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MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S EIGHTH CLASS FOR PROFESSIONAL ACTORS

"THE ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR"

MEANS OF APPROACHING THE PLAY
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INDIVIDUALITY
COLLABORATION OF AUTHOR, ACTOR, AND DIRECTOR

Moscow Art Theatre
Hamlet
Romeo and Juliet
Bernard Shaw

MEANS OF APPROACHING THE PLAY:

To be able to go on with our sketch, we must investigate another point which will lead us to the next series of rehearsals. There is one very interesting process in human beings, and in actors especially, which can be used not only when we are preparing a part, but also by the director as well. It seems to me that it simplifies considerably the process of finding the part, on the one hand, and on the other how to convey to the actors the director's ideas without speaking or philosophising too much.

This often takes place, and it was particularly true in the Moscow Art Theatre. We were sitting at the table for months and months, speaking about our parts and our characters, and becoming very clever and wise about the play, but none of us could begin to act! Then came the most difficult

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moment, the most difficult period, when we stopped talking and began to work, and we saw that nothing had come from all our analyzing of the part and the play. Our intellectual approach always killed the desire and ability to act until after several difficult days, when we remembered that we were actors.

But there is a means of approaching the play and the part without speaking too much. For the initial part of the work it is definitely good; I have tried it and it has been successful, but how long it can be preserved during the process of rehearsal is a different question. The point is the following one. We can easily imagine it by shutting one eye, as it were, but what shall we see? We will see that we are obliged to do two things on the stage, and these things include everything in the whole of acting. One thing is, we have always to do something, whether outwardly moving and speaking, or by having an objective, which means we are inwardly moving towards our aim. In either case, it is always a movement - either visible or invisible. The second part of this all-inclusive thing is how we do it. If we really try, in the initial period of our work, to grasp the part and the play from the point of view of "what" has been done, and "how" it has been done, then we have everything.

WILL, OR ACTION AND QUALITIES, OR FEELINGS:

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If, for instance, I ask you to take a chair and place it on a certain place, that is doing or "what" I am doing. Now the question remains, "how" do I do it? All the "how's" imaginable can be interpreted as qualities of my doing, of my acting. I can do it with the quality of "care" - and what is that if it is not acting? Simple, but complete acting. I am doing something with a certain quality. You may say to yourself, for instance, no feelings, no philosophy, no psychology or anything of that sort, only the chosen business with the chosen qualities. The result will be that you will awaken the most precious thing in the actor's profession - your feelings. You cannot move the chair with the quality of "care," without awakening something inside you. You can do everything, with all qualities. Whatever name you care to give it, it can become a quality. This is an important key to acting, and with it everything becomes simple.

Let us take the example of Hamlet and Horatio on the castle tower, waiting for the ghost to appear. What is Hamlet doing? He is projecting his attention in one way. He can project his being with the quality of "anxiety" and immediately there will be something - the first stone on which you can base other things. The director can tell you to combine two qualities - "anxiety" and "warmth", for instance. Everything becomes possible. You will come to more and more complicated things, and, from the actor's point of

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view, the part can be prepared very quickly as a result. But really prepared, and not empty clichés which are always following us.

Secondly, the simple action, and the simple quality will appeal to our utmost inner life, as we are not touching our feelings first, we are not tearing our soul to pieces to find our feelings, which cannot be found in that way. When the actor cannot find his feelings - for instance, tender love for a child - if he tells the director that he has never had a child, the director can answer him that everyone can give the quality of tenderness and love to his actions.

Simultaneously we take the action of moving the chair with the quality of "care". Neither is the result, they are only the springboard for awakening the two main things which actors must always use to the fullest extent - our will, or action, and our feelings. For action we must just choose what to do or the action, and for the future feelings, we must choose how to do it, or the quality.

Question: Suppose you choose one of Hamlet's soliloquies. Does the quality come from what you are doing?

Answer: It is one thing actually. What you are doing, and the quality with which you are doing it is actually one thing upon which you agree. The action never dictates the quality, nor the quality the action - it is a unit.

Question: Let us take Hamlet's soliloquy: "But now I am

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alone." How he avenges his father's death is colored by certain feelings. His action is to avenge his father's death, but with certain qualities or "how's".

Answer: My aim was to simplify even the most complicated things, and, therefore, I have spoken about the action as a gesture.

Question: In Juliet's speech, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou?", let us say her action is to pierce the distance, to find him, and her quality is one of "yearning". Would her action be to speak to someone with the quality of yearning, on top of which you would add all the other things?

Answer: Right. But now let us add something. If we describe what our action is, then we are describing our action by speaking about it. If the same is true with the qualities, then we are back with the Moscow Art Theatre and speaking without end! Therefore, the whole complicated business of Juliet is to be found out "gropingly," for which we don't need anything but the actor's talent. When the actor says, "I am groping," before she knows all the actions, then such complicated actions as Juliet's has to be simplified to the degree where the actor can show it, with simple physical gestures - with hands, arms, and body - then we are at the right point.

Nothing can be simpler or more appealing to us as actors. So Juliet in this moment is "groping," but with

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which quality? The quality of "longing". Now do the same gesture but with the quality of longing in your fingers, hands, arms, and body. When you have whatever psychology you choose, and you decide to turn it into a simple physical gesture with a certain quality, then you have the basis for developing your part, and for awakening your own emotional life and will impulses. Your creative imagination and everything will add to it until you become inspired, when everything goes, and you are simply acting.

ATMOSPHERE:

Question: I have wanted to ask you for some time about the question of atmosphere. I have seen very good actors led into a very bad thing - what I would call playing the mood, that is playing the result in terms of the mood. For ten or twenty minutes we do not see what the actor is doing, we only see him sending out a certain mood. Many good actors are betrayed into this through a lack of action. How can that be avoided?

Answer: First of all, I must answer that in the whole Method which we are exploring, you will not find a single place in which we appeal to the feelings, because it is the most dangerous, treacherous point. As soon as we try to appeal to our feelings, we are out of control. We lose our action and flounder in the mood, and begin to lie more and more. All the points we have spoken of are only the ways to the feelings, but we never call directly on the feelings themselves. I have tried

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to explain that we have to imagine the atmosphere around us filled with certain things. That saves us from squeezing the feelings. For instance, if we imagine the air of a cathedral - the air filled with awe - of course our feelings will react to this.

Question: I don't believe the atmosphere can be characterized. It comes from one's relationship to the object or person. For instance, the relationship of this class to Michael Chekhov is an atmosphere. That atmosphere has already changed, and my attitude became quite different to that of anybody else in the class - it became a personal thing, an individual thing.

Question: In my opinion the atmosphere is the feeling one gets, which may be an entirely individual adjustment to, let us say, the moonlight, or the garden, the balcony and so on. You don't have the same feeling as you would in the daylight on the beach. If you use the atmosphere with the action, then you can't be involved in a mood. You have your action which does not become static, and you are expressing yourself in action. For instance, each of us has a reaction to the night, but it is not the same.

Question: I think we are confusing two things - acting, and our own personal feelings. If we are given a situation and an atmosphere, and we decide that we are going to work for an atmosphere of "awe," what I feel is not important; I only have to work for the atmosphere.

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Question: Does it mean that you should not have your individual reactions? Where is the difficulty?

Question: What can we get from the generalized atmosphere, rather than from the particular character and his particular reactions? You say, for instance, that there is a general atmosphere of the tavern in the moonlight. What can we get from that which is different from the individual reaction?

Answer: The atmosphere, in the way that we have spoken of it, has to be imagined as a thing existing objectively.

First of all, we must forget ourselves - whether we individually experience the awe of the cathedral or not is not important. The important thing is the imagination we have of the play in which this moment takes place. Different characters come into this cathedral - one experiences awe, another is indifferent, while the third becomes cynical, let us say. That is the theme of the play - a cynical character in the atmosphere of awe - otherwise the cynicism would not mean anything.

Question: Does that not mean that you are taking a cliché when you say that the cathedral is awesome, or the moonlight romantic?

Answer: We can take many examples. If we have a cathedral on the stage, the atmosphere will depend upon the play, and what is going on. Remember Murder in the Cathedral, and its atmosphere. I have used the cathedral, and the catastrophe

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on the street, simply as examples, but there are no clichés in our understanding of atmosphere. We must realize that whether we are trying to identify the atmosphere in everyday life or in a play, we must find it from the life situation, or the play quite objectively.

Now let us imagine the cathedral with the atmosphere of awe. Whether I become cynical or full of awe, that is my personal business, but as soon as I act a part in a play in which the director wants the atmosphere of awe, I have to imagine it because I am taking part in the play. Even if I have the character of a cynic, I must still imagine it, because otherwise I do not know what to do in the play.

Question: Does the actor have to create the atmosphere as any particular character?

Answer: Let us say that we have decided to create the atmosphere of awe which is written in the play. We have to do it by our means of imagining the air around us filled with the atmosphere. Then the feeling thing happens. The more you grow into your character, the more you react to this atmosphere as a character, and then we have just what the author wants. He combines so many characters in the one atmosphere of a scene, an act, or the whole play. But whether you, as a character, are cynical towards the atmosphere of awe, or are sympathetic to it, you must accept it, otherwise you will be out of the style of the play, or you will not belong to the scene.

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Question: Suppose you are a cynical character and the director has told you that the atmosphere is one of awe, what happens to your character?

Answer: I react as the character would react, but in order to react to something, there must be something to react upon. If there is no atmosphere of awe for me, because I am a cynical character, then I am not taking part in the play. I will tell you later what the order of work is.

Question: Do you mean that the atmosphere is created by the play, and is the result of the play?

ORDER OF WORK - ATMOSPHERE - GESTURE WITH QUALITIES - CHARACTERIZATION:

Answer: I would suggest that we drop the question of where the atmosphere comes from, because that will lead us to psychological analysis which will not be of any use to us. Your actor's intuition accepts, for instance, the atmosphere of a very dirty tavern in our scene. We have the means in our actor's souls to grasp intuitively the atmosphere, then we have the means to imagine this atmosphere around us, and that is all we need. Simultaneously we have to produce the gestures with qualities, and the characterization. So we have the order: 1. Atmosphere. 2. Gesture with qualities. 3. Characterization - and the whole composition is there in the simplest way.

Of course, there is an even simpler way, which is

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to use clichés but we deny this, because clichés close the actor's soul rather than open it. But to find the way to these vivid, alive and original things we have to do something - we have to sacrifice our energy.

There are two ways - one is a long one which was developed in the Moscow Art Theatre to the finest degree - that was analysis. Of course, they acted well in the long run, but this analysis was almost a disease. The other way is the one we are speaking about - to simplify things without losing anything. To make a gesture we use everything - our will. By applying the qualities we awaken our feelings. By creating the atmosphere, we envelope the play in one thing, which is the soul of the play, and by this we create a new, ingenious approach to the play. The actors will feel much freer to express themselves, than to be under the pressure of clichés, or to be pierced by intellectual speculations which are clever, but which are detrimental to acting.

The atmosphere is something which belongs more to the play or the scene, and the personal reaction of the character belongs to the character, so that the character reacting to the atmosphere is the character in the play. The character who does not create the atmosphere or react to it, is a strange body in the play. For instance, let us say you must create the atmosphere of fear, and react to it personally. You may tell the director that you are fearless, and you have the

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right to say so as a private person when you are not acting, but since you are an actor - whether fearless or not as an individual - it has no connection with our profession. As actors, we have to create the fear around us, on order to be able to act the play. So at the same time that we are acting, we have to sacrifice our own personality.

TRANSFORMED FEELINGS:

In this connection I mentioned something in our first talk, and I will now remind you of it. We might say that when we feel something on the stage it is our own feeling, and that no one gives it to us. But that is not quite so. Of course, we feel things, but there are two different realms in which there are two different kinds of feelings. In one realm there are the feelings which we awaken by the "death of the grandfather" which we have spoken about. The pain of your grandfather's death may be still fresh, but it is personal, and you cannot act it. Of course, it might help you if you were acting a sad part. But there is another realm of feelings which come from a certain subconscious realm of our life, and they have come through absolutely transformed.

Through our subconscious we have experienced all the feelings. So if we try to apply the fresh feeling which we are living with now, it could be dangerous even for our physical nerves. But if we apply the transformed feelings which have gone through a complicated process, then we cannot

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be harmed by them, because these feelings are in us and are us.

When we know that we are acting well, we are astonished by our own acting - we might ask, from where do I know this? I have never experienced it before. The reaction to the atmosphere means to react to it. Personally we have the right to say we have no reaction to the awe of the cathedral, but as soon as we are actors, we must have it. For instance, if I am a cynical person, I will remain so, often on purpose, because in our everyday personality we are just as stiff as a chair. In our creative individuality there are both possibilities. There are limitless things there because we are able in our creative spirit to combine things which we cannot even think of combining in our everyday life. For instance, let us say I am a religious person and an atheist - it is difficult to imagine such a person but in this other realm there are both. Indescribable beauty of no time or space, everything together in the realm of the transformed feelings.

Question: What distinguishes these things from a cliché?

Answer: I think we can imagine clichés as follows: Clichés exist only in the personal feeling life, and not in the transformed feelings where there are no clichés because there is complete freedom. Clichés are necessary because we are very limited persons, so we appeal to them as the easiest way, but as soon as we can penetrate into the realm of trans-

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formed feelings we do not need them. Of course, when you speak of a religious person or an atheist, if you will consider your intellectual conception of them you will see that it is a cliché.

Our intellect is a series of subtle or crude clichés, but in our creative spirit are concepts of transformed imaginings, transformed feelings and will impulses. Since they are transformed and we have found an approach to them, and the whole Method as I understand it is the way to open the door to this world of transformed things - then we do not need clichés. Of course, our body will force us to use clichés which are sitting here and there in us, but we have to gradually fight free of them.

Question: It should be a continuous process, as opposed to clichés which are always fixed and stiff things.

Answer: Yes. The gesture is always a continuous process. Clichés are stiff things, while the other realm is one of endless, continuous process. By transformed I mean transformed to our life. For instance, you have experienced something very pleasant, and you are still very happy about it. It is not yet transformed, but you go to bed and forget it perhaps. Then suddenly you, as a person, find new abilities in you. Where do they come from? They come from this happiness, this joy.

Question: Is it transformed because the emotion is different from what it was before?

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TWO STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS:

Answer: It changed when it became unconscious. This process does not depend on us. Every moment something is disappearing and transforming. It transforms in the sense that we become objective about it - we are free from it. When I am very tortured by someone or something, I am not objective about it - it is me, me, me. When I forget it, the same pain becomes richer and I am objective about it. I can use it in my part. The real good actor must act fully and completely, having laughter and tears and at the same time be so objective that you can absolutely see what your sister is doing in the first row of seats. That is real freedom on the stage.

When we are possessed by the part and almost kill our partners and break chairs, etc., then we are not free, and it is not art but hysterics. At one time in Russia we thought that if we were acting we must forget everything else. Of course, it was wrong. Then some of our actors came to the point where they discovered that real acting was when we could act and be filled with feelings, and yet be able to make jokes with our partners - two consciousnesses.

CHARACTERIZATION:

Question: I want to ask about characterization and where to find things for characterization. When you are searching for characteristic material, do you try to choose things from

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people you know well?

Answer: Of course, you can use persons around you as suggestions, but better still you can use your own imagination, and then you will get suggestions - a series of suggestions from which you can choose, or merge them, or combine them, and simultaneously you can observe your friends or enemies and choose from their characterizations.

Question: I tried to choose a quality of a person whom I knew, in relation to a character, but what got in my way was my own feelings about the person. It was a quality of will which I did not like, but I felt it was right to use in a characterization, and in the psychological gesture of the character, but I could not free myself from my personal feelings about the person.

Answer: This is only a question of developing this objectivity I spoke about, but it will come after certain means have been applied. You will become more and more objective about it, and on the other hand, the power of concentration will lead you to become free from personal feelings. Then the moment will come when your personal connections will be less significant and will not disturb you.

Question: You were speaking about the transformation taking place long after the thing may have happened. When you are portraying a part which is completely foreign to you, for instance, you must draw upon your conception of it and the

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picture of the part in the play. As an example: there was a play called "Mulatto," the premis of which was that the boy was a mulatto, but rebelled against it. One time a boy from Texas played the part with great racial prejudice - the lines can be motivated either way - but instead of subjectively placing himself in the author's hands, the actor played his own personal idea of it and ruined the play, but gave a very good performance.

THE CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY - THE HIGHER INDIVIDUALITY:

Answer: That is an interesting problem because it is just the problem of our creative individuality. Our creative individuality has a certain world outlook, and this world outlook - if it is the creative individuality and not your own political convictions - if it is the voice of your creative individuality, then it is the most valuable thing, your individual conception.

Perhaps this example you have given was not a very high example of the creative individuality, but for instance, if the actor becomes absolutely objective, it might seem theoretically that this objectivity increases to the highest degree, but will lose the individual point of view. But quite the opposite is true, because it is the world of the creative spirit, which is absolutely different from our usual conception of a human being. Therefore, the more objective we are as artists, the more freedom the individual has to interpret

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the character this way or that. The less objective we are, the more chained to our everyday feelings we are, and the less our creative individuality can speak.

From this mistake in approaching the play, or the part, from purely personal will impulses or ideas, comes the thought that I must produce Shakespeare's Hamlet - I cannot have any idea of his Hamlet, but only my own conception of it. To have that is the only thing which the audience wants to see, whether it knows it or not. Because we appreciate all the old masters, not for the blue and the green colors and the figures, but because we see in Raphael that which we cannot find in Rembrandt.

COLLABORATION OF AUTHOR, ACTOR, AND DIRECTOR:

Question: Does the actor bear that relationship to the play? If so, where does the author come in?

Answer: It is a combination. Bernard Shaw is an author who has no idea of the theatre. He thinks that he alone exists in the whole world, and if he has imagined and written a line in a certain way, it must be done only that way. But strangely enough, he always interferes with the directing, and does such things! It is so tasteless, from the point of view of the theatre. Shaw has a concept of his play, the actor has another, and the director still another.

In the realm of the creative theatre nothing can be

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found which cannot be merged into another thing. For instance, if Bernard Shaw and the actor would merge, their imaginations, Bernard Shaw would be grateful to the actor, because he would explain something to him. Just so with the actor. If the actor is open to Bernard Shaw, he will get so many inspirations from him, and the performance will be Bernard Shaw's interpretation, plus the actor's interpretation. But if one submits to the other, it is wrong.

If the actor is really using the higher individuality, the creative individuality, then he will need the author, and while accepting him, will transform him. Of course, we are all bound by our racial characteristics which influence our acting very much, but still there are always higher and higher points of view, and in this realm the higher it is the less it is connected with the binding racial characteristics.

We have spoken some days ago about the many gestures which foreigners make. But if I am acting an Englishman, I must use the English manner of moving my hands and arms. I must stop being a Russian and be free to perform an Englishman. But how can I get to this point? I must imagine the play long enough to get rid of my Russian reaction. It is not at all the question of substituting this hatred for some other kind of hatred, for example. No. I must look at the character in my imagination so long that it will be purified, and will become more and more artistic by the process of ima-

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gining, which is art. Then the moment will come when you will be free from anything you have to take from below, and things will come from other sources and you will see that it is objectively true. You will understand this kind of objective hatred, for instance. Again we must appeal to this region of the transformed things.

Question: That is why you say that an actor has to be a special kind of person, who can feel all these different things.

Answer: Every actor knows that there is a certain different manner of knowing things than the usual way. It has to be cultivated, so that it will become more important for the actor than the usual manner.