qualities of contempt that follow.

Scene VIII:

There must be a certain humor, a certain irony in the scene with Drosdov. He is still too important for Stavrogin - he should be for him a fly, nothing more, although Stavrogin gets angry with him later. In his presence he is almost laughing. Drosdov is in constant fear and hatred. He moves slowly but gathering power and threatening.

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For Kirilov, this is one of the moments of inspiration - a spark. It must be another facet of the same idea which leads him to the moment of ecstasy. He gets up slowly, so that we hardly notice that he is moving - it is as though a continuation of his thoughts. He must make the circle clearer, bigger - like a philosopher, he walks always on the same spot and ruins the carpet.

Verkhovenski holds his joy and pleasure and activity until the moment when he says, "Let's go." It must be a continuation of the joy which grows.

Meeting scene:

The Chairman's objective is to calm everyone and to say what his idea is. He must speak to individuals and not forget the Theorist, who lifts his finger a little higher than usual. When Verkhovenski speaks about nature, it is absolutely mechanical - he has no sympathy with nature - he hates nature.

When Shatov enters, the reaction must be just as sharp as the reaction to the entrance of Verkhovenski. Everyone thinks that the next speaker is going to speak against him personally - this is always true of such intellectual meetings and chaotic people. No one expects Shatov, and even physically they go from him, and give him distance which will be needed later on, so that he feels around him a certain desert, and this will give him a fine impulse. He will feel that, "I am already alone." All his life he has sought the

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person with whom he could collaborate, and that was Stavrogin. When he comes to this meeting of the organization and says, "I demand the right to speak," his dreadful destiny is there.

Verkhovenski becomes angry with Shatov - he must not be controlled or restrained. But he must avoid shouting. To do this try to draw a plan like an architect - try to see the plan, the blue print, and describe it. He must remain sitting when he introduces Shatov - the quality of irony.

In dealing with audience reactions, the usual trick is to go on speaking during the audience's reaction, but remember where the noise starts and when the noise finishes, repeat the whole piece as if nothing had happened. Whether it is a little scene or a powerful scene, this is the only trick...simply go on and then repeat, but only if you hear that you were not heard. If it happens in a pause, then hold the pause.

Scene XI:

Lisa must take this dialogue about running away, very lightly. If you speak this part too slowly and heavily and with too many pauses, we do not have the impression of the revolution. Perhaps this is the lightest moment in the whole play - flowing words. Take it easier and don't hurry. On "I will tell you the whole truth," the heavy part begins. The only significance up to this point is that she wants to run away.

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Scene XII:

Verkhovenski's last speech must be spoken more mechanically, more dead. Hold the letter in your hand without having any interest in it.

Scene XIV:

Stavrogin should try to avoid making any gestures - that would be the ideal case because the whole play, and especially Stavrogin's part is concentrated on the spirit so each movement disturbs and distracts the audience. Only the Stranger has the right to make gestures because Stavrogin is under him, and he is above and over him; so bodily he must be fiercer than Stavrogin. The Stranger speaks with tremendous erudition and wisdom. Our idea for this play is that it must sound very modern. The Stranger is an absolutely modern man and the audience must feel that this is a man whom they might meet anywhere and everywhere in the theatre and in life. He plays with these thoughts quite freely and because it is easy and light, it is more persuasive and it affects us. When you say, "They rejected Christ..." this is the most beautiful sentence and must be spoken without any mystery, and therefore, it becomes the most mysterious. He knows Christ so well that he has the right to speak in this way about him.

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