

0928  
New York  
November 7, 1941

MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S FIRST CLASS FOR PROFESSIONAL ACTORS

"WHY IS A METHOD NEEDED IN THE THEATRE OF TODAY?"  
(Checked and Corrected by Michael Chekhov)

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Hamlet  
Stanislavsky  
Dr. Rudolf Steiner

THE NEED FOR AN ACTING TECHNIQUE:

I think today will be a kind of introduction as I will speak mainly in general. First of all, let us ask why is a method needed in the theatre? It seems that the theatre goes on so well without any such difficulties as a "method". Yes, it can go on like that and will go on for a long time, but still it seems to me that the time will come when everyone of us will become somehow unhappy, simply because our profession [lacks a technique] - excuse me if I say things that offend you about our profession, but I must speak honestly to you what I feel about the theatre, and perhaps you will forgive me when you realize that I also am an actor and, therefore, offend myself in offending you.

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Sometime we will realize that our profession is the only one which has no technique. A painter has to develop a technique, a musician, a dancer, every artist, but somehow we actors are left alone - we are acting because we want to act, and we act just as it goes. Something must be wrong.

This painful feeling that our profession has no technique made me unhappy to the extent that I tried to find what kind of technique it could be. And then I saw that our profession is even more difficult than any other, because we have only one instrument with which to convey to the audience our feelings, our emotions, our ideas - our own body. It is terrifyingly true.

#### THE ACTOR'S BODY AS AN INSTRUMENT:

I use this same body for everything in my daily life, I use my voice for everything, for quarrelling, for making love, for expressing my indifference. It is strange to realize that I have nothing more to show to the audience than myself. I found it difficult to find a justification for using the most abused thing in my life, my body, as something which I have to show every evening as a new thing, interesting, attractive. My own body, my own emotions, my own voice - I have nothing except myself.

Then I understood that if it is so that the actor cannot have a musical instrument or a brush, or paint, then

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he must have a special kind of technique which he must find inside himself. If we find this technique, or at least the approach to this hidden, mysterious thing sitting in ourselves, then maybe we shall get to the point where we shall hope to have a technique.

After many years of trying to find this technique I found that everything we need in order to develop such a technique is already there in us, if we are born as actors. That means that we have only to find out which sides of our own nature have to be stressed, underlined, exercised, and the whole technique will be there. Because while we act, good or bad, we are using our own nature but in a very chaotic way, in such a way that one part of our nature is disturbing the other part and the third part comes in between, and something else falls down upon us, etc. But the elements are there, the thing is how to anatomize our own nature - to find what is a, b, c, and d, and then when a, is well-shaped and b, is well-shaped, we can let these letters come intuitively together and create words which will mean something and will not be so chaotic.

I have found three things - when I say "found", I mean I have been attentive to certain points and they have become obvious; I have invented nothing - the three realms which have, first of all, to be distinguished. 1. our bodies. 2. our voices. 3. our emotions. At first I thought that we

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must keep each one of them apart and try to develop them as if in different rooms. But I found that when we start to develop the body, for instance, we find a very interesting thing. Trying to make exercises with our bodies only, in a purely physical way, we find gradually that we are already in the other room where our emotions are. So that our body becomes, later on, nothing other than our psychology incorporated in our whole body - hands, fingers, eyes, etc.

#### THE ACTOR'S PSYCHOLOGY:

Thus, the body becomes part of our psychology, which is a very interesting experience and a very surprising one. Suddenly we feel that this same body which we use the whole day through for going here and there, this body is a different one when we are on the stage, because there it becomes, as it were, my condensed, crystallized psychology. If I have something inside me, it becomes my hand, my arm, my cheek, my eye, etc.

Then we go into the other room, where pure psychology is - nothing to do with the body, only ideas, feelings, will impulse, etc., - and we try to develop them as purely psychological things. Suddenly we discover that it is our body also. If I am unhappy, it is my body, my face, my arms, my hands, every part of me becomes unhappy if I have trained my body sufficiently, but it is possible only if my psychology has been developed separately from the beginning.

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## THE INTELLECT:

Then they, the body and the psychology, find each other somewhere in the sub-conscious regions of our creative soul, and when they meet each other, we find the following thing: that all that we have to do on the stage is to find out gradually that when the developed psychology and the developed body find each other and join together in our sub-conscious life, then we have to exclude one disturbing element in our profession. It is our dry intellect which tries to interfere with our emotions, with our body, with our art. Intellect in the sense of dry thinking. Perhaps you will help me to find the right term because actually "intellect" is a very high term. But by intellect, we mean a cold, dry, analytical approach to things which cannot be approached in this way. This is the only difficulty we must exclude.

We have to rely on the training of our bodies on the one hand, and the training of our emotions on the other, and on excluding this intellect for the time being. This does not mean that one has to become a fool - but to rely upon our emotions, on our bodies, and not to rely upon this clear, cold thinking, this "murderer", which sits in our head. Later on it will become very useful when it sees that it cannot kill the body or the emotions, because it is in the actor's power. I can become gay and laugh, or sorry and thoughtful as I wish because I have trained myself.

Then the intellect becomes very useful because it

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makes clear for me everything in my profession - starting with the written play and finishing with the production on the stage. Every detail becomes full of meaning, full of sense, because the intellect knows that it cannot do anything but serve me. But to start by making agreements with the intellect, to fawn before it, to obey it, then we are lost. When the intellect is allowed to become the master, it becomes a fool, an evil fool and a merciless one. Everything which the intellect can make clear it makes obscure if it knows, "I am the only master." Then we are lost.

#### THE ACTOR'S VOICE:

So the first scheme I want to convey to you is to anatomize the body, emotions, and voice and have nothing to do with the intellect. The body becomes the soul and the soul the body, and the intellect is allowed to come and serve. The voice is a special thing and a very interesting one. I cannot speak about the voice here because it is not my special field, but the method which we use in our school, that of Dr. Rudolf Steiner, is a very interesting and profound one, and also the results are not immediately obvious, and this is very good. When the results are there, they are of such a kind that our voice becomes a fine instrument for expressing and conveying the most subtle psychological things. The technique of using our voice according to this method, is of such kind that we can send the voice either in high or low

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tones over a distance which seems sometimes impossible.

#### THE ORIGINS OF THE THEATRE:

The second point is - speaking again only in general - that very often we professional people forget one thing. We forget that everything which starts must be finished - just as with a plant. The seed is put into the ground, the long process of growing takes place, and another seed is the result and goes into the ground again, etc., etc. Just so with the theatre. Once the human race found it necessary to express and experience for itself certain things which they called "theatre". You know, of course, the origin of the theatre and how profound and deep it is. After this profound experience which humanity had - mostly religious, many thousands of years ago - the process of using the theatre degenerated more and more and went to the most ignoble depths. But the beginning was very high and the end will be still higher.

Therefore, there is very much to do in the theatre. Many things have to be rediscovered so that the beginning will become the end. And I think we must do everything we can to make the theatre more noble, more complicated, as it were, because this will serve our human culture more than anything else. All the moral preaching is nothing in comparison with the theatre, if one has the vision as to what will be the end of this beginning. And if one has only the courage to say that we are in a state of degeneration.

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#### THE DEGENERATION OF THE THEATRE:

What was at the beginning, and what must be at the end, and what is the degeneration? In the beginning, as you know, the theatre was the means of getting certain impulses from somewhere else to enrich one's experience. The end will be to enrich the surrounding life by giving back all the experiences which the human being can accumulate more and more, and become so rich and full of precious ideas, emotions, and will impulses and give them back through the theatre. The moment of degeneration is the little, dry, condensed, egotistical self - I am a very small little thing, and I am showing on the stage how I love, how I hate - me, me, me. This is degeneration, this condensed and closed, "I am", is the sign that the theatre has degenerated, and instead of getting things, or giving things, one enjoys oneself on the stage in the most egotistical and selfish way.

#### THE ACTOR'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE CONTEMPORARY LIFE:

The whole life which we have now can be used again for accumulating things, and for preserving them in our souls, if we want to be actors who are inclined to go this way. For instance, to say to oneself, there is a war. Of course, we cannot really imagine what is going on over there, or <sup>we</sup> would become insane. This lack of imagination allows us to go on living - but to a certain extent we can, we are obliged to ima-

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gine the war there. We are obliged to live, for instance, with our dreams. We awaken in the morning, and we know we have dreamed, but we don't think any more about it. But we must make an effort sometimes to remember our dreams upon awakening - why we were laughing or crying, happy, sad, etc. Or I have to imagine the psychology of Hitler, for instance, although it is a very unpleasant business. To penetrate into this man - the most unimaginative mind in the world because he does not know what he is doing, therefore, he has no imagination - only a will and nothing more. But we have to understand what he is, or we have nothing to do on the stage. Just as we have to understand Francis of Assisi as much as we can. We will not become insane if we do this consciously, and by our own will. We will remain absolutely sane, but if we deny this necessity to penetrate into these minds they will penetrate into ours, and then we will become insane.

This moment will come, but it is better that we do it ourselves and enrich our actor's soul. Then, if we have found some slight understanding of Francis of Assisi and Hitler, and all that lies between them, then it may happen that we appear before the audience on the stage, and suddenly we will be able to produce such things, have such radiation, that Francis of Assisi will act there, so will Hitler, but they will be used and will serve us because we have understood and digested them.

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THE THEATRE OF THE FUTURE:

These are the means which I believe we, as contemporary actors, must use in order to come out of this state of degeneration; consciously to absorb things and let them live in us and torture us - we have to suffer if we have anything to say, because if we are only happy, we have nothing to say. Then, when we have Francis of Assisi and Hitler in us somewhere, we will inevitably realize what the theatre can and will be some day.

We shall understand many things. First of all, we will see that all the points in our Method are keys which open our own nature for us. All those closed doors, behind which we shall find Hitler whom we manage and govern, and Francis of Assisi who inspires us. All the black things we possess, all the white things we get, and then we can mix the colors and they will mix themselves inside us. Then we shall really enjoy our profession because we have the vision of the future theatre. We have our own actor's creative nature in our own will, and, as actors and artists, we have more than we have as private persons. As private persons, we "know" very much and it is useless for our art - as artists we "know" very little but these little things are so big they make up the whole life for us. This is point two. We will make all these points more concrete by taking each point of the Method separately.

(Intermission)

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#### THE PERFORMANCE:

We will not make a great mistake if we compare the performance as an independent being, with the individual human being. We know that human beings have ideas, thoughts, and that we have our feelings and emotions, which are quite different from what we call thoughts or ideas, and we also have our will impulses. Three different regions which can be separated one from the other - 1. ideas. 2. feelings. 3. will impulses.

The same is true of the performance - I don't mean the written play because that is only the score, only the symbol and indication of what we have to add, but it is not yet the performance. I mean the performance on the stage where everything lives, moves and exists.

#### THE ATMOSPHERE:

The performances as an independent being has also the idea, the "what" that is going to be shown. All that we have on the stage which is "what," is the world of ideas on the stage. Then we have in the performance the realm of feelings, the heart-beat, as it were, and these we call the "atmosphere" of the performance. It is not the feelings of this or that actor, it is the feeling which belongs to the performance itself, to nobody but to the performance.

For instance, let us take some examples to illustrate what I mean by this "atmosphere," which does not belong

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to anyone but still exists. Let us imagine a street accident - there is a definite atmosphere around the place where the catastrophe has taken place. When you enter the scene where all the people are running or moving or standing still, you, first of all, feel the atmosphere before you understand what it is that has happened. To whom does this "heart-beat" belong? To nobody. The policeman has quite different feelings, but he has not produced the atmosphere. The victim has different feelings, but still it is not the atmosphere of the catastrophe. We look on helplessly, but our mood is also different. To whom does this atmosphere belong? - to no one. You can't find the person who has created this atmosphere of the catastrophe, and still it is there.

This is a very strange thing, and psychologists cannot explain it. They try to figure it out by means of the dry intellect - from where does this atmosphere come and to whom does it belong - it cannot be explained, but it is there. Let us take another example - you enter an old castle. In whatever mood you are in, you feel immediately something of the atmosphere of the castle. Who created this atmosphere? No one is there. The walls, doors, and windows? It is there, and you even feel, just as you did when you underwent the painful atmosphere of the catastrophe on the street, that first there is a little fight between your own mood and feelings and the atmosphere, and either you push it away from you,

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or you give in to it. Either it is stronger than you are, or you are stronger than it is. Just the same with the castle - you may enter it in a very gay mood, and suddenly something comes over you. In the castle it is perhaps pleasant to accept the atmosphere and merge with it, but there is still a moment when it is questionable which will conquer - the atmosphere or your will.

Each performance should have an atmosphere which does not belong to anyone but belongs to the performance itself. Each scene in the performance must have its own atmosphere - I say "must" because it is not always there. Why? Because of the intellect we have spoken about, this dry, cold intellect is an enemy not only of our personal feelings, but also of atmospheres in the performance, and of the atmosphere of the performance as a whole, because the intellect cannot stand feelings. It knows that as soon as we allow our heart, as the realm of feelings, to become alive, the intellect immediately feels it has to think differently. All its knowledge and convictions mean nothing at the moment when we allow our heart to produce its values.

#### THE FEELINGS:

In our present culture - not only in America, but in the whole world and before the war, because now it is a bit different, - our present disease is that we have closed and shut our hearts to such an extent, that we cannot not only

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produce atmospheres on the stage, but we are ashamed to show our feeling to each other, knowing that in one's head instinctively sits a devil who will laugh at all our feelings if we dare to show them. If that is so, then, of course, we cannot create any atmosphere on the stage, and we are compelled to show only an imitation of our own personal "I am" feelings, and "I am" is not an interesting person - my personal feelings mean nothing when shown from the stage. It has to be something bigger than "I am", and the atmosphere on the stage is one of the means to show more than one could show if one relies only upon his own little "I am". Atmosphere gives us the air, the space around us. It coaxes our deeper feelings and emotions, our dreams, our Francis of Assisi, our Hitler. Without atmosphere we are imprisoned on the stage.

There are certain means by which we can create the atmosphere on the stage and let me tell you in general about them. The atmosphere, "the soul" of the performance, the realm of the feelings, is what our present time needs more than anything else. We are not free inwardly because we are afraid of our own hearts, and the hearts of our fellow actors. First of all, we have to learn, to train ourselves as actors to discover in our everyday life the atmospheres which are around us everywhere. This can be done very consciously. You can enter different rooms, different streets, buildings, etc., and ask yourself what atmosphere is there. Very soon

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you will see that there are atmospheres everywhere - strongly expressed, powerful atmospheres. This first attempt to understand, to absorb the atmosphere will be the first step to the ability to create it on the stage. For instance, the atmosphere of this room in which we are sitting is a very strong and obvious one. If we pay attention to it, we will realize that it is there and that we have not created it individually.

The second step can be the following. When reading plays, for instance, we can try to find which atmosphere would be the most expressive one for this scene, for this moment, for this part of the scene. We can do this pleasant exercise when reading plays. Take Othello, for instance. If you are trained and sensitive to atmosphere, you will find that the tragedy of Othello has an atmosphere which you could never confuse with any other of Shakespeare's tragedies. Twelfth Night has a definite atmosphere, and so has any modern play. There is nothing in the whole world without atmosphere except our dry, cold, intellect which knows nothing about atmosphere and fights it.

The third way to be able to manage atmospheres is to imagine the atmosphere we want to create on the stage, to imagine it objectively as being in the actual air around us. But not yet in us. We can imagine that this room is filled with smoke, with blue smoke, with gray smoke, or with a

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fragrance. It is easy to imagine that. Or we can imagine that the air is filled with sorrow. It is just as easy as to imagine it filled with smoke. The mistake would be to try to feel that you have to be sorry. No, sorrow is everywhere around you and yet you are free from it.

If we imagine that the air is filled with sorrow, then we can do anything we like in it. We can move, we can speak, we can sit quietly, but we must try to be in harmony with this imaginary atmosphere. This is also very easy. It is only difficult if we try to force ourselves to feel sorrow. This is wrong.

Now try to imagine how you must move in order to be in harmony with this imaginary atmosphere. If you have trained your body by means of other exercises, you will be able to move in harmony with this atmosphere of sorrow. And as soon as you begin to produce these simple movements, there begins to be something inside you like a life, which can be called, "I am sorry". Without any reason. In our art we don't have to have reasons. As soon as we have to have reasons, we can do nothing with them, and then it is not art. The actor must be able to cry without any reason, simply because he is an actor. If he cannot cry immediately, then he must leave the stage. If he has to recall the death of his father, poor old man, etc., etc., then he is not an actor. If I can be angry without any reason, then I am an

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actor, but if I have to think of Himmler, whom I hate, before I can be angry, then I am not an actor. Everything has to be at my disposal because everything is developed.

As soon as we imagine the atmosphere and imagine it in the air around us, and then move in it in harmony, then our feelings will arise, and we can act with pleasure. The next step will be to radiate back this atmosphere. We have to increase it, because if we get something from certain inspiration, there is nothing for us to do but to give it back - to mirror it. Atmosphere has the ability to be increased to a very great extent if we are able to send it out.

Here again is a very subtle point. We can egotistically enjoy the atmosphere and keep it for ourselves, but it will immediately die out. Whereas, the more we give it back, the more it will increase. But because all actors in all countries are to a certain extent egotistical, they are afraid of the audience. They depend upon the opinion of the audience, and this egotistical contraction and fear before the audience is so great that we cannot mirror anything and all our efforts are only "pushing," with our words, with our faces, with our clichés, because we are afraid of the audience. Instead of letting the audience collaborate with us and then it will be "our" performance, working together because the atmosphere is there.

The significance of atmosphere in our time is perhaps

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more important than anything else because I think the theatre is, and will be, one of the most important cultural mediums for present humanity. Because the atmosphere, just as it opens our own hearts if we imagine it around us, it opens the hearts of everyone in the audience. And if we, through our profession, are able to open the hearts of our fellow men we shall create a miracle. Because the thing which we lack so much is feelings in our life, and if we want to serve our present time, it does not mean that we necessarily have to take a modern play, about modern times, just written. We can take a play written hundreds of years ago, if we are able by means of this play to awaken human beings to things which are sitting so deeply inside them - things which we keep so closed and suppressed that we cannot understand the things which are going on around us. We cannot understand the war in Europe, we cannot understand what is coming to us, what is going to happen, what will be the end of Hitler, we cannot understand anything because we do not feel it. But we must understand. When the heart is torn to pieces and is open and the intellect becomes a servant, then we immediately see what Hitler is, what he has already got, what we cannot avoid, what we can avoid - all these social, cultural problems can be solved by the means of our beautiful, mysterious, great profession, the theatre. And the atmosphere is the means by which we can speak to the audience about things without using words to speak to, to listen to.

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Many years ago I tried the following experiment while acting Hamlet. I tried to act Hamlet each night not as I wanted to, but as the audience wanted me to. It was very interesting because each evening I got different suggestions and questions, as it were, from the audience. If it was an audience from the street, I got one thing. If it was a group of teachers, I got quite another lot of questions, and they had to be answered differently. And so on.<sup>1</sup> So I am absolutely positive that if the atmosphere is there, the audience will tell us so many things and we shall tell them so many things which they really need and which we really need and our time needs - only by means of atmosphere.

And here again is a very interesting thing. In the present theatre we rely very much on the meaning of the word and we speak from the stage the content, the meaning, the "what;" and, therefore, we don't need as if any atmosphere, because we can say the "what" without any atmosphere. But as soon as an atmosphere is there, let us say the atmosphere of love, you will presently forget the meaning and speak something much more. Our language, our words, will become so full of "meaning," which is more than "content." And if we speak these loving words in the atmosphere or hatred, for instance, it is a very interesting combination, a collision of things which makes it interesting. Super-human, under-human, anything but the bare thing itself.

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So the atmosphere is the best director. No director can suggest things which the atmosphere can, and if it is there and the actors are agreed upon certain atmospheres and really create them, you will find that you are acting tonight not just as you acted yesterday - it will be different because the atmosphere is the life and the life is never the same. On the stage we will find such a variety of things inside us, if we become inspired by atmospheres we create ourselves.

Now, let me finish my comparison of the performance as an independent being, with the human being. The performance is the idea, the "what," the realm of feelings, the atmosphere, and the will. Everything which we can see on the stage with our eyes, everything that is audible, belongs to the realm of the will of the performance. It moves, it is there, it is a constant process. And if we shall define these three things, we shall find later on the place where and how to apply certain points of the method.

#### THE OBJECTIVE:

Let us take an example from Stanislavsky's Method - the "objective". Very often actors try by mistake to apply the objective to the realm of ideas - it cannot be applied there - it has to be applied to the realm of the will, because the objective is that which I am going to do, to act, that which I want. We need only move inwardly to the objective, and be still outwardly, because inwardly we are always moving.

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While sitting there, if you realize it, you will find you are moving inwardly. I can move visibly with my hands, my body, my eyes, and I can also move only inwardly, and that is the realm of the objective.

#### RADIATION:

Of course, we can take another point - radiation. Consciously radiate so that you feel that you are giving out everything you can to your audience. Of course, it has to do with the will very much, but you can radiate your feelings. It is the realm of the heart.

If this division of thought, feeling, and will seems to be intellectual and dry, it only seems to be because when you feel that you can really manage these three levels concretely, you can plunge into the realm of ideas, or become absolutely filled with the realm of feelings. You can live in the realm of the heart, as well as in the realm of the will. When you feel it concretely and it is no longer an abstract idea, which it seems to be in our talk today, when it becomes concrete, then you will see that all these things are the means of expression, are tools in our profession, and this temporary anatomizing will lead us later on to such a composition of things in us, such a harmonious composition, that we shall be able to discover in ourselves many things which want to be awakened but we don't allow them, because of the chaos which is going on in our actor's nature while we are

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preparing the play.

DEVELOPING THE ACTOR'S NATURE:

Now, the last thing for today. The way to develop our own nature takes time. We have to use a certain amount of time and effort for training ourselves, but after this period of training which may be a long one, we will find it a real economy of time. Sometimes this period of training is mistaken in our profession for a loss of time, when we have to produce plays in four weeks. We think that if this training takes years there must be something wrong. The wrong is only if we think the period of training is an eternal one. No. It is a long one, but when it is accomplished it is such an economy of time. When you can laugh, cry, sing, be happy, at once - when you have trained your imagination so that you can see the whole of Othello at once - that is real economy of time.

If we don't have to keep our hands in our pockets for the first two weeks before we overcome our sense of shame, we will realize what our hands and arms can do for us as means of expression. If we are free to move our hands and arms from our center and not from our joints and are free, then we can speak of economy of time. So really it is the greatest economy of time to spend a long period of time in training. When everything is there, after a long period of training, then I will believe that the performance can be done even in two weeks. But not now.