

Michael Chokhov

September 25, 1939

THE IDEA OF THE PERFORMANCE  
 FIRE  
 UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEANING OF THE PLAY  
 IMPORTANCE OR UNIMPORTANCE OF THE INNER LINE  
 MEDITATING ON THE IDEAS OF THE PLAY  
 THE MAGIC OF THE WORD  
 THE OBJECTIVE  
 THE ACTOR'S PROFESSION

The Possessed Run-through:

The opening night of The Possessed will probably be about the 23rd of October. By then some people who have finished the school course will have received their diplomas. We will start our regular rehearsals in the theatre with lights, settings, make-up, etc., and so we will approach this "to be or not to be" in our lives. Who is going to act the first performances, and who will act the second, I cannot tell you. I have many things to consider. In any case, everyone will get an opportunity to act, the question is only who will be the actors on the opening night.

THE IDEA OF THE PERFORMANCE:

I want to explain how we have wanted to help you, and what difficulties you have put in our path. The run-through yesterday was somehow a dull performance and torn to pieces. We have always seen that there are one or two moments which are right and which express the right idea, but the next moment means nothing because the actors don't grasp the idea of the performance, or the whole play. We have come to the decision that this lack of understanding for the play makes the play dull, and secondly not a whole thing.

M. Chekhov

September 25, 1939

FIRE:

We have, therefore, decided to do two things - first, to try to get from you human fire or tempo, in the spiritual sense so that you will get the feeling that you are producing one big gesture, one big performance. Not a series of small lamps, candles, and sparks, but it is one big thing which begins to burn and flame, and is not extinguished until the very end. I have made the effort to inflame you, to give you the tools to keep the whole performance as one big thing, and we got it, but we paid for this because you lost entirely the sense and meaning of the performance by senseless shouting and tension. The performance looked like a madhouse, and those of us who were looking at it got ill. Instead of fire and human presence, we saw a group of people shouting without any sense. You must realize how senselessly you spoke your sentences. We are collaborating, but if you do not know our difficulties, we are not able to go on.

After this mad performance, we have decided to do the following thing: to ask you again to try to understand at least what you are speaking about at different moments. Mr. Shdanoff tried to do this, and he was able to bring back the sense of the performance, but it was again dead. It was as though it were a reading of the text, and there was very little acting, very little human presence, very little

M. Chekhov

September 25, 1939

characters. So this was another extreme. Either it is hysterical and senseless, or it is sensible and dead and has little to do with acting. It is reading, reciting, or declamation, but it is not a performance, and so we are again in great difficulties.

This cannot be shown on October 23, because this speaking of the content is too primitive and cannot be done - there is no art in it, and everyone can become hysterical. It is only a painful thing for the audience, or a dull one. What to do? We have come to the conclusion that we must ask you to help us because we cannot be on the stage acting for you. You have to act, and so you must help us. You must understand our problem which is yours as well. There is only one thing which we are asking from you - please try to get your human fire and be sensible on the stage. That is all. Be sensible and fiery - be fiery and sensible. If you are fiery, you must not lose your brain, and if you are thinking you must not lose your heart and will. We require the will and the clear thinking at the same time. In every day life you are speaking with temperament and ideas, and it should be so on the stage, only with increased life. The stage is increased life, but it is not a place where you act your head off, or where you act your will off. We must try to get the fire for our rehearsals. There were very good moments in the rehearsal, but I am speaking in general.

M. Chekhov

September 25, 1939

Kirilov's fire - he is chasing ideas which escape him. This is his main gesture. Verkhovenski's gesture is to spy. If Kirilov's gesture is chasing his ideas and someone asks him about his name, how will he reply? Everything he says is really, "I am chasing my ideas." It is the main objective, the fire. The fire means to follow the main idea with the whole being. Therefore, when he speaks, he must do so on the basis of the main gesture. Use all the means of our Method, but use them. Verkhovenski's gesture is to catch, to grasp, to choke, to pieces, being possessed. He is catching, grasping, spying, therefore, he must find the artistic and human power to go out of himself and be in Kirilov. Spiritually, he catches him - he has an inner psychological grasp on Kirilov. What is the fire of Stavrogin? His fire in his words lies perhaps in still more retreating.

If you understand this fire as spiritual fire and not noise and muscles, you will understand why you have performed as mad people and why you cannot follow the inner sense but only the intellectual meaning, which is not the meaning of this play. To understand this the actor must meditate more on the play. You do not understand it because there are such depths in this play that you cannot yet grasp. We understand the play much deeper than you do, but you can and must understand it as deeply as possible. Dostoyevsky could never understand what he meant because he was inspired.

M. Chokhov

September 25, 1939

But each of us must dig deeper and deeper and never undergo the illusion that we understand what we are speaking about - we have to dig deeper and deeper.

So far you have understood nothing of the depths. If we have to say such things again and again, it means the actors do not understand. Do not live in this illusion that the play is absolutely understood and deciphered. Imagine that at last you are appearing before the audience. Do you think you will have time at the last moment to persuade them that you are really actors who understand? It will be too late, and they will not be merciful to you. Why do you risk so much? Do you think you can persuade the critics by being mad on the stage? They have seen this, and they will see it is not art but old fashioned melodrama. Do you think you will satisfy them? Dorothy Thompson is much more clever in her writing.<sup>1</sup> We must show something different that is alive in our thoughts.

If Kirilov will imagine that as an actor and an artist he is chasing these intangible things, his thoughts will live. Stavrogin's thoughts will come alive when he is in emptiness, looking everywhere for problems. All Verhovenski's thoughts will come alive if in one scene he will spy, and in another he will clown, and in the next something else. If on this basis we give the intonation, then it will be the right thing and not a mad thing. We must have this basis on

M. Chekhov

September 25, 1939

which we can give suggestions and concrete things.

What is the difference? A little effort to fulfill your professional task fully! Why don't you do it? If you could not do it, I would not bother with you. This is the honest answer to all my efforts, and sometimes it is dishonest because you allow yourselves to forget everything I have worked for with you over the years. It is possible to do it and it must be done, otherwise we lose - you as a group, and everyone with you.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF THE PLAY:

The connection between the three spirits is very important. One spirit is spying, tracking down, killing. Another spirit is quite the opposite - the whole cosmos is before him. When he speaks the word "punishment," there are lots of problems for him: Why does God punish human beings when He has created all these criminals Himself? It is a problem, and Stavrogin lives with this problem. Why have we a conscience when we are born with the ability to kill each other with our guns and everything? Contradiction. The contradiction is punishment. That is a problem. God has created Satan, and He punishes us because of these Stanic powers. Another question: Stavrogin has not solved these problems, therefore, when he asks "punishment?", it means that he has a lot of problems before him, and he is not asking about a small thing. The third spirit is one which has lost

the ground and the aim, and is flying without the hope of finding the ground. As actors, you must feel that this is an important moment.

#### IMPORTANCE OR UNIMPORTANCE OF THE INNER LINE:

Now comes another moment which has no words at all. When Vorkhovenski asks Kirilov to sit down. Would you act this with just the same importance as you have acted the previous scene? If you know the real meaning of the play, you would never act it with the same importance as the scene before. One of the things which makes our performance so "equal" similar is that we do not know what is important and what is not. This is again a lack of meditation on the meaning of the play. By performing the scene as if it is insignificant and unimportant you will get the importance of the inner line.

This is the question of when you are performing on the surface you confuse two things - you try to act it by stressing unimportant words and time. In this scene the time must be bigger and smaller. Whether the word is important, or the process of putting him on the chair is important, whether it is important to drag the time or to compress it. In the moment before the time is big and the word is important - "punishment" is the whole philosophy. The next moment the time is not important, the word is not important - then we will get the importance of the under-current.

M. Chekhov

September 25, 1939

This is what it means to understand what is important and what is not important. Verkhevovski (Woodie) has always done this scene with the same significance, and, therefore, the audience confuses what is important and what is not. We have followed him in the important scene, and he has kept our attention with the same means of tempo and significance in a scene which should be quite the opposite. It should be insignificant, but we follow it with the same interest until our soul dies out. Then we lost our interest, our attention, and our understanding. When we come to the next moment, we don't follow him because he has shown us unimportant things as if they were important. Therefore, we are confused.

There is another meaning which we must know. What is Stavrogin's psychological line during this scene? Emptiness and problems everywhere. Kirilov comes in, and this is the problem which Stavrogin wants to solve - his costume, his words, his heart, his soul, all are problems. Stavrogin lets him enter into his emptiness and lets him speak. Then comes a great disappointment - "And from the destruction of God to the ape..." - the problem cannot be solved by him. Stavrogin cannot remain on the same level, but must climb up and go down. The whole problem is here, the whole psychology of Stavrogin is shown in that moment. That means that the actor must meditate on each part of the scene. In this moment is a very interesting up and down. In this moment



M. Chekhov

September 25, 1939

when he asks the question and speaks the last sentence, he finds out what Kirilov is, and he falls again into this big sorrow in which he lives. That is the meaning of the scene - not in the words, but what is under those words or this group of words.

All these things are the meaning of the play and not the words themselves. What does the whole scene mean from the point of view of Kirilov? He has almost caught his idea, and Stavrogin has got it like a tree, and then the tree falls down. We must see Kirilov chasing and almost reaching it, when he comes to the moment of ecstasy and says, "From the ape..." he has almost got it and then it is gone. The gesture must be up, up, up, and then down. When he climbs to this point where he almost gets it, he does so more in a meditative state - his form is not open. When Verkhovenski says, "Curious, isn't it?", he would not speak if, in his devilish soul, there was not something essentially important to be said. He means listen to the death, the suicide, which speaks through Kirilov.

#### MEDITATING ON THE IDEAS OF THE PLAY:

Such threads and connections must be in your soul, that is why you are obliged to meditate on the play from this point of view. It must be clear to you, and if you will put a lot of explanations under each word, it will be good. It is the art to have under one point the whole world, so you

M. Chekhov

September 25, 1939

must say under this sentence lies many things - for instance, under this "Curious, isn't it?" Verkhevovski really says, "Stavrogin, listen to the voice of death which speaks through the mouth of Kirlov, because I am going to explain to you that we will use him as a living corpse for our aim to kill the whole population and children, to get our aim to be the ideal."

We, as actors, have the right to do this, then our words will become significant by the means of higher significance. If I ask you for the meaning of any sentence anywhere in the play, you must be able to answer from the point of view of the character, from the philosophy of the play, from the main idea which we are aiming to represent through the play. Because if we are not able to answer from the depths, the meaning, we don't have the play.

#### THE MAGIC OF THE WORD:

In olden times, in Egyptian and Persian times - now we laugh at the priests in our churches, but we don't know the history - in ancient times the priest had a magic word. When he was celebrating and when he was speaking the word, it was a magic word. Why? Because under each word which the ancient priest spoke was the whole philosophy, the whole world outlook. Everything under each word. Then the word became magic. Now we laugh at priests because they do not know the

M. Chokhov

September 25, 1939

meaning of this real white magic, but we must not forget that it is something which had the real magic meaning. What is our art, idealistically speaking? We can never be like priests with magic words, but the idea, the technique is just the same. Under each word on the stage must be so much that the word becomes artistic, magical. Only then do we have the right to be on the stage and appear before the audience. That is what we call the meaning of the play and the word. Therefore, you must ask yourselves what is under each word, each sentence, then you will justify your profession.

#### THE OBJECTIVE:

What is Verkhovenski's objective when he says, "See? Understand?", etc.? The moment you have the objective it makes it clear. Therefore, when we speak about objectives, we don't only want to get the objective into our head, but we want to apply it to our work. It is a means by which the actor can have his whole scene in his hands for all time. That is why Stanislavsky invented the objective.

For instance, the director will say use the quality of staccato in order to help the actor not to disappear at this moment. This means that the director gives you only the color or the quality, and you have to take the director's suggestions on the basis of what you have, but it does not mean to discard everything and take only the quality. You make this mistake very often - you discard what you have done

M. Chekhov

September 25, 1939

before and take only the latest suggestion superficially. We want to accumulate qualities and never start each time from the beginning. When we want you to discard things, we, the directors, will tell you definitely. But in the majority of cases we have never told you to discard things, but they just disappear.

We have given you atmospheres, for instance, and we have rehearsed with them, but you have forgotten them. No one has asked you to do it, but you are simply not paying attention to it. For instance, when I gave Verkhovenski a certain quality, it was given in a certain form, but he took only the voice, not the quality. You must take the quality and not discard everything that goes with it. You must do it in the atmosphere, in the character, etc. You must not imitate the director but take the new suggestion on top of all the other things you have. It is your business to paint with all these things - the director's business is only to give the hint. Because if you imitate the director, you will lose everything.

While you are trying to find the objective, you really act the right thing. You must make the effort to clarify the objective of each moment. If you are content with a vague objective, we will get a vague objective. If you feel there is an empty word, an empty sentence in your part, immediately try to find what is the deepest meaning in it, then it

M. Chokhov

September 25, 1939

will cease to be empty. If you will do this fine work, you will be like a magician on the stage, and each sentence will mean something.

Objective for Verhovenski: (1) To frighten Mrs. Stavrogin so that she won't get rid of him. (2) To frighten Stavrogin. (3) To calm Stavrogin. (4) To dull Stavrogin's consciousness. In the scene with Mrs. Stavrogin, try to justify what you say by means of the fact that you are spying - a very, very evil thing - a murderer. You are killing Mrs. Stavrogin - the quality of a murderer.

Why does Verkhovenski want Stavrogin to see Kirilov? You want to amuse him, to show him this trick, and when he swallows it, then it will become a poison. It is as if you were showing him a very dirty, amusing trick. Verkhovenski's objective is to awaken Stavrogin's interest in Kirilov.

Each sentence can be sensible, can be interesting as an objective, and the objective for each sentence can be explained, but you must have in your imagination the whole play, then each sentence will become significant.

From now on, to avoid any unpleasant talks between us, will you please start your study of the play - even if you have only one sentence to say - study the script and ask yourself whether there is a phrase where you don't know what you are speaking about, where you don't know the objective, where you have forgotten the atmosphere, where you don't know

488  
M. Chekhov

September 25, 1939

where the psychological gesture lies, or the connection between each thought, each word.

Try to work upon the play so that if you meet someone after the performance and they ask you whether you have understood what the author meant, you will be able to explain everything, because you have meditated upon the play. This will help you to make it more profound and clever - you are so much more clever than you appear on the stage. You are stupid on the stage sometimes. In everyday life you are clever and fine, but when you enter the stage, you discard your cleverness and become puppets who don't know what they are speaking. It is an old habit of actors.

I must say that the actor's profession is one in which understanding is increased, the heart is burning, and the will is there. Actors on the stage are much more clever than in ordinary life, not the opposite. Your whole cleverness, your nobility, your personality you must bring on the stage and increase them. You must show that you are philosophers on the stage, and full of love and compassion, and through your characters you are able to understand the tragedy of the human spirit in the form of Kirilov, Stavrogin, Lisa, Martha, and so on, and not the opposite, to become dull and stupid, without understanding when you enter the stage.

When we read the newspaper of today and we see that a little Polish girl is killed by a German plane, perhaps we

M. Chekhov

September 25, 1939

will not cry, but we must cry because here is the life, and we must show our feelings, our compassion for human beings - this is the place where we can serve as priests. But not the opposite - we read our newspapers being dull, and we become more dull even as we read that little girls are being killed.

#### THE ACTOR'S PROFESSION:

As actors, we must understand such things here on the stage because this is our altar where we sacrifice our beings, our brains - everything. We must be much more clever than in life. That must be our only aim in choosing this profession. Otherwise it is so cheap when we cannot speak sensibly on the stage, when we cannot show our tears. The stage is the place where we can cry and laugh and show our feelings - we can laugh and cry simultaneously on the stage. When Verkhevski speaks, he has either to punish Hitler, or to laugh at him, or to cry about all these tragedies - something definite must be there, otherwise we have no profession and we must feel ashamed of it. Explore your parts more deeply, and until the opening night leave all other work and try to meditate and find what depths are there in each word and sentence. In flying over the play, try to realize your need to dig deeper and deeper.