

Michael Chokhov

July 21, 1938

FIRE
OUR METHOD
IMAGINATION - MEDITATION

We must say goodbye to each other, after being together for more than half the time we have to be together. The old friends, and those who have come later and who have joined our inner and outer life so quickly that I count on all of us as having been together from the very beginning. That is my personal feeling - all these distances in time are actually not there. Therefore, I speak to all friends - we are one together - one big group. This shows me how much we have done without doing it - in a friendly way, rather than an artistic way. This means very much for me and for the studio.

What concerns our professional and artistic way, I have to say something which will not be astonishing for you, because it will be quite a comprehensive repetition. It is my duty to repeat things which you have not grasped yet. Before I tell you something about this, I have to announce one point of organization for the next year. Our committee has decided to divide the members of the Studio into two groups - not from the point of view of one being better than the other, but from the technical point of view.

In one group we will have members who have jobs other than that of actors. For instance, Miriam is a designer, therefore she will be a member of a separate group. Nickie is a musician so he also belongs to the other group. Such

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people will be here by special agreement. It is more convenient for me and for the organization. There must be a definite reason why the person wants to enter this group - which we will call "B" - and there must be an individual agreement between the person and the school.

Now about the artistic development, I am almost ashamed to repeat what I have told you many times. Throughout my experience as a teacher and director in Russia, and other European countries such as Germany and France, this is quite a new experience for me with English and American students. After having been with you for two years, I have tried to find out what this new experience is that I have got from you. There are, of course, many things which I appreciate and love, and I am very thankful to all of you for these new things which you have revealed to me; but there are things which are not very satisfactory for me, and about these I must tell you.

I have never seen, in any of my previous experiences, such slow development, and this makes me very unhappy. But what I am most sad about is that I cannot understand why. This makes me disturbed. The development is slow - not only individually and personally - the development is slow as a group as well as individuals.

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I have tried to ask myself what is the reason. I don't know, but I have some ideas about it; and one of the ideas is that perhaps it has to do with the moment, with the unbridled art of the moment. As the theatre art was, until today, an unbridled field of something which is indefinite, which was considered more as an art of the lips, but inwardly no one has had the feeling that this is an art.

The theatre has been a field in which the person may make a vague display, or display one's own soul. A field where there are so many stars who appear, God knows from where, and disappear. Such a world of glittering chaos - that was always the theatre. And many young people in all countries were imagining a shining figure of their own, an egotistical future. Perhaps they are stars.

This kind of thinking about the theatre and films which was empty, wrong, cheap, and not even human in its approach, has given the impression to our fathers, and to us, and to our children that the theatre is something like a big sea, into which one may jump and swim and flounder, or step off on the shore and leave it - something cheap.

Therefore, we met this problem from quite a different angle, so that from the very first day you felt that there was something serious in this school - there is a Method - there

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is something which must be learned, exercises created with effort and with the application of our thoughts and other powers, and our souls. We have met something which we were perhaps not intending to meet, and our nature received a certain kind of shock.

This is just one of my thoughts, and perhaps I am absolutely wrong. Our nature got a certain shock - perhaps the nature rejects this serious and maybe too serious approach to the art, which seemed to me quite a different thing. You enter the school with quite different ideas - to sing, to whistle, to dance your life through the school and perhaps become a star, and the meeting with this quite different approach has perhaps created certain inner conflict, which stops your nature with which you entered the school, not wanting to work really seriously upon this theatre.

If you had had in your nature this desire to pursue your life as a serious, long, difficult path, perhaps you would go to the University and not to the theatre school.

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Perhaps you would try to study social activities - there are many ways in life to apply a serious desire to live consciously, and you have the aim to develop the seriousness of your soul. If so, then to a certain extent this slow development can be explained because the nature was not wanting to go this way.

If it is so, then I have another idea which tells me that I have seen my friends and students in many stages. I remember all of them and I know these stages and know the development of each of you, and I must say that the moment when the nature was shocked by this serious unexpected thing has already passed and gone and many of your natures have accepted this, otherwise you would not stay here. I have seen how your natures have accepted this new approach, but then the question arises from this point. After this period of time why is the development as slow as before?

FIRE:

This is again another question, and here is the thing which I have to repeat to you, here is another point - the point when I must shout to you again the question of "fire". Because the development is there quite definitely, and I speak now about slow development, ^{The reason for this is} possibly this first shock, lack of fire, lack of human activity? This fire must be found, not only on the stage but through your human approach to the whole problem of your being here in the school.

If you tell me you have fire, I will tell you that

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it is a wrong idea because you have not yet discovered the fire. It may happen. If someone were to come and tell me that there is no talent in our school; you are working in vain; you are asking for fire in vain; it is simply an empty running machine; I will answer this person by saying, yes, genius and brilliancy is, of course, like a jewel in a big vast field, lying somewhere, and it is difficult to hope, and hopeless to hope, that the whole school will consist of geniuses or even big talents. If they are not born, they are not born; if they are not interested in the theatre, they are not; if they are not interested in our school, they are not. We have to work with the material which is here, and even if the geniuses will come it will not be the whole theatre. Even with five gifted persons it is not yet the theatre; the theatre consists of twenty-five persons at least.

Who are these twenty-five persons, intelligent people with real good fire, and understanding, and love of work, and with the ability to do consciously work in the form of a theatre? This is the school; this is the theatre. So it is wrong to say that we have no geniuses; if it is necessary they will come but we are going to build a theatre and not a star organization. For perhaps five years a star is young and has a marvelous success, and then disappears. This is not our aim, our approach, our ideal, and the means which we use is quite a different thing. Even one star will be too many for us because we have a group ideal, and our ideal is

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that if someone is gifted five percent, and another ninety five percent, the other need not be a heavy weight on this talent. Our idea is to develop this five percent so that the person will get from this five percent of his or her talent as much as possible. This means to create a group and if the group will be blessed from above, talent and genius will come and crown this group. Everyone will accept such talent because who does not like to work with a genius? There are no fools among us who will not accept such a genius.

But we have to be honest with ourselves, and say that whether I have five percent or twenty five percent or fifty percent gift in my nature, here is the place where I can develop it. Here is the place where I must decide the question which is, do I really want to develop my talent to its greatest extent or not? You will not find other schools which will be concerned with your talent more than other things which will come before your talent.

So the first question is the "shock," The second question is, "take the decision." We must decide whether we want to do this. I have no other means; I have only a certain method to give you. Do you want to be developed? And the third question is the question of "fire". Because even if you get the desire to go on this way, you will not be able to if the utmost important point of your soul or spiritual being is simply sleeping.

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If you will tell me you have no fire, I will answer you that I myself have seen fire in each one of you. I have seen it. I can tell you the moments when the fire was there. So the question is not to have or not to have the fire, the question is where is it sitting? Why do you allow yourselves to live the whole day without any spark and quite accidentally - there is nothing accidental when the method is there - you make it accidental very often, but the idea is not there. Please, where is this fire? Give me this fire and then we can go this way together.

The reason I put such emphasis on it is because without this fire there is nothing for the Method to be applied to. The method applied to the brain is an empty, shallow thing. I can explain the whole method to you in some few hours, including the rhythmical part, because you have always been dragging me back and I cannot go on with this beautiful work - always some hole opens up in front of us. I can explain it in a few hours to you, and some of you know it but you cannot use it.

OUR METHOD:

I am an old actor - I have found out this Method and have taken things from others as well, but I myself was never educated in such a method. Under Stanislavsky's Method I was not educated in such a way, but I could radiate the atmosphere better than you do. Why? If you discover the fire you will do all these things and you will do them better because I was not educated in the right way, but you can be and will

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be. You will be educated in this way. You will not be amateurs, and this is a new thing in our profession. You can be pioneers if you want, and this is a great thing. If you shut your eyes to this pioneering then we will lose something which is so important for our whole life as artists and as human beings.

Try to feel this difference - before the method came into our art, first through Stanislavsky, and the second attempt which is now being made in our school to continue and develop this method. It is a certain important period in our art, so don't miss this opportunity to be pioneers in the cultural life of the theatre, which is part of the world of art, and this can be a very noble part - it is not yet, but it can be.

No one, sitting in a concert will actually speak in a free manner about whether the concert is good or bad, because the person does not feel himself educated enough to be speaking about the music as easily as he would refer to a bad actor. Why do people judge so freely about actors? Because there is nothing to know about them. If the actor is lucky enough to get a part, anyone has the right to judge him. But if we have some method, some technique, some special development, then the critics will not be able to say, "bad actor." What do they mean? Be silent and let only the person who knows more speak about our art. It is something which can lift our art to a higher standard, and be part of the cultural life of humanity.

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It is clear - fire! After you take the decision to go our way you must find something about this fire. If you have not taken the decision it means that the fire is not wanted, because when the fire is there decisions are taken every moment. If the person has the fire to get up from a chair, it is a fiery decision. But if the person has no fire, then he gets up from the chair and does not even notice that he is already walking. We must take one decision after another, and this big decision which you must make can awaken the fire.

Nowadays so many people are taking the decision about what they will do if war comes. Almost everyone is concerned with this problem. I know some persons who were cowards and quite unable to think of fighting, but what have I seen? When the person has taken the decision to fight, at that moment fire came out of his whole being. It is a very understandable thing, because the decision was taken. In such a sharp and terrible problem as the war which now depends upon two or three dark persons in the world, we are simply victims of these dark personalities, but the problem is there.

Now, on a smaller scale this is the same principle which faces us, to take the decision about our life in our profession. If the decision is take the fire will come as an answer.

IMAGINATION - MEDITATION:

How to get this fire is our problem, so I ask you

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to take from me as a school task the exercise to meditate each day on the theme: "To imagine myself acting or rehearsing, on the stage, in the room, in costume, with make-up, with the "fire." Try to meditate on the problem of your personal fire. In some cases I don't have know your meditative ability, but if you overstrain yourselves it will have quite the opposite result. So for five minutes each day, every day. If you miss for one day because you are busy, then the work will suffer from it. Each day which is missed will kill five days of work. So it is worthwhile to choose five minutes each day and meditate upon yourself as a fiery artist - an actor. If you ask me what you should do during the summer time I will ask you for nothing but meditation on fire, imagination on fire, because real imagination is meditation.

When we meet next term I will expect you to bring this fire. Not waiting for something which perhaps will come, perhaps not. The time for perhaps is gone. For the dictators of the world there are no perhapses, and we must answer this with our strong will. This is our only answer. If we think that dictators will draw us into war, and that there is nothing for us to do but wait for our destiny, this is simply to lower ourselves to the level of the animal consciousness. In our small sphere we have to be the person, the most important person in the sense that we must be the most powerful, the most helpful and the most productive. To be humble enough and to be brave enough, this is the

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composition. Because to be only brave is the way to the mad-house, and to be only modest means to die before death comes. The composition of the two things makes the real life.

Children! Fire, fire, fire! It is the only thing I accept from you, and it is the only thing you must accept from yourselves. We will meet next time and without mentioning this word we will see whether the fire is there. If the fire is there we will have won our big fight, if not we are defeated.

Thank you very much for you, because I have received very much from you as friends and as human beings, and so we shall go on in friendship, and in the belief that we will discover these things which will lead us to the real results in our small sphere which perhaps may become in time a big one - nobody knows.

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