

Michael Chekhov

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"TAKING" THE METHOD
THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION
GOETHE'S "EXACT IMAGINATION"
THE ACTOR'S INSTRUMENT
INCORPORATION OF IMAGES
FEELING OF EASE AND FORM

Goethe
Hamlet

"TAKING" THE METHOD:

Class for Beginners:

I hope you are continuing to exercise your imagination through your work on the fairy tales. You also know something about the incorporation of your imagination. Now I am going to give you some other points of the Method. One of the most important principles in our school is that not only is the Method really given, but it must be "taken" also, and that is your business. If you think that the Method which is given can do everything, that is a wrong impression. The Method can be useful only if it is taken. By this I mean that you have to exercise every day, actually every moment of the day, then gradually you will see the result of the Method in that your actor's nature will become more and more developed. That is our aim.

We want to help you to awaken in your souls and bodies definite qualities and abilities. We don't want you to "understand" the Method. To understand the Method is the work of twenty minutes, but it does not help. It will only help if you will take it, and digest it, and live with it.

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Then you will see that the result will come gradually, like the sunrise, and you will feel certain abilities and qualities which will develop you as actors and will give you such assurance when you are on the stage - things which you will never get if you live only upon your gifts and accidental things happening on the stage.

Therefore, we have a three-year course - if I can be absolutely free with my ideas, I would say that it is a twenty-year course! Because there is no limit when we can say that now we have everything and have nothing more to get. We can and must always learn in the three years during which we are trying to train our actor's soul according to my Method. Those who have had the ability to get this Method, only those will get the certificate. We will not give a certificate to those who have not got the Method, even if they have been twenty years in the school! The certificate is more than a sheet of paper - it is my conviction that the person can do it. The certificate for me is one of the most important points in accordance with the Method. To "take" the Method means to be able to do it.

THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION:

The imagination is the world wherein you find your own artistic desires. The imagination actually is not a thing which is sitting somehow in you - the real imagination is a miracle. It does exist somewhere - not in you, but at the

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same time it is your own creation. If you really create an image, and if you will ask yourself from where the image comes to you, you must say that it comes from two sides at once - from the world of the imagination and from yourself. It is a miracle in which the outer world begins to be in me, and my inner world is somewhere there. You will see that by imagining more and more, that it is a very curious and interesting experience when you know that you and not you, are creating simultaneously, and the result of this thing - you and your creation - is the imagination - the image.

I will try to describe what Goethe says. Imagine that there is a science and a scientific approach to the world of events, etc., where everything is absolutely objective and exact. That is one realm. Here is another realm. Imagination in the very common sense way, everything is actually without any laws or objective truth. These two things are now reigning over the whole world. We also actually live in this great illusion that things are either objective or absolutely free, in the sense that we have no laws or rules - I am free to do what I like in my inner life. Both are wrong, therefore, there are so many difficulties in our scientific and social life, only because of this great mistake - that there are things which can be explored objectively, and there are things which are the result of free imagination.

GOETHE'S "EXACT IMAGINATION":

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Goethe has discovered for himself that there is a third kind of imagination which is just as exact as the outer world, and at the same time is as free as the common type of imagination. And the work upon the imagination and the science or exact thinking at the same time, gradually brings us to the ability to have what Goethe calls the exact imagination, where everything is created in our imagination and has, at the same time, objective truth. Everything which you receive and accept from the outer world can be immediately saturated with your free imagination and this, and only this, is the right and true creative spirit of the human being.

Therefore, when we speak about our imagination here in this school, we always aim at this last point which Goethe called the exact imagination. The whole Method shows the way to this exact imagination. This is a little addition to our lesson on imagination, but try to have this idea of Goethe's in mind about the exact imagination. The time will come when you will experience it inside of you, and you will recall my words - when the tree remains green but still fantastic, and the dragon, which I have created in my imagination but which I have never seen, can be true and objective just as the tree is, and this is the beauty and the mystery of the real creative imagination. You will be so happy when you get to this point of exact imagination.

THE ACTOR'S INSTRUMENT:

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We have our creative spirit, and we get from the world of the imagination certain orders which we have to fulfill here on the stage, but there are two sides, as we have just mentioned. There is the world of the imagination, and there is the world of reality. Our bodies and hearts are our instrument - the only instrument we have in our profession. The world of the imagination gives us certain orders to fulfill and incorporate.

INCORPORATION OF IMAGES:

Let us say we are going to prepare the part of Hamlet. We can see him perfectly in the imagination, but it is not yet the whole work. We have to incorporate this Hamlet by giving this imaginary Hamlet our body, otherwise it will remain only in the imagination, and no one will be able to see what our interpretation of Hamlet actually is. Therefore, we have to approach our professional technique from two sides. First we have to develop our ability to imagine to the extent I have mentioned, and on the other side we have to develop our bodies, to make them flexible and to enrich them. When our bodies will become so subtle, then all the images we create in the world of the imagination will find us a very flexible and suitable instrument for incorporating themselves into our body. Today I want to give you some exercises for the body.

FEELING OF EASE:

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There are four qualities which we think are very important and must be developed in our bodies. The first quality we call feeling of ease. That means that our bodies must acquire the ability to be light and easy, to move freely and to be able to lose their weight, as it were. The body must become absolutely light and easy, to such an extent that your images will flow into it. If the body is light and easy, the images will not become stiff, but they will if the body is stiff and awkward. This is one of the qualities which must be present continuously, our body with the feeling of ease must be at our disposal always.

The first step is to make the psychological effort to desire to become easy in your body. Try to develop the ability to desire your body to be light and easy and almost without weight. First psychologically - say to yourself very strongly, "I want my body to be light and easy." When you are gay and full of joy, you really experience your body as if it were light and easy, and when you are depressed and tired, you feel a quite different weight in your body, so it is a psychological thing. But we must not rely on an accident - we must acquire this ability as professional people. We must have the ability to be gay and light at the moment we desire it. That is the professional thing.

Now, having the desire to become easier in your body, try to raise your hands up and down, and try to pour your

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desire to become easy into your limbs which you are moving. Remember that the center from which your arms must be moved is not in the shoulder, but in the chest.

Exercise:

Raise your hands and arms. Then walk three steps forward and three steps back. Then do it only in your imagination, and realize that you can fly over the space without any weight. Believe in yourselves as beings which are only psychological beings - spirits, invisible spirits. Imagine if you look at each other that you see not only the body but the superhuman being I don't see, and this invisible person has the power to put the body on the ground. You must believe in this ability, and only this belief in this invisible person will give you the power - with it you are not a physical person, and you will be master of your body. Kneel down and realize that you are not falling down heavily, but that you allow yourself to touch the ground as if you are on a string. Lie your bodies down like a veil. You will meet certain physical difficulties which are inevitable, but try to overcome them by the psychological desire to become easier and easier. Run freely over the room.

You will get such pleasure and joy from being able to govern your body and manage it, being out of your body at the same time. This is a very important effort for the actor, because it means that we have our instrument in our hands.

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Just as a musician has his violin, he takes it and puts it aside. We must do the same with our body - when we enter the stage, we must take it, and when we finish our life on the stage, it must become a different thing.

Now get up and down with the music. The rhythm will help you. When going down and getting up to the music, speak the words, "down," and "up," just as easily and lightly. Now only speak the words.

Still keeping the desire to be easy, take the heavy table and move it - through your psychological desire to become lighter, the table will become light, too. Think of it as a table in a fairy tale. All these things in fairy tales are born out of this living in the world of psychology.

Exercise:

Girls on one side of the room, boys on the other, and the table in between. Form a group under the influence of the music, but the task is not the composition, but only from the point of view of light^{ness} and ease. Then take into consideration the whole space and the two structures, and form one group.

FEELING OF FORM:

There are four such qualities which we must acquire with regard to our imaginations and our bodies. I will give you the second one now. It is what we call the feeling of form.

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Just as we have to be able to get the feeling of ease and manage and govern our body by it, so we must get the feeling of form. We must always be able to create a form with our bodies on the stage. It must not be at all vague. We must always feel that there is a different form for stopping or moving on the stage. The feeling that we have in our private life of a certain vagueness about our body as a form, must be discarded on the stage. Our body must always be considered as a beautiful form, even if it is a character part or even if it is a cripple that we are playing, because it is a marvelous form. If it is really ugly, then it is wrong. If the feeling of form is there, it will become beautiful, persuasive, and artistic.

Begin first by standing still and trying to walk inside yourself with your mind, and try to experience your own body as a definite form. We have a head as firm and round ⁱⁿ form as the universe, if you will imagine the sky and the stars and the horizon like a dome or cupola above you, you will see that your head is ^{the} center in this big cupola which is round, and every part of your head is directed to the stars, and they are sending their rays into your head. It is a definite form, and if you will experience this little world which your head builds, you will get the feeling of form.

Try to touch your head with your hands and then with your mind only - then try to mold this little world with

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your mind - this microcosm. Now only with your invisible hands. Try to imagine that your head is unable to produce any gestures - you can move your arms if you want but all the gestures which you try to make with your face are always ugly.

If you try to express fear with your mouth and eyebrows, it is ugly and only a grimace. The nature of the head and face does not allow any movement of this kind. It is something which cannot substitute for our ability to make gestures with our whole body - that is the thing which we have to make gestures with, but not the head. The head is the form which must be quiet, noble, and must reflect the universe for the audience, if you don't spoil it with grimaces.

You will see that if you don't spoil the beauty of your face with grimaces, a miracle will happen. Your little "universe" will become the most expressive part of your whole body because certain feelings, emotions, and will impulses will find their way to your face. The real feeling which will arise will change your face so that it will become expressive. The mouth and eyes and cheeks and everything will become expressive if you don't force it. Leave it quiet and noble and elaborate the body, then the face will become a membrane, a mirror, which will vibrate immediately getting the most beautiful impulses from your whole body. Then your face and head will be like a crown on your actor's being which starts from the center.

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To get this poise for your head and face, you have to get the feeling of form. If you are not able to imagine your head like a little "universe," you will try to use your head as something which is just like your hands or fingers, and you will try to do things with it - it is not allowed - the "universe" does not allow it.

Then experience your neck as a column on which this beautiful "universe" is resting. The head and neck belong to the universe, and the lower part of the body belongs more to the earth. There is something psychological or philosophical which is like a neck between the universe and the earth - this cosmic "neck" which separates the earth from the universe.

This is actually the theme which all philosophers have dealt with. You will not find any philosophy where the universe and the earth are mixed together. Only in rude materialism or in abstract people who stumble on the earth and are looking to the sky as heaven - both extremes have nothing to do with philosophy or art. The neck is the connection and again this is the most beautiful thing in the cosmic connection between earth and sky. Try to imagine these two forms as they are, the universe, and the philosophy - the connection, the bridge between the universe and the earth.

The third part of our being - the chest, arms, and hands. What does the form of our chest, arms, and hands express? It expresses a marvelous thing which no other beings

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have - it is the freedom on the earth. Animals do not have this freedom - they are earthy beings - only man has this freedom. The chest, arms, and hands express freedom on the earth. If it were not for the earth and that we are on the earth, we might have wings! We can imagine angelic beings with imaginary wings, but that is a different thing. The head is the universe, and the neck is the approach to the earth and the distance between, and the arms and hands and chest are already the earth, but free. You must appreciate this part of our body as the human freedom on the earth.

If you will understand all these parts of our body - the form and shape of it from the point of view of these cosmic connections, you will understand instinctively many things which are so expressive, and we don't know why. For instance, when a person sits with his head in his hands, why is it so expressive? If the head is the universe and the hand is the free will of the earth - it is the moment when the free will tries to get the depth and height of the universe, and the universe is bound to this free human being, and this is what we call the process of thinking and meditating on the earth.

So each movement and position has a very deep sense, if we understand it from the point of view of its real meaning. If we put the finger to the nose, we have the free being who is ridiculing the universe. You can take any position, and you will see that it is absolutely the philosophy of the form

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of the human body, and you will get the desire to explore it and to fill your form, trying to get deeper and deeper into the meaning of it. Then if we try to penetrate into it, we will get the desire to be perfect in our expressions on the stage, and we will become so ill from all the un-shaped things on the stage which mean nothing or have only half-meaning. How often we see people making the wrong gestures. If we will study it, we will get the feeling for it.

The first realm is the world of creative ideas. The second realm is the realm of the feelings. The third realm is the realm of the will. If, on the stage, you try to express certain ideas, as for instance, in "The Possessed" - "That's true," - you must say it with the head because it belongs to the world of ideas. But if you have to say, "That's true," with your head, and you have certain feelings at this time, let us say you want to express the feeling of excitement, you must add the will, you can use your feet or legs and then it will be justified.

This does not mean that you have to remember all these things in your work - that would be wrong. I tell you only so that you will work upon these ideas, and they will become your instinct - then they will be useful to you. You can't say, "Oh, how terrible," with your head only, but you can say it with your hands and fingers. If you say, for instance, "I don't allow him to do it," you can use your legs and feet as an expression of the will.

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I divided these parts only to give you the main realms of the three parts, but they are always interrelated. They all go together and must, but they can go together only if you will develop the instinct that this is the world of ideas, this is the world of feelings, and this is the world of the will. When you try to develop this instinct, you will bring together all three realms in the most beautiful expressive and profound way. That is what I want to tell you about the form in general. Now try to express the form of your body.

Everything can be and must be pointed out from different points of view, and you must get accustomed to it. We must not fix spiritual truth as we fix tables and chairs. This freedom must be acquired, otherwise we will never free ourselves from the world of chairs and tables.

Exercise:

Now move your bodies as a form, forward and back, then lift your hands and arms and move forward and back, then run over the floor, being aware every moment that it is a form you are moving. If you will do this with the same concentration that we try to get in our lessons, then it will become instinctive, and it will serve you on the stage so that the audience will be mystified by your acting, your expressive acting, so fully experienced and expressive. They

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will not understand what it is, but you must understand that these are different abilities which we are trying to develop and turn them into instincts. If we do not have this instinct, the whole acting is as ugly as a grimace, if it is not inspired.

The third part of our being - the lower part of our body. This is the connection to the earth. We are able to possess the earth with this part of our body. We are here definitely on the earth, but we are no longer as free as we were in the arms. The lower part of our body makes us earth beings. If we consider the form of our feet and legs from this point of view, we shall see the following thing: the construction of the plant is the same - the roots touch the earth, and the flower touches the sun, but the difference is that the plant cannot move, but the human being can. You will find that in this most earthy part of the human being, we have our freedom. The plant has no freedom - it cannot move - but we can move, and we are free in our connection with the earth.

This is essentially important for us as actors because our legs and feet have to express on the stage everything we need to express in connection with the earth. For instance, if the character is materialistic, we must express it with our legs. If the person is superficial, we have to express it with our legs. We cannot express ideas very much with our legs and feet. We can express the character from the point of view of his connection to the earth, but with our

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arms we can express the connection of the character to the earth and to the world of ideas, and with our head we can express only the highest which is given in the play or the character.

Now try to experience your body as a form from this point of view. Look with your mind's eye on your body, and try to get the meaning of all the parts. The form in connection with this content.

The whole philosophy of the human beings:

