

Michael Chekhov

July 4, 1938

OUR METHOD
STANISLAVSKY'S SEARCH FOR A METHOD
THE ACTOR'S SECOND NATURE

Stanislavsky

OUR METHOD:

Criticism on improvisation on the ground of "shifting sands". My impression is that there is a great difference between what you have done today and what you did some weeks ago. I see that certain results are here, but now I want very much that you will understand the whole meaning of these important exercises. Without this ability which we are aiming at developing; without this ability for orientation, whatever situation it is, whatever partners we have, whatever stage of the rehearsal we are in, this special kind of ability of orientation makes you free.

What is the difference between a young student and an experienced actor? Not that the quality of the experienced actor is higher than that of the student; often the student has much more fire and sincerity, but the old actor will always be much more attractive to the audience, because he is able to orient himself. This ability the old actor got quite simply, without any method or rules, through his experience because it was through life necessity. If he is not able to do this he will be discarded. He has to find his orientation.

But in our school we try to go quite a different

2252
M. Chekhov

7281
July 4, 1938

way. We want to develop all these things which an experienced actor gets from his inharmonious profession, on the basis of a certain method and knowledge. We must know what we are doing; we must know what our aim is. We must come to this aim as a scientist comes to his aim, knowing certain things and standing upon them. If our school was a different one; if we were doing just one sketch after another, without any aim, it would be a method of floundering. But we aim at overcoming this cultural gap in the actor's life. We want to pursue our aim quite consciously, and this is to get the ability for orientation in our art, by certain definite points which belong to the realm of our special professional knowledge. This is point one.

The second point is, that in trying to get this ability to overcome this usual floundering on the stage and during rehearsals because we do not know how to catch the subject, we are trying to get the knowledge about all the points of our Method which seem so simple - objective, center of attention, psychological gesture, etc. - all things which we can have in our hands and which will give us this orientation, on the condition that we are able to manage all those points in the quickest tempo. We have to juggle them; only then are we really able to develop this ability of orientation. It must be instantly there.

Now when we are doing our exercises on objectives we sit quietly and take the objective and follow it and pre-

M. Chekhov

July 4, 1938

pare it and do it. This is absolutely necessary to start with, but the second stage is to take it instantly and choose the right one, and it is there immediately. For this aim we have this exercise of forcing you to find which is the right one for your character, for the situation, etc. If you have the ability to choose the right objective and pour it into your body, then you are able to orient yourself.

STANISLAVSKY'S SEARCH FOR A METHOD:

I remember Stanislavsky's method to educate himself. When he was training himself to get this ability to catch the right objective at the right time, he did the following exercises. He was walking along the boulevard of Moscow and he was always choosing the place to sit near two or three people. Sitting and looking at them, he tried to guess what their objectives were, and then when he had decided what the objective was he would go to them and ask them what they were speaking about. In this way he could prove and improve himself in getting the ability to choose objectives. He could choose the objective like a magician. At once it was a revelation because he was a specialist in this work. This is a very good example for explaining our attempt to do these exercises; we must be magicians in catching the atmosphere which is supposed to be here; to catch the gesture, etc. The technique is the same - to train ourselves by means of these exercises so that we are able to catch everything at once.

M. Chekhov

July 4, 1938

The last point: the ideal actor in our sense is the one who, at the moment he crosses the threshold during the rehearsal or the performance, feels psychologically hungry if he is not filled quite instinctively and at once with the gesture, with the objective, etc. By trying to do this exercise, we give ourselves this ability to feel ourselves on the stage in quite a different way than in our everyday life. This is in full contradiction to the usual idea of the stage, which is simply the more I am on the stage the more I am like everyday life, and this is a certain nothing. To be an actor means to have two psychologies - one for one's private life and one for the stage, and this stage psychology (the other self) means to be filled instantly and instinctively with everything.

Stanislavsky tortured all the actors around him, and he tortured himself even more than us.¹ He was a very difficult and strange teacher, and perhaps a very heartless and merciless teacher, and he has perhaps not found the right way for teaching, but because he was merciless to himself and to us we have a marvelous example of what it means to be trained, really trained. Not only to know something, because he knew his Method absolutely, but he wanted to get it as his second nature, and when have we seen this around him? We have seen that when he entered the stage - we knew his movements, and eyes and everything absolutely - and we have seen

M. Chekhov

July 4, 1938

that he was like a wild animal; he was chased by his own hope to be filled by the points which he thought were right. He was never satisfied with his acting, although he was a marvelous actor. He was his own specimen, his own victim, his own patient.

We have seen this marvelous quality, and this is what I want you to get. Instinctively, he had not allowed himself to enter the stage without having this second nature which is in the objective, and the other points of the Method. He was filled with all of these points, and until he had done this, until he felt that his whole nature was bursting with these things, he could not rehearse, he could not act, and this is the right attitude which we must get to.

When we are satisfied with being half-filled with the objective, half-radiating the atmosphere, half-guessing the gesture, we are on the wrong path because we are only half-creators, half-actors, we are half-strong or half-weak, and this is what we must overcome. That is the reason why we have our school; to get something to the fullest extent. This is so important, it must be like a thermometer if we get the same feeling that Stanislavsky got; when everything is done for the part it must be inside you like a thermometer. You must feel that you must do something to bring it to the top within you. This satisfaction with the half-way is the most weakening, the most treacherous for the actor.

I have seen Stanislavsky like an old lion; like

M. Chekhov

July 4, 1938

an old king; he was crying like a child before us because he could not stand this half-way, because his nature was through and through an artistic nature which requires always a certain fullness. The real artist will never be satisfied with half-things. When he was crying and saying he was not an actor, he had a factory so why should he act, he cannot act, etc. etc. He was crying like a child - that was an artist who requires everything or nothing.

We must get this ability through these particular special exercises to awaken this feeling of the necessity to be oriented, and for this aim this exercise is the most beautiful which I know. This training to get one thing after another, consciously trying to get it, follow it and it will lead us in the shortest way to these two abilities to feel whether everything has been done, or I want to leave the stage and go to my factory, like Stanislavsky. After all this explanation you should actually get the desire to do these exercises again and again, and with full activity, then it will bring us to the Stanislavsky result.

ACTOR'S SECOND NATURE:

When this second-nature is really aroused, it is an indescribably pleasure or delight which arises. When the weight falls from your shoulders and you feel free and happy while doing various points, then you have really got the thing in your hands.

M. Chekhov

July 4, 1938

The imagination can be applied to the whole scene; each of us (Stanislavsky's manufacturing business)¹ can imagine the whole scene and we can use this kind of imagining when acting so as to have always a certain kind of inspiration through our imagination as to what we have to do next. Up until now we have used imagination only in the following way; we have tried to start with the imagination of the coming scene, or performance, or character, and the second stage we have done, but now I suggest that we do both. Imagine the thing and then do it, and we can use another thing; you may be asked to continue to act on the basis of the imagination which is always there before your mind's eye, as a continuous thing and not as a separate prepared thing. There are two varieties of the imagination and we must choose one or the other, and then work upon it.

All our exercises are actually one big thing, but we have taken them separately as different points because we are training ourselves. There seems to be a great improvement in the scenes which we saw a month ago. There is certainly improvement and you must know this but also you must know that there is success, but that there is also room for other things. But please try to avoid the illusion that we have group feeling. Actually we have not got it or only half-got it. This illusion makes us happy in the wrong way, and this was the point at which Stanislavsky cried - he did not allow himself to live in illusion.