

Michael Chekhov

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CREATING THE INNER LIFE OF THE CHARACTER
THE "I AM" OF THE CHARACTER

The Possessed - A Play in Fifteen Scenes by George Shdanoff
(Based on ideas from Dostoyevsky's writings, especially on his novel, The Possessed)

Mr. Chekhov said that having had a picture from Mr. Somoff of the reality behind the play, The Possessed, this would give us the possibility of approaching the play more deeply, but he also suggested that we try to find another approach to the problem, from the inside, as actors and artists with a developed imagination. This is our professional approach. In the description of characters to follow, he urged everyone to use the powers of his imagination by trying to project the characters onto the stage, and to imagine them acting there. This would enable us to see the inner life of the characters. - the "I Am."

CREATING THE UNDEFINABLE, THE INDIVIDUALITY OF THE CHARACTER:

Imagine Shatov - what face would appear before your mind's eye if you were able to penetrate into Shatov's soul? You would see there an image which Shatov and all the other Shatovs in the world have - the image of a man, a human being. Shatov received the gift from above to have the vision of a man, of this precious thing which each of us has inwardly, but unfortunately each of us does not realize our individuality.

In our school we call it the "I Am."

THE "I AM":

Shatov is definitely a clairvoyant person for seeing this "I Am" in everyone. There is nothing more precious for Shatov than the "I Am" in everybody, and he sees first of all and perhaps sees only, the personality before him. He judges everyone from the point of view of whether he is a man or not, and what kind of a man. This thing burns in his eyes, and is expressed in his whole figure. He is seeking for individuals,

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for living beings, for the "I Am" in everyone and in himself. He is too honest and too great to think of himself, he actually despises himself because he looks for society and for human lives.

For Shatov, society is not something vague like a flock or a mass, it is unlimited space, physical and spiritual, in which everywhere are sparks of individuals. When he approaches Stavrogin, he sees in him a great individual, which is not the right one. He sees Verkhovenski and says, "In him I don't see any individual." This is his torture - he hates Verkhovonski, not only because of his wrong ideas, but because he cannot see in him a person, a man.

Shatov is in love with human beings, and he has visions and ideals. He feels concretely that the hand he shakes is only the manifestation of something which is deeper and deeper, in the very depths of the person - another "I Am," another individuality which cannot be killed. Who but Shatov could live with Kirilov? No one, because no one else has this tremendous feeling and vision for human beings which Shatov has. He sees Kirilov as another individual who is ill, who needs help and warmth. For Shatov he is not a mad man but an ill "I Am." Shatov will never lose his admiration before Kirilov's existence, before his "I Am," before his right to live and to suffer and to be glad.

As he sees the "I Am" in everyone, Shatov guesses

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that the theories of the materialistic scientists of the time, such as Darwin, are wrong. He sees another thing - something so great, so extended in the whole universe, and he cannot think or feel other than if such universal greatness exists. Of course, we are not only the small, stupid human beings walking on the earth; there is something greater, and this greater thing is what humanity calls God, and which humanity has even spoiled by using the name of God.

Shatov purifies this name - he knows that from above and not from any small amoeba can the "I Am" be created. Only from above - that is his general feeling towards the power and wisdom which has created these "I Ams." But this is not all - in addition to having a very sharp insight for this certain thing which we call "I Am," the personality or the individuality. Shatov and all the Shatovs understand another thing, they understand that Christ is not a God in general, at all. Christ is an individuality - Christ is a personality - Christ is the highest "I Am" in the whole Universe - if the whole Universe could pronounce "I Am" that would be the voice of Christ himself.

Shatov is able to imagine what inner state must have been there in the body of Jesus, which gave him the right to speak the words: "I am the light of the world." He understood that Christ is "I Am" and this cosmic "I Am" should be in every human "I Am" and then will arise the real religion.

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The philosophers throughout the ages who have discussed vaguely the existence of God are not dangerous for Shatov, because he has a very clear eye for the "I Am." When he speaks about Christ he speaks with the same feeling as when he speaks about another "I Am," but increased a million times. Kirillov and Christ are for Shatov the same nature because both are "I Am's." Christ is the cosmic "I Am," and Kirillov the earthly "I Am," but they are of the same nature. This is the basis on which Shatov stands and no one can dislodge him.

Now let us look into the soul of Verkhovenski. What do we see there? We see that Verkhovenski has beautiful spectacles, but no eyes. He cannot see the life - he only sees through his spiritual spectacles all the details and fine manifestations of life but not the life itself. That is his spiritual face - he is not only a scoundrel and a murderer - he really sees. He sees manifestations of nature, of human society, of everything whether small or big, but if he looks at a tree in the spring, for instance, he sees that the tree is getting bigger and bigger and that its color changes and that spring brings a certain metamorphosis on the earth - he sees just as Shatov sees, but he does not see why it grows, what changes it, what power.

Through his spectacles Verkhovenski sees that there is a process of growing which can be calculated, fixed and

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understood, as a manifestation of the life, while another person, who is not a Verkhovenski, would say he feels the life which comes. Just as when I move my arm, I know that it is my life which moves it, so there is a thing which moves the leaves, opens them, makes them become red and fall down.

Verkhovenski is not able to see the life, therefore, everything around him is bereft of life - everything can be taken with his hands. Shatov can and must be taken with his hands and guns. His approach to life is that when he sees the manifestation of life and begins to calculate, he becomes a very interesting system of thoughts and figures, and these figures are everything for him. His eyes, his ears, his consciousness, his heart, his gun - these things are everything for him. He sees clairvoyantly only one side of the life - only the manifestation, but not the life itself. He sees that there is a brain sitting in the head and this brain produces thoughts just as a flower produces fragrance.

Verkhovenski does not see the "I Am" which Shatov sees, and only sees the body - the human body, the body of society, the manifestation of life and nothing beyond it. He thinks that these manifestations of life can be changed, guided, forced, just as a plant can be - when a man produces wrong things by means of his brain, it must be changed. If it can't be changed, it must be destroyed, and that is all.

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Shatov sees the "I Am" as the most precious thing in the whole world, and he connects it with the cosmic "I Am" personality and individuality of Christ - Verkhovenski sees the manifestation of life and believes that everything, if it can be grasped, can be changed.

Now let us look at Stavrogin's soul - it is absolutely empty. The emptiness which Stavrogin experiences is not the emptiness of a small being - it is the emptiness of a great spirit, therefore, he feels himself extended and expanded over the whole cosmic space, but still he is empty. He tries to fill himself with certain content - whether it is God, or Verkhovenski's ideas, or the strange child Marthe - he would say yes to anything if it could fill this emptiness which makes him so aimlessly wandering. He is looking and seeking for certain content.

This big emptiness is Stavrogin's "I" - he looks around everywhere at visible and invisible things with this emptiness - he does not approach material things with the feeling that he knows, for instance, that this is a chair. He approaches it with emptiness and with the terrific torturing feeling, "I am told that it is a chair, but I don't understand it, I don't know that it is so." Everything for him is a new thing. He approaches the chair with his whole big emptiness and embraces it, keeps it inside of him and says, "No, it is not."

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Then again a great terrific emptiness comes upon Stavrogin, he approaches Verkhovenski and takes him into his soul, otherwise he would not be able to pronounce the soliloquy in the "nightmare scene" - he does accept him and hears what he says to him, but it is a painful experience to have Verkhovenski inside of his emptiness, so painful that he knows something must be wrong, so he throws him away. But one thing remains in his soul after he has kept Verkhovenski in him for a time, he finds a certain thing which corresponds to his own emptiness - it is a certain possibility to become an "I Am" because Verkhovenski's idol is something which can awaken in this big emptiness a certain "I Am" - "I am the Idol." Why not? He wants to be an "I Am" but he does not know how. Verkhovenski says to him, "You are our Idol - our I Am."

But being so empty and so big in his emptiness, Stavrogin feels that this "I Am" is not what he is looking for, and he cannot live with it. He knows that he will always be smaller than he could be because now his emptiness embraces everything, the whole world. So he denies Verkhovenski's "I Am." Then he approaches Shatov and takes him into his soul, and he finds there is something which attracts him immensely - he loves Shatov, that is why he comes to him, but it is the idea of religion which repulses him. It is something which he cannot accept, because religion seems to him to come from outside as a series of laws and commandments, therefore, he

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cannot accept it. He remains empty because he cannot accept the wrong kind of "I Am," and he cannot accept Shatov's kind because of the laws in the form of religion coming from the outside.

Stavrogin does not see in Shatov's point of view the human "I Am." He does not see it because he has his own "I Am" already and does not recognize it. He has in this great emptiness - which is a kind of clairvoyance which enables him to approach everything and to say, "I don't know but I must experience." Such a small, terrible, "I Am" which sits in him like a spider which sucks his blood, and this tiny "I Am" he carries with him his whole life. This little spiritual spider forces him to protest against Shatov's earthy human "I Am" because his spider wants to exist and to live, and that is why he is so superior with everyone because this spider commands him; why he neglects everyone and everything; Lisa, Shatov, Verkhovenski, Martha, his mother, everyone, because this spider whispers to him: "Let me live because I am so happy to live." But at the same time he cannot see this spider within him. When he comes to the Stranger with his great emptiness and opens himself, he gets the first general feeling of something which is very warm, just as in Shatov's soul.

So within the frames of our play we see Stavrogin as the very interesting and difficult human type. We see him extended through the whole world with his emptiness - this

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emptiness which is his "I" and the little spider which is his "I Am," which sits in him and does not allow him to approach the right things.

What is Lisa? If you will keep these four powers in your imagination, you will see that this composition of powers holds the whole play together. If you listen to the wind in the autumn, you will hear in it a note of such painful sorrow - it never finds the solution of itself - it is flying and crying, and nothing can stop this pain in the nature. A restless spirit - a spirit which has no limitations, which flies everywhere and cannot stop, cannot find the solution, cannot be comforted. Now turn this wind to the image of fire, and you will get the archetypal of Lisa - fire which is blown by the winds with noise, tremendous crying, and at the same time tremendous warmth.

What is she seeking? For something, or somebody, which can accomplish her, which will stop her crying life. She is not able to help anyone, she needs help. Therefore, she never helps Stavrogin although she could give him so much warmth and feminine feelings, she could accomplish and fill the emptiness of Stavrogin, and he could give shape to this wind-fire and include her in his being if the spider could be killed, and she could kill it. She needs help and he needs help, and they do not give it. She always tries to take more and more beings into her crying, flying over the whole world.

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She takes them, and they disappear, and she is looking for others for the same purpose. Nothing can help her.

If Shatov could plunge into Lisa's soul and say, "I Am," she would become a real human being. But as she has no basis on which to stand - as fire and air, she burns everything and everyone around her - she burns Stavrogin, she burns Drozdov and herself, and when she disappears from the play, there is no end - this figure goes away and disappears in what? Again into this crying, flying over the earth - fire - earth. Lisa can be described as the crying beauty which everyone of us has but in a small degree - everyone has this autumn mood and fire. But Lisa incorporates it as fire, as air, as a human tragic beauty.

If you will try to imagine these four figures together, you will see how they spark, how the qualities of Shatov are so complete in comparison with Verkhovenski, and how Verkhovenski's qualities are relieved by the comparison. How Shatov and Lisa complement each other. If you will see the characters with the artist-actor's clairvoyant eyes, and really see what their main line is, what their spine is, how they look after we look at them with the decision to see the inner spring of all these things, who is Stavrogin? A human being with a spider inside him. Who is Shatov? A human being with one hand lifted up to the greater individual, himself.

Who is Verkhovenski? He is a grating sound, a human

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being who is not a human being - he is possessed. And who possesses him? The tremendous archetypal of superman under-human brain and nothing more. Clairvoyantly we would say that when Verkhovenski appears, it is a construction which resembles the human brain and nothing more - no legs, no feet, no heart, nothing but the imitation of a brain walking among people. It is not a human being.

Who is Lisa? She is also not a human being, in the sense that she is a superhuman being but not perfect. She is looking for incorporations, she needs another to become incorporated. She is crying for incorporation, she is not yet on the earth, she is still in the forests, fields, and the ocean. She can take different forms, but unlike Undine, she cannot keep them. She is always in movement.

Perhaps I made a mistake, at the beginning of our school, when I told the students not to approach their work with understanding, but rather with the imagination. This mistake occurred because I did not understand the terms, - I am only against understanding with Verkhovenski's brain, with his kind of thinking. For instance, you can read many books about King Lear, but it will not give you anything as an actor or an artist because that is Verkhovenski's approach - to describe the manifestations of life, but not life.

I never meant to say don't understand the character, but simply flounder in the atmosphere - but I tried to warn

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you against the means with which you must understand. I asked you to see at the same time you understood. It is absolutely necessary to understand the history, the epoch of the play. But if we only understand it with Vorkhoven-ski's brain, it will not affect our artistic nature. When I say don't work intellectually on the play, I don't mean don't understand the part - you must understand the part to the depths but understand it with your wisdom, wisdom which is deeper, which embraced more than reason and intellect.

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