

Dartington Hall - an experiment in rural reconstruction in which the arts play an important part in the life of the community - was founded in 1925 by Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst. By 1935 it had become the centre for the Kurt Jooss Ballet School, the Hans Oppenheim Music and Opera School, and an art school under the guidance of the gifted American artist, Mark Tobey. At Dartington, Michael Chekhov found the artistic freedom he sought, and the creative climate in which to develop his method with a permanent group; to train assistant directors and teachers; to collaborate with playwrights and designers in accordance with his theories of theatre, and finally to form a travelling repertory company.

World War II caused the Chekhov Theatre Studio to move to Ridgefield, Connecticut, bringing with it many of its trained students and staff. Once again I assisted Beatrice Straight and Michael Chekhov in the practical tasks of reorganizing the Studio's life. In addition to teaching and acting, I continued with Chekhov the always important work on the material for his book. A theatre was built in Ridgefield, and The Chekhov Theatre Players, a professional acting company, was formed from selected members of the group, of which I was one. Dostoyevsky's The Possessed and Shakespeare's Twelfth Night were performed on Broadway in 1939 and 1941 respectively. Adding Dickens' Cricket on the Hearth and Shakespeare's King Lear to its repertoire, and Troublemaker-Doublemaker (a fairy tale Theatre production for children's audiences) the company



went on tour from Maine to Texas for two seasons.<sup>4</sup> During this time, Chekhov gave a number of lecture courses to professional actors from Broadway, and to members of the Group Theatre. The war forced the Chekhov Theatre Studio to disband in 1942, when many of its actors were called to serve in the armed forces.

The last decade of Chekhov's life was spent in Hollywood, where he exerted a significant influence on the acting world through his teaching and coaching of leading actors, his lectures, and his outstanding portrayals in a number of films.<sup>5</sup> Chekhov died in Hollywood in 1955.

One of the most involved and least explored aspects of the actor's art is the psychology of creativity, and it is one which deeply concerned Michael Chekhov throughout his artistic life. As an actor whose originality, ardent temperament, and brilliant technique personified true creativity, he won the admiration of his Russian contemporaries, one of whom, Seraphima Birman, wrote: "Chekhov's talent is almost inexplicable; he is a phenomenon nobody has succeeded in deciphering." To "decipher" for others the creative experience which he himself knew so well, became his lifelong goal, and the efforts to codify his intuitive knowledge

<sup>4</sup> The children's fantasy, *Troublemaker-Doublemaker*, was written by Michael Chekhov and the American playwright, Arnold Sundgaard.

<sup>5</sup> "Spellbound," "Rhapsody," "The Spectre of the Rose," "In Our Time," "Cross my Heart," "Song of Russia," and "Abie's Irish Rose," to name a few.



resulted in the principles set forth in his Method. This he was urged to do by Stanislavsky, who once told him: "Organize and write down your thoughts concerning the technique of acting. It is your duty and the duty of everyone who loves the theatre and looks devotedly to its future."

In 1953 Chekhov's revealing introductory book on his Method was published. Entitled To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting, it is a revised and condensed form of the earlier more detailed versions on which I had worked with him. Currently used as a textbook in college drama departments and theatre schools, it has been translated into French, and Spanish. In 1962, the book, Michael Chekhov's to the Director and Playwright, by Charles Leonard, appeared. The source material for this book was provided, to a large extent, by a series of twelve remarkable lectures which were recorded on tape shortly before Chekhov died.

Chekhov's fundamental artistic principles are defined by him in great detail in the material I have accumulated as the basis for my book, comprising a verbatim, unabridged record of spontaneous expressions of his thinking during the period of 1936-1942, with which I am especially familiar. This is a unique body of work in the annals of the theatre, constituting as it does an almost complete chronicle of <sup>a</sup> greatly gifted, unusually articulate artist, during a period when he was engaged both in developing his original Method and in evaluating his ideas in the light of practical theatre experiments and productions.