

Michael Chekhov

June 16, 1937

FEELING OF TRUTH
THE INTELLECTUAL APPROACH -
THE ACTOR'S ENEMY

Stanislavsky
Moscow Art Theatre
Vakhtangov
Princess Turandot
The Cricket on the Hearth

FEELING OF TRUTH:

Feeling of truth - our nearest friend. It's mission is absolutely indescribable. This feeling of truth is always sitting everywhere seeing everything, and giving suggestions about everything. Therefore, if we try to describe its mission, it is possible to do so only to a certain extent, because its voice is as deep as the voice of conscience. It is not possible to describe it, but we have to try to do so in order to make it clearer and clearer, and not only to make it clearer but to awaken this voice inside of our aesthetic conscience.

Mr. Shdanoff has found a very interesting comparison - the feeling of truth, what is it like? It is like a musical ear - everyone has the ability to hear different intervals in music naturally, but this ability can be developed too. The same is true with the feeling of truth. If we only show that this is wrong, and this is right, it is not going to develop our feeling of truth. We must have time to develop our feeling of truth, and one of the means is to exercise, knowing why we are exercising this and that.

THE INTELLECTUAL APPROACH:

Today I want to call your attention to the following

M. Chekhov

June 16, 1937

fact: imagine that we are actors. As actors our problem is to show, to incorporate, to convey to our audience things which are not so obvious to everybody, therefore we are actors. This means that we have the ability to see and understand, and experience, and do things which a person who is not an actor cannot understand, radiate, convey or incorporate. But because of the special kind of understanding, special kind of experiencing and conveying and so on, we encounter our biggest enemy - we know him and have spoken about him often. This enemy is our intellectual approach to everything - our intellectual understanding and grasping.

To be more concrete: if we take the newspaper today and read the following: "In Italy there has been an earthquake, and many thousands of people have been killed." We read this news with our intellect, and we say what a dreadful disaster, we forget it for half an hour then we meet someone and ask them if they have heard about the earthquake. Our faces try to express something, and then a great pause, as though we were really experiencing it. This is a pure product of our intellect, these expressions, these words, these "as if" emotions, have nothing to do with the real experiencing of this earthquake. From a certain point of view this is quite right, because we would become crazy in half an hour if we really understood all that was going on around us.

This intellectual approach is necessary, but not for us as actors. The danger for us is that when we transform this

M. Chekhov

June 16, 1937

intellectual approach, which we are using the whole day, and which is in its right place in everyday life, when we transform this intellectual understanding into our profession we see at once that it is nothing. It is our greatest enemy - our intellect.

If we consider our actor's soul and our profession then we will see that the intellectual approach is not enough. It is wrong and the feeling of truth is able to show us on the stage when the approach is an intellectual one, which has nothing to do with our profession. But as we are accustomed to do these intellectual procedures from morning to night, we are killing our feeling of truth systematically. Therefore, the feeling of truth is dead in our souls - it is quite natural and understandable. If the feeling of truth were to speak the whole day to us we would be crazy, because in everything we are speaking, doing and thinking we are lying, because the conditions of our life are such that we must lie. To be able to lie like that we must kill our feeling of truth.

Now, on the stage we must do the opposite thing. We have to awaken this feeling of truth with great effort and many exercises during many years. Therefore, you must not think that your feeling of truth is already awakened. It is not yet, and you must not think that it will be awakened tomorrow - not at all! You must have a long artistic life of experiment and exercise, and with time you will awaken it more and more. Therefore, be very active in doing your exercises to awaken

M. Chekhov

June 16, 1937

this feeling of truth, and be patient enough to know that if you force yourself you will only be frightened of this feeling of truth, instead of having a friend which is growing up with you. Do not force the child to grow too quickly.

Now we must try to make an experiment - we will take one of the scenes - this is not meant as a criticism, it is only an experiment, only an example which we are taking. Let us take the moment when Balladina says, "Is your jug full?" Do it technically first, and we will see some things which are wrong. Look at the scene with your feeling of truth - it must be very active because you are paying attention to it. Live the scene with the actors, being led by your feeling of truth. You will realize that the actors have done it only as an intellectual scheme - with the same reaction as our example of the newspaper. Concentrate on the two sentences, and the pause in between, and try to create something which will not be intellectual - try to be led by your feeling of truth and nothing more.

Our intellect is our enemy because it knows everything even before we get our part - the actor knows what he will act because he has done it for so many years. I must repeat that you must not be afraid of this feeling of truth. If you think of it as a great sin which you are doing on the stage, then you will not be able to follow this beautiful voice of the feeling of truth. But you must be brave enough to see these things in yourself, and in your friends. To see it and

M. Chekhov

June 16, 1937

to be brave enough to start the long work of fighting with this intellect which disturbs us) or just to be afraid - these are two different things. Your fear will overpower you. It is better to be brave enough to say, "I know all my sins but I am strong enough to go on, and through years and years of effort and very careful work I will conquer my enemy."

By all these exercises we are trying to open our inner eyes, and to see more than others who do not belong to our profession. We will have some very painful experiences, but we must do this and open our eyes and see that our artistic being is full of enemies. If you are suffering because of having this enemy sitting in you somewhere, this is very good. Suffering and exercises, but don't be afraid, that is the only thing which is dangerous for us.

When we were young we got from Stanislavsky this feeling of truth, and we were very frightened because we took it only as an enemy and a critic, and we were afraid of it, and were with time very bound by it. Before we were able to say something, or to move, we thought it would be wrong, because this wrong idea of the feeling of truth was overpowering us. As a result we began to lie more than ever before.

But those of us who could overcome this fear got, with time, such a help from this feeling of truth, which was so pleasant. As experiments we tried, when acting one of the performances which we had already acted for many years, to start the performance only with the feeling of truth. It was

M. Chekhov

June 16, 1937

a very interesting experiment. We had acted hundreds of times the same thing - how we entered, how we put on our hats, etc. All these small things were a great pleasure.

When you get pleasure from this exercising of the feeling of truth, you will be really happy. You will feel that your nature is much richer than before. The feeling of truth opens so many doors in your psychology, and you will know what freedom on the stage is, because you are not afraid of doing anything. The feeling of truth is so inspiring, when it is awakened, that it leads you. Only when you are wrong in your connection with the feeling of truth will you be frightened. But do not worry about being frightened, as it is only temporary.

This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of the death of Vakhtangov and they are acting the Princess Turandot with a performance which is number 922.² I have acted in one play, Cricket on the Hearth, for 600 times.³ It is a very interesting experience to act the same play so many times, because all the difficulties on the stage with make-up, etc., are all gone, and you are free to make experiments, and do everything you like. If you are interested in the theory of the theatre, this gives the possibility to experience it.