

Michael Chekhov

July 8, 1937

LIFE IN OUR WORK
FIRE - FEELING - TEMPERAMENT
OUR METHOD AWAKENS FEELINGS
JUSTIFY THE ACTOR'S PROFESSION
THE ACTOR'S SACRIFICE
SIGNIFICANCE OF COSTUME AND MAKE-UP

The necessity for Developing "Life" in Our Work (advice given after a Dress Rehearsal of The Golden Steed):

What I am going to tell you about is the aim which we must try to reach throughout our whole school work; but we must become attentive to it now. By continuously paying attention to this point, you will find that it will help you very much.

FIRE - FEELING - TEMPERAMENT:

Our art especially is only of value if it has "fire". We can call it feeling, fire, temperament, or beings who are able to open their souls and send out something more than technique. Let us call it today "feeling" - in spite of our rule. I have observed that sometimes you lack feeling in your work. You understand well what you are doing, you move well, and you speak better each day, but there is no fire behind it, there is no human being behind it. Please understand that I am not scolding you. I have to say this to you because I feel that the moment has come when I have to mention this. You are more human beings when you are not on the stage, and you are less human beings when you are on the stage. This is quite the opposite from what we need in the theatre.

On the stage we must show our feelings twenty times

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more strongly than we do in everyday life because then they are appropriate. We are now in danger of hiding our feelings on the stage under the screen of technique. There are two things to be considered. First of all, you must take and understand our Method as the way to awaken the feelings, not to hide them. For instance, I have never given, and I never will give you the old method, in which the director requires the actor to feel hate or love or joy. Of course, this would be possible if I shouted long enough, but you would be angry with me. You might finally get the feelings, but they would be full of pain. This way, which seems to be the way to the feelings for many schools of the theatre, is absolutely wrong. I know this from my own experience in Russia and my observation of other theatres in the world. That way is torture, not art, when you get feelings after being tortured like that. I will never give you such a Method.

OUR METHOD AWAKENS FEELINGS:

Our method is another way to these precious feelings, to this fire. Why do we create atmosphere, for instance? It seems to be a thing which exists quite objectively. We will never say, "Feel sorrow," and expect the atmosphere to grow. At the moment when I say, "Feel atmosphere," if you are honest, you will never be able to feel it. But I have given you the method for creating around you the atmosphere of sorrow, and

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you are able to do this at will. It is also able to awaken the feelings in you without touching the feelings directly. This is made possible by creating the atmosphere, because you are doing something, and sending it out; and in so doing, you must awaken your feelings. This is the aim. You must say to yourself, "I must accept and pay attention to my feelings, which must arise."

You can take each point in our Method, and you will find that each point leads the way to the feelings, which are the most precious thing. An objective, for example, is something an actor can take with his whole body and fulfill it. If he is really able to fulfill the objective, he will get the feeling - if he is an artist. If an artist forgets about this feeling, then something can happen - as with us. We are using all these things given in the Method to a certain extent, and we think that is enough. It is not enough. An objective which does not wake the feeling in you is only half-work. You must know that the objective is fulfilled if, as a result of this fulfillment, you have a spark of feeling. The feeling of truth - what is it? By trying to create a feeling of truth in your movements, voice, etc., what is the result? It should be feelings. The same is true of mise en scène. When it is given, and I am able to value it as an artist, then I have at once feelings.

Everything must be a path to the feelings, if I look

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upon everything with my whole artistic being. This is what we must really know, and then this knowledge will lead us to the right discovery of how rich are our souls. They are really rich. Now we are in danger of having our souls poor - even poorer than in everyday life, because on the stage we feel we can stop before the feeling comes, and are satisfied with technique, skilfulness, etc. But if we have not yet crossed the threshold to the feelings with all these means, we have not yet arrived at the right place. If you will think of our method from this point of view, you will see that everything is but the door to the feelings. If you stop before this door, it means you have not yet used our method; it is only an illusion.

Of course, you know that each nation has a different kind of vibration of the feelings. It is very important to know that English people, as a nation, are more closed than some other peoples. Their education, and their fully elaborated culture of the intellect, make them more closed. This means that, being here in England, we have to pay special attention to this because we have to overcome this difficulty. Russians, for instance, do not have this problem. Their feelings are on the surface of their skins.

This is a question of the national constitution, and it means that we, here, have to work towards the feelings with much more intensity and much more desire to get them without touching them. It is very important to know this; and if

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I have told you this before, I must underline it. You must not try to get feeling by forcing it artificially. You need time to accomplish this, and you must have time. If you are in a hurry, you will not get the feelings, but will push them still further back.

I would suggest that during the summer you think about what we know in our Method, and that you try to discover for yourselves that I have not given you one thing which is not the way to the feelings. Therefore, what you need now is only to understand this: all things lead to the feelings. For instance, why was I so unsatisfied when I saw your work with the psychological gesture? Because you have done this only to a certain extent, and not to the next step, which is the feelings. For example, if I have given a gesture of lifting something up, what is its quality? Nothing other than the feelings.

In our Method the quality is experienced throughout the whole being, and you must elaborate the gesture as long as it is necessary to make your feelings respond. The psychological gesture is the way to the feelings, so is the imagination. If I imagine something only as a picture on the wall, or on the blackboard, it is nothing - it is not imagination. Real imagination begins when this image starts to live, to speak, to feel; and that is the moment when I, as the person who sees, begin to feel.

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Concentration is the same thing: it is the way to the feelings. If I am concentrating on a flower; if I see it, that does not mean that I am concentrating on it; but when I am concentrating on a rose, then I begin to feel red gestures. When I am able to feel it, it means I was concentrated.

This is what I want to tell you theoretically: that our Method must be understood as a way to awaken the feelings, but do not try to hurry this development. With time you will be able to awaken the feelings more and more, because without feeling there is no art, but only an illusion.

You can have more make-up or less costumes, but you are wearing the costume and the make-up, and you, as a human being, are sitting inside, and you are full of feelings and will. You must show these feelings to the audience; there is nothing else to show - in the costumes or the face. It means nothing. Only our human heart and being must be shown on the stage. You must think about these simple things.

If a painter paints something depicting his suffering, then it [the picture] shows all this suffering. We, as actors, are the picture. This is the tragedy and beauty and difficulty of our art. To be brave enough to tear our souls, and to show everything - that is what the audience wants to see, nothing more.

JUSTIFY THE ACTOR'S PROFESSION:

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I was always so unhappy when I heard such indifferent appreciation of the theatre, because I felt ashamed for my whole life. It was really something dreadful when I began to feel that I was a person who only amused others who were able to pay for their seats in the theatre, in order that they might laugh, or be quiet, or be entertained.

THE ACTOR'S SACRIFICE:

To fight with this lack of appreciation and to justify our profession, we must be heroes. This means that we must open ourselves, and show that we are human beings and artists. Do you want to see my heart? Then I will cry in you, and you will cry in me and with me. And I will laugh with you, and in you. Then it is something - a sort of sacrifice. But without this it is not worthwhile, and, for me, it is really shameful to be an actor.

By all these words I want to say that we must appreciate the feelings more than ever before. You must take this something which I have tried to explain to you, and put it into your beings somewhere so that it will grow, if we want to overcome this difficulty which is a sense of shame before our own feelings. It is natural for everyone to be ashamed, or be afraid of showing his feelings, or of being hurt, but we must do this; we must be hurt, because a quiet psychological life is not for an artist. It is possible to live without being hurt, but it is not the way for an artist. I would have

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nothing to say to my audience, because nobody could penetrate into my heart and make disorder there. I must be tortured, because that is my path in life if I am an artist. It means I sacrifice my heart. I must experience this, and then I will be able to say from the stage something against this hurting.

You must ask yourself, "How can I get the feelings without forcing myself?"

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SIGNIFICANCE OF COSTUME AND MAKE-UP:

About the performance today. There were some charming moments, but only moments, and I will tell you why. You must know that when you put on costumes, they have the ability to kill your activity. They make you sleepy - and make-up does the same - or they make you too active, so active that you lose all your technical control and do very chaotic things. And to find ourselves in costumes and make-up, this is a certain process. Actors need time to be awakened from this sleep, or to overcome the excessive energy.

Therefore, if today it was too technical, and you were not able to create even the most simple atmosphere, this can be placed at the door of the costumes, which can be responsible for this psychological depression of the feelings. Therefore, when putting on costumes, you must justify them. You must work on them from inside, to adjust and make them

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part of your own body. This needs time, but you must do it consciously. Don't be passive while being in costume. Adjust your being to the costume, and your costume to your being.