

IMAGINING THE PLAY  
CONTENT

## IMAGINING THE PLAY:

Shdanoff Play: [The Possessed]:

We have spoken very much about the imagination, but the real application of this ability which we call imagination, and of other things in our Method is very varied. We must not think that the imagination is simply seeing a picture and then perhaps incorporating it. The real usage of imagination is so varied and individual, and the more variety we have the more spiritual is this ability. We must be able to act long scenes in our imagination, with so and so many variations, and with beautiful and interesting speech, and emotions and mise-en-scène, lights, etc. We must be able to do this as long as we like and then ask ourselves the question: What have I acted in my imagination? You should be able to answer: I don't know what it was because it was not the content.

This is the real ability to act on the basis of the imagination because the real actor's imagination does not require any content. To cry, to fall down, to get up, to hold a pause, to move stealthily, but quickly, to go down and to threaten by rising - the whole performance in our imagination. Again the question: What have I done? And the answer: I don't know - I am acting! This is the real ability to act in the imagination.

If on top of this ability to act for hours on end, we are given some sentences by the director, they must be such an enrichment. We have to take such sentences and put them into our world of imagination, even without asking what was before and what will come after. They should be enough to inflame us to act again for hours and hours, with these single sentences. When a soliloquy is given to the actor it is so rich he must be able to do it in hundreds of ways - again without knowing what follows. When we have the whole play and we know the content and the succession of events, then we are kings in our actor's profession - we rule everything.

This is the real imagination which we must have today, and opposite to it is the actor who says: Before I know the whole play, my part, and all my words, where I am standing, who is my partner, etc. I cannot start to play. The majority of the present day actors are such. They cannot act without the part. This is lack of imagination and has nothing to do with the real art. Therefore, our actors must be crazy enough to act everything without knowing what it is.

Today we will work with some actors in the following way. We will try to rely on this ability of imagination. We will take one sentence after another, imagining how we can pronounce it, what we should do at this moment, what the mise en scène might be, etc., by reading one sentence after another,

and what we know already about the play comes as an enrichment, but it is only enrichment, and not the condition in which we are only able to act. This is a great difference. We will start to use our imagination in this way today. We will take a sentence and throw it into the world of our imagination, and see what will come out of it.

During the reading of the words, by imagining, if you have understood me rightly, you will use everything. How the character looks at the moment, how he is sitting, how the voice sounds, etc. If the director adds something which contradicts your imagination, never accept the contradiction, accept the suggestion because you are so powerful and rich inside that you are able to accept many things which you may not feel at the moment. This is the real power of the actor-- then he can choose. The suggestions that come from the director may be very strange, but they will give something to the actor if taken in this way.

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Scene when Nicholas sits alone in his study:

After many years of inner struggle and conflict, and especially during the last days of inner difficulties, after getting the blow from the idealist, Nicholas, in a certain way, reaches a crucial psychological moment when he has to make some decisions in his life - whether he is going to

the left or the right. In his inner world which is very rich and disturbed and unquiet, there live two characters, two images, two figures, two powers, which always tear his soul to pieces. He can't say yes to one and no to the other of these two main powers, because something has not yet ripened in his soul, and this is his struggle. Now we see him in one of his crucial moments, in one of his critical moments, one of the climaxes of his life, when he tries with stormy inner power to find the way between these two powers. He is longing to be able to say, "Yes, this is my way," or "No, this is not my way," but he cannot, and this is the human tragedy expressed in the picture we are going to try to do. What are these two powers? If we take them as images we will see that one power is the spy, and the other the beggar girl. These two powers are tearing his soul to pieces.

Night. A dimly lighted room. (In old, rich Russian houses there was always a room with a good, big desk in it for writing and sometimes the person slept in this room, although they had a bedroom as well. When writing or reading long into the night in their study, they would sleep on a divan in the same room. It was a very usual thing. For the person who slept in the study, it was psychologically necessary to stay in this same room - to be bound by his things, reading or writing, or by his thoughts. It was a certain psychological thing). Now we see Nicholas sleeping on his divan beside his

desk - without blankets or anything. He has fallen asleep quite suddenly without being able to control himself, so tortured is he. When the curtain goes up we see him in great torture and turmoil, but sleeping. Apparently he sees dreadful dreams and nightmares. Out of this nightmare we, the audience, begin to understand some words. Out of this dreadful state of mind which is a half-asleep, half-waking state he comes more and more to the formation of such ideas: (The audience must get the impression that Nicholas is not mad. It is as if someone is present in the room, but we don't see him. As if Nicholas is speaking to someone he knows, or sees, or suspects. It must be a certain psychology which is half-incorporated. A very fine thing. There is a close psychological connection between Nicholas, the mother, and the spy throughout this scene). This is a very crucial moment for not only Nicholas, but for the whole play and everyone in it.

One thing we must do consciously. If we are acting inwardly we sometimes lose the possibility of seeing ourselves moving or speaking in our imagination. If this happens we must appeal again to the full imagination. When you are concentrating on the sounds, don't forget the mise en scène and vice versa. Try to keep the whole machine working. The words you are pronouncing must be only part of your whole imagination. The setting, everything in the mise en scène, how the character moves, everything must be there in your

imagination. The least important part is the content. Act whatever you like.

#### CONTENT:

Before we go on we must have an idea of this kind of application of our imagination. There are many ways to apply the imagination, and this is one of them, and one of the most dangerous because it is very near to one of the dangers which exist in the old type of theatre. In the following diagram the inner triangle represents the content or the "what," which will be given to the audience in a certain artistic aura which includes everything - what we can see, hear, and feel, everything. The whole theatre art is around this. This is the content which the author gives - the author in the sense of the person who gives the plot and the thoughts. The outer triangle shown on the diagram is the ideal future performance which is absolutely like the content, but it embraces it, includes it and gives this aura.



In the old theatre the actor and the director start with thoughts, and they try to speak all these thoughts, or apply some means they are accustomed to apply in the theatre, even if they are funny and strange things, such as elaborating strange eye-brows to give the character before elaborating anything else. Such actors start with the content, and try to stick around it some means which they call their artistic means, and when they are very conceited, they say this is their

individuality. It is the old way to prepare a play.

The other way to develop the play which we are trying to do in our studio is to find all the many ways to approach it. Our world of imagination is absolutely rich, or will be, if developed, and is very independent and fantastic, and very unexpected for ourselves, and rich in every direction. If the content says, "Mother, dear," then for the old-fashioned actor there is one, or at best, two or three labels to stick on it, while for the imagination there are innumerable possibilities.

Here is the beauty of the world of our imagination. We start with the same thing as old-fashioned actors - we get the play from the playwright, but when the old-fashioned actor reads some lines, he is inclined at once to adhere to the content before anything else, and this is the danger. If we cling to the content our imagination fades away. Sometimes the content is so clear and enticing that we are encouraged to follow the lines, speaking them intellectually and sticking on some labels, but we must make an effort to jump over this enticement.

We have to live, or try to live far, far around this content - the further the better (see the outer circle on the diagram) because here, in this far, far distant realm are all the things which we are actually seeking for. We do not seek for the content, which is simply given, we seek for something else, and what is it? It is our own imagination,

unknown to ourselves. In this particular method of applying our imagination as today, the less attention we pay to the content the better. This does not mean that we have to distort the content, but we must not adhere or cling to it. We must be absolutely free to fly there - very far away. What is the ideal result? When we are speaking the words without distorting them as content, but so that we don't actually notice that we are speaking them, because our imagination about this strange room with the dim light is for the actor everything. Our imagination about the night atmosphere, about the setting, about everything is as strong as our speaking. Therefore, when we say we have finished our rehearsal, what have we done? Actually everything. What does this mean? We have seen the room, we know the atmosphere, and sometimes we have spoken. This is the ideal case, of course, and from it we shall see a very interesting thing - the content from which we want to get away, as it were, grows and becomes clearer and clearer to us and to the audience, but this requires a certain training.

What we have done this morning was not quite such an ideal case, although it was a step in the right direction and we must take it as a path to this ideal case. During our work today, we have been thrown back to the content at moments, and we have spoken merely words. On the other hand, sometimes we were flying over all the boundaries, and have distorted the



content because we were not in our imagination but in some distracted floundering. For instance, our imagination can be very vague and muted, at this stage, but it must be "something." Therefore, I ask you to see the light, the room, the divan, and to hear the voices, but sometimes we jump out of this realm of imagination and are simply floundering in something which is no longer imagination, but is a certain kind of chaos as if we are anticipating.

This has nothing to do with the real imagination which has always something. Even if you are really anticipating your character with your imagination, you actually know it - it is something. You will be able to die for this future character which you are going to act. Not to know means either that you have not started your work, or you have jumped over the boundaries. There must always be something in you as an actor which is always able to say, "I don't know what wig I will have, but I know absolutely what it is like." This is the real thing which must be awakened in us by walking in this circle (see diagram).

This experience will come in time, then we will know whether we are imagining or whether we are floundering. Today we were here and there, and it is quite natural that we must be thrown because, like children, we are not able to swim at once. We must go through this period, but to know and anticipate what is the real imagination, this is necessary. For

instance, when I tell you that I am seeing in my imagination something quite definite, without any content: For example, I throw myself down and tears are coming, and somebody gets up, and I understand it is finished and suddenly "he" appears and we together have a real light in us. Who "he" is, or which light, I don't know. This is imagination which is content-less but which is absolutely legal, and which feeds the future content. We must be strong enough to take the content from the author and say, "This is the basis on which I will dance with my imagination as I like." In this way, instead of distorting the thoughts of the author, the actor will use them as a beautiful something on which to stand. For instance, in the phrase, "usual and exceptional" in the ideal case the actor will feel something like pins and needles, a sensation. He sees the lamp, he sees the room, he sees the audience and he hears "usual and exceptional"... has he spoken? He doesn't know. He has acted. He has made some gesture. He has acted without distorting either the words or the content.

This is a very fine thing which the future actor will discover - this real creative state of using the imagination. Therefore, by doing this work we must try to feel this thing consciously, and later it will become more subconscious. Then we will get the ability when the moment comes when the part and the actor merge together - the moment

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when inspiration comes - then the actor is free to act his part with any cast anywhere. Before this moment comes, we must train ourselves to be able to rehearse and to see the image at the same time - this requires great inner effort and knowledge about it before it will come. When I am speaking my words on the stage, there are two persons - one whom I see in my mind's eye, and I am always incorporating his suggestions - he is always acting a little bit ahead of me - I am here only to serve and to follow him. Then comes the moment when he disappears and I no longer see him because he and I are one. He is acting in me. But to get this ability we must master this world of imagination, and distinguish it from the labels which we stick on, or the world of chaos where we are robbers and murderers. This is what we must learn. We need this because we need to use our full talent - our performance must be full.

