

Michael Chekhov

(afternoon) February 18, 1938

ART IS "HOW" NOT "WHAT"
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STYLE

Of course you know that I am able to speak for hours and hours, but this time I will confine myself to some points I have chosen, and I would like you to write them down and think them through, and then it will be of certain use.

1. I have noticed today, that you have a certain kind of freedom which must be one of our professional qualities in the future work, especially when we have not to lose the time for any other things only for professional everyday work. We will not have time to develop this freedom in our actors - it must be there. To try freely and to experiment with this or that, to take suggestions freely to show different characters freely, and so on. Freedom in all possible cases. Certain freedom and flexibility must be there in our work. At the very beginning of the work on the fairy tale I have ^{with} great pleasure noticed this freedom.

2. I have seen that you have started to understand what it means to have a certain amount of temperament, (I call it "fire" in the ideal) but it was not yet fire. The ability to get fire was there. A certain anticipation of the ability to act with flame and fire I have seen. Of course, you could say to me, "We have shown you before certain moments." Yes,

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of course you have shown sparks, but this was something very special I noticed today. Not "unbridled" behaviour but the beginning of this good feeling, and a certain beginning of this temperamental activity, and fire.

3. I must say that certain interesting imagination is lying underneath; it is not primitive, that is the imagination in the whole performance. You were not primitive in your interpretation of the fairy tale. The director was not primitive in his method of approaching the world of the fairy tale.

Now, in connection with the negative thing. Your approach to the interpretation of the world of fairy tale was not primitive (although it must be developed and explored more and more), but your fulfillment of these things was too primitive. This primitive kind of incorporation. These things which give more inspiration, must not have such primitive incorporation. This is the first negative point.

ART IS "HOW" NOT "WHAT":

You are taking the psychology of your human characters so that they are mere graphs - mere schemes - it is not yet living psychology. I do not know why you omit and lose all possible bridges and transitions and counterpoints that are in human psychology. If you think in the fairy tale one must fall down heavily, flatly, nothing more, it is not interesting. It is not interesting merely to give the flower as if it were

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a pencil. This is merely the intellectual content. The art begins with "how" not "what" - "how" I give you the flower. This is what you as an artist have to add to the intellectual content. I have seen today many, many things which are not intellectual. Therefore, it depends on the development of the actor. If the actor pays attention to this "how", then this "how" will appear always. This is the art, this is why we call ourselves actors and not analysts or critics. Through intellectual understanding of the material you have to tackle you will never awaken these artistic abilities. It only seems that if you understand it more and more it will help you to be an artist. But this is not true. This is a very hazardous attempt. Better not to do this and to approach all things at once with "how".

If the director gives the composition and the structure of the play then it is all right but this has nothing to do with intellectual content of the play. We can give a complicated or simple graph of the play by showing some composition which is able to inflame the imagination. This has nothing to do with the intellectual approach. Under intellectual approach I mean "what" and not "how". If you, as the director, gave your cast "what", then it is wrong. If you gave them the composition, then it is right.

At the moment when the actor tries to follow even the simple line, "I enter the room, he will enter the room

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(if he is an actor) somehow. But at the moment when you are satisfied with the "what" in your actors, you are wrong, and you, as the director, are leading them astray. I have seen this morning too many "whats." This is the mistake.

I should like to concentrate on what was done as mere "what." One moment I remember with Paul and the flower - this was only "what." While the moment when the two brothers mounted the horses, this was "how" - it was pleasant to see although it was nothing more than riding on a stick. It was rich and pleasant to see.

THE JUDGMENT OF THE STAGE:

This is a very important point. You must know that human psychology in everyday life is much more complicated than we show it on the stage, but it is not yet everything. The psychology on the stage must be much more interesting than in everyday life. Therefore, the whole situation is turned upside down. It is wrong if you think that you can dare to give the audience a product which is cheaper than everyday life. You must understand this once and forever and must say to yourselves: "This is simply a hollow shell what I give." When you will grow in your understanding of the theatre, you will see that this giving, this showing from the stage something which is even lower, less complicated, less interesting than everyday life, is something which makes an impression of being still more hollow than it is. Because the stage is a

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thing which always judges the actor, the stage, simply the stage. The moment when the actor stands on the stage he is judged by something which cannot be found with the eyes - it is unseen. If you are lazy in your everyday life you can be excused, but on the stage there is no excuse. Nobody is there to excuse us. This is the difference, and this is the great mistake we always make, when we think that we are on the stage in the same conditions as in everyday life. But never - we are judged. Please pay attention to these psychological transitions, bridges, counterpoints, and all these "hows".

The "what" must be there because without it the plot will not be there. The "what" must be taken simply and quickly - the "how" is the beginning of everything. The actor must be an actor and the master of "how," and the director must be the master of coaxing out this "how.". In our age, "what" is so dangerous because it becomes so important. Therefore, we have to pay special attention to distinguish between this giant which is "what.", and this dwarf which is "how.",

PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE:

Today I have not seen the method from the point of view of directing - I have not seen it sufficiently. When I saw the psychological gestures you gave the case, everybody, absolutely without any exclusion, instead of showing the psychological gesture, showed merely the intellectual idea

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of what it should be or could be. This is a very good sign, and a very important indication for us, that the psychological gesture either must be taken as a food, and elaborated at our rehearsals as a basis on which we stand, (psychological gesture must be a fundamental ground work), or you must say you have no need for the psychological gesture. But to take the psychological gesture and to have only the illusion that it is taken, is not sufficient.

Why shall we allow ourselves such an illusion? We are belittling this idea of psychological gesture by using it in the wrong way, if we only use it half way. We will get the feeling, here is psychological gesture, but it does not help us. I want to protect the psychological gesture from this abuse or wrong usage. The directors must not allow this illusion. First of all, it was done powerlessly, lazily, and sometimes cozily. This is wrong, and what has given me such pain was that the persons doing the gestures were so serious and quite satisfied. I realize that it is so deeply wrong that it must be discovered again, and this is the second point, everybody is guilty, especially the director. I think everybody who directs in the future must make an agreement that if we are going to use the psychological gesture, we must use it and really understand it fully as a basic work, or not touch it at all.

I was not sure whether your actors had some objec-

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tives - whether you had touched other points in our Method. My impression is that you have started this work as if it was a children's game, and you have carried it on in this manner. This atmosphere, this approach of "playing games" is the most beautiful thing in our profession. Even by acting Othello, we must feel we are playing a game - we must have this "playing" psychology. Then we are really artists. But, to have only this "playing games" psychology is not enough. We must stand on certain ground, and on this ground, on top of this must be this children's psychology, that we are playing a game.

After this psychology - which I greet with great pleasure, I want the director urgently to build the fundamental basis for all these things from the Method. I would suggest that you do it urgently because this feeling that we must rely upon the accidental, upon the mood, is a very bad one, and it makes certain psychological decay in us which will in time bear bad fruits. It would be better to begin with the Method and not the scheme, and work with the Method and go slowly, rather than prepare a cold scheme without grounds. This is a question of being correct and incorrect on the stage. It was incorrectly done from the point of view of method today, because it was pure accident. It was very chaotic and of low standard because there was no ground.

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From the school point of view, it was good to show what you have, but from the point of view of the correct Method, not good. If the director has some doubts or wants to ask something, then he has a right to show it, but if he feels everything goes all right, then why should he show it? In this case today, I was very happy that I have seen it because I could point out some things which I think are very important. In the future, however, the director must begin correctly with the Method, so that the actor will always have some ground and can work correctly and will not rely on the beautiful "children's game" mood, which although good is not correct, and does not give us the power to be professionals.

SPACE - DIMENSION:

Now, a very subtle subject. I am not quite sure whether I should mention it because it can lead you astray if you misunderstand it. Experience is experience, technique is technique, but there must be a certain desire awakened in us to get quite different dimensions than we have. We are always rehearsing and playing in such small dimensions; the voices are so small, the movements are small; the radiation only a few feet. We are, as it were, without air-space. It is so small, so condensed that when you will enter the Barn Theatre, you will see how many difficulties you will encounter.

Of course, again you are right if you say, "Let us

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have experience," but I say, "Let us have desire to be wider, to be more expressive, to send out everything." There is a great danger to become content with these small effects. I know this danger from experience in schools and even in theatres. It is like a snake which comes into the school - to be content with the "small" effects; small, intimate, family impressions, and when our friends begin to appreciate more and more these small things, we begin to live on these small effects and the drama will be so small.

We will be thrilled, but the real audience will not laugh, and will not be thrilled, because the audience has quite a different dimension, and when we enter the stage we will wonder where our charm has gone because nobody will have any sympathy or compassion for us. Because we are always acting for the theatre that is very small. This is not to blame you but only a warning that the experience will come through great disappointment and tears, and you will tear your hair; but it will come. It could be avoided and with much less pain if you will say to yourselves: "I have to solve this problem before I meet the real audience, and it will blame me and push me away, before they say we are not interesting actors."

It is, therefore, better to avoid it and so you must grow, grow simply in the space. Sometimes great actors when they are asked to act in a drawing room, in a small room, will start to perform and it will seem rude, too big, too much voice, because they have the right dimension for the the-

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atre, and it is a great difficulty for an actor to diminish it to the size of the room. But this is the right feeling for the actor. Therefore, the director must not lead the actor astray with this "intimate" poison. But, I do not want you to make another mistake, and that is to force yourselves, only you must nourish and cherish this desire to be bigger and bigger in dimension - the big American theatres must arise before your imagination.

Perhaps the director has made one mistake today. You have said that one of your characters used the psychological gesture and center, as if it were an exceptional case. No. It is possible to build the gesture in a moment's talk with the actor, and you can elaborate it by adding time, space, activity, everything, or you can elaborate the gesture, but with the center, because the center belongs to the gesture. The gesture, fully done, must take the center into consideration, must move from the center. We must not be too pedantic in saying the gesture must help. If it does not help, we must take the problem deeper and deeper. If it helps, then we need not be pedantic about it.

PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE:

Some gestures were half acted. That is quite wrong because the gesture can be, if you want, rhythm, archetype, music, but it has nothing to do with action and directors must

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be aware of this point. None of our directors must allow the gesture to be turned into action. It must not be descriptive. It must be the ideal which the actor has to read. For my feeling, the gesture of the two evil brothers was the best, the simplest, the most expressive, and the most interesting. For instance, Woody's gesture was so complicated that if it were a real gesture and really elaborated, he would have got such interesting things from it. But the action had nothing to do with it. The gesture was made quite mechanically. In fact, the gestures as shown today were illustrations of the method we are not going to use.

TRANSFORMATION:

I think the idea of transformation is one of the basic ideas of fairy tales. Therefore, it should not be used only at the end but must be used throughout the whole play. The real and good fairy tales are transformations throughout. We must discuss this question which is so important and is so near to the theme of rhythm which never stops although it has a beginning and an end because it is the basic ground for fairy tales, the idea of the transformation is so important.

IMAGINATION: INNER ACTING.

We must understand the process of imagining much much deeper. When the director tells you something you are

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taking it in with understanding, but not with imagination. Imagination as we know it is invisible acting to the fullest extent. If it is not acting then you will only understand and will never be inspired for anything. Your understanding will sit with you, but your acting will be pressed down because understanding consumes the power which we should use for performance. And this is the danger. That is why I am always fighting this clear understanding and inability to express. To understand by inner acting which is imagination - this is the only way we have. If you are tired or bored, better say to yourself, "I will have some rest," and stop listening to the director for five minutes. But if you sit and think that you are working in your imagination, and do not work but simply understand, it is destructive to your actor's nature. Each profession requires special food, and the food for the actor's soul is to imagine by acting.

I am sorry that I did not criticise each actor in the fairy tale personally, but I do not do it on purpose because it is absolutely important to get the general understanding for the work, then there is sense in criticising. Being myself an actor, I was always very eager to hear the criticism of my personal acting, and it is a very understandable feeling, but sometimes it must be postponed. I will criticise everybody later on individually, in connection with the two plays we are working on.

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STYLE: Mr. Shdanoff's Play:

We shall start with short exercises in style in general. You will see when we get the translation of the play that it is written with so many points. It is specially done, and it expresses the tension which does not break the form. It is like an inner psychological spine. There are long speeches, but they are broken with these points which will express for us this tension, which does not break the form if it is not necessary.

Therefore, will you please as you sit, realize the form of your body; how it is situated on the spine. Now try to find some word or exclamation or sentence which could break this form which you have just now. Try to find the solution for your position in the sentence and then break this form you have now with the sentence you will find, the sentence which expresses why you are sitting like that. If you are sitting in a weak position then try to justify it somehow inwardly, so that it becomes a very tense position, and try to find sentences and exclamations which will fill this form. The position, though it is weak in the beginning, must not be in Ibsen's or Chekhov's mood. Try to create in it something which is very tense and say sentences which justify this form. Then I will ask you to say the sentence.

This ability is absolutely important for Mr.

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Shdanoff's play. Each position inwardly and outwardly, even if it seems to be very weak and quiet, must be filled with the activity that is breaking the form. Without this we are not able to give the special style and special tension, tremendous tension in this play, and only by these means can we do it and we will be very attractive to the audience through this ability.

Please get up when I ask you, as if you are threatening to burst the form by getting up. It must be dangerous getting up, but when you will get up don't break the form but keep this tension. Again, try to justify the whole getting up from the position you have just now. Now, find the sentence which will break the form, and after the form is broken, you have again to take this tense position, then another one as a result of the position you have justified. Now keep this new position. Now, will you find another sentence which will lead you to another sentence, after breaking the form. Now, try to find the following and keep it. I want you to find the sentence which will make you calm and quiet, the transition from this outer to inner action. Break the form by whispering or sitting down, but the tension must be there.

This is the style of Mr. Shdanoff's play. Inner things keep it. Now, try to test whether you have the tension in your head and brain, or in your whole body. If in your head, then you will be tired after the first twenty

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minutes. If your whole body is filled with this activity, then you will get more and more activity. The brain is the place where our power is consumed. Try to make sure that your being is tense, not the muscles, not the head.

Now, I want you to get up and to recreate this position into another one which will express the question as if something is going on which is very exciting over there, and you are getting up and your whole body is tense with the question, and your tension must be expressed in a long pause. Now, I want you to whisper the sentence, absolutely without breaking the form.

Sometimes I will remind you during the rehearsals that we are out of the style, but mostly I will not do this because our real aim is that during exercises here, and at home, of course, you will get more and more natural, and when we hear "Shdanoff's play" or "Henry's play" we will react immediately with the inner style.

We shall try to explore one of the many, many sides, psychological sides, given in the play. Now follow me with your imagination. I will speak quickly, but you have to follow me by acting what I tell you. You want to act with your whole body, not with your head.

Scene:

It is early morning - dawn - small railroad station. People are in the train and almost all of them are sleeping.

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Then all at once the crash; the train stops and everybody awakens. Officials are running with lamps and shouting and nobody knows what has happened. They are all frightened, and the voices come saying, "Everybody out of the train." In the group everybody is carrying bags and they are unhappy and frightened. Then we see the son. He is carrying his luggage, and is quite conspicuous because of his tremendous quietness. He tries to find out what has happened, but he is very quiet. The people have quieted down, and are sitting on benches. The son hears the voice of the spy saying, "You didn't expect me." The son is very much annoyed. He wants to annihilate this spy, but he does nothing outwardly and tries to forget him forever. The spy says, "Please do not shout because it will be dangerous for both of us." He does not shout.

Criticism:

The noise was too gradual. I want you to reach a certain climax and then go down. When you feel that the son and the spy are about to start you must give them space, and quiet.

The spy wants to influence the son and makes him sit down. The spy is unbalanced but not crazy. Take the ground consciously.

The son sits down - his idea is, "I want to convince myself that he does not exist. I want to forget him."

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The spy's idea is to influence him. Repeat scene.

For the first time I have not seen a "mob scene."
It was a group of individual and well trained actors.

Another small scene:

We are in an empty room in this provincial town. The group of revolutionaries are having a meeting. It is a very important ceremony because the son comes for the first time into this small town and will be present. Everybody asks, "Who is this great power on which is built the whole idea of the revolution?" He is an idol. The people are waiting for his coming. Great attention. Curiosity and real interest. When the spy comes and enters the room with the son, this is the moment. They both are very important but the son is the idol and the spy is power. Both have come from abroad where everything is, and when they enter there is the moment of reception and acceptance. They accept him because he is really beautiful. He is, of course, the genius in the play. But his genius has been misdirected. Everyone who sees his pale face and fearless atmosphere is persuaded. They will do everything he will tell them. Every glance, every pause he holds is significant. Everyone in the room understands in a few seconds that he is their leader, and naturally, without any preparation everybody seeks for a means of expressing their belief in him. It must be like a flame, this long applause.

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The spy understands the moment is right, and at this moment the son says disdainfully, "Stop this stupid thing." He is divided in two. One side is with the revolution, and one side elsewhere. When he approaches one side he says, "Must go this way," and then it is the other way. This reception does not make him conceited - the more applause the more he despises it. The nearer he comes to the light he is seeking, the more he pushes it from him. This is his inner misfortune. Very characteristic of the genius, especially of our time. The genius of our time is two persons.

Scene:

There are glasses on a table as a subterfuge in case the police come. The chairman says, "Please take your glasses of tea and come to the table," and at this moment the door opens and the two figures, the spy and the son appear. The chairman then says, "I have the honor of introducing to^{you} our leaders." Very complicated response. Belief. The will to follow. The necessity to express this belief. Applause, because they have no better means of expression. "Stop it," only from the son. This makes the appearance of this idol still more charming. Then in this atmosphere the chairman says, "Please take your places."

I would suggest that you take this small sketch on the basis of atmosphere.

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The room is cold, uncomfortable and dirty. Great expectation and eager suspense. When the son enters will you please create inside of you and radiate the whole gamut. It is a very serious moment in their lives - they are always in danger.