



THE PENCIL

Memories of Dartington Hall and the English Origin of the Michael Chekhov Acting Method

DEIRDRE HURST DU PREY

tape-recorded, transcribed and edited by
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INTRODUCTION

I was born on July 16, 1906, and I think it was rather an important day, because my birth took place in a forest fire. My mother was in a little house bearing me, while my father was on the roof with the neighbors, trying to put the fire out. We were in tall, standing timber, and it was summer, and therefore very dangerous, but all went well. And as my sisters used to say, 'She was born in a forest fire, and she's never stopped burning.' Why, I don't know; but I always had all kinds of fire in me, which had to be expended.

It is not surprising that fire should be the earliest image associated with Deirdre Hurst du Prey, as her devotion to her mentor's teachings, particularly those regarding the creative imagination, still blazes despite the outer frailty of her 94 years. A number of fortuitous events combined to bring about the crossing of destinies between Deirdre and Chekhov. First, growing up in the wilds of Vancouver in the early decades of the twentieth century, her family befriended Russian émigrés, such as Michael Gounderov Rosinsky and Prince Volkonsky, that often had fled to the Northwest via Harbin, China. As a result, Deirdre, although never speaking a word of Russian, developed a feeling for the language. This sensitivity served her well in her later work with Michael Chekhov, who wrote to her from Hollywood in 1946, "My English is as bad as always, and it was only my confidence in you-that you would understand me-which gave me the freedom to express myself without any inner difficulties."¹ Loss of her father to typhoid fever left her mother the task of raising three little girls alone in a strange country, except for her young Shakespeare theatrical cousins. At her widowed mother's insistence Deirdre learned some practical skills in the event that she would not be able to make a living in the arts, particularly dance, although her mother valued the arts above all. As a result, she developed a skill for shorthand, which allowed her from 1936-1942 to take down verbatim every lesson and lecture Chekhov delivered in formulating his system for English speaking actors in Dartington Hall, England and later in Ridgefield, Connecticut. These lessons account for hundreds of pages of largely unpublished, original material, which currently comprise Deirdre's *The Actor is the Theatre: A Collection of Michael Chekhov's Unpublished Notes & Manuscripts on the Art of Acting and the Theatre*. These notes became the foundation for Chekhov's original manuscript for *To the Actor*, and earned Deirdre the nickname The Pencil, for the essential instrument that she still keeps nearby in the folds of now white hair.

Deirdre's pursuit of a career in dance led her to the innovative Cornish School for the Arts in Seattle in the early 1930's. Although she had a good relationship with Miss Nellie Cornish, her difficulty in modern dance lessons taught by a rather harsh member of Marie Wigman's company, ultimately led her to the School of Dance Mime in Dartington Hall, Devonshire. Here she began the lifelong friendship with Beatrice Whitney Straight, whose parents, Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst, had founded Dartington Hall School and community in 1926. This encounter led to her eventual meeting with Michael Chekhov.

What follows is the story of Deirdre Hurst du Prey's early years in relation to the birth of Michael Chekhov's acting method for the English-speaking world. This narrative is based on tape-recorded interviews I conducted over a period of several months in the spring of 1999 in Deirdre's home in Westbury, New York. After transcribing the seven sessions, which fill approximately 100 pages, I condensed and edited the individual narratives to create a unified story by omitting or moving sections to avoid repetitions and to clarify their chronology. Additionally, I made small word changes or additions when necessary to clarify meaning without losing the natural cadence and charm of Deirdre's narration. (None of these changes are signaled in the text that follows.) I have included footnotes to aid the reader in identifying some of the characters mentioned, for Deirdre's long life in the arts brought her into contact with many important names in early twentieth century cultural movements. Above all, I hope that any student of Deirdre's will recognize her unique and colorful voice in the following narrative, which opens a window not only into the genesis of the Chekhov method and the early years at Dartington Hall, but also portrays the often undocumented weaving of relationships and events that form the life of the artist. The tribute given by Mark Tobey to Nellie Cornish applies as well to Deirdre du Prey: "Among her gifts was her ability to choose and have faith in her teachers. Once chosen, her loyalty to the teacher was as consistent as day follows day."²

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Deirdre Hurst du Prey
Edited by Diane Caracciolo

I was born on the outskirts of Vancouver, in that strange and wonderful place, British Columbia, right on the Pacific Ocean, so powerful -- the sense of it opening up into other wonderful countries across that ocean to the Orient. In those days, we befriended many Russian refugees who settled in Vancouver, and although I never learned a word of Russian, the cadence of the language and the effort to understand it was later to come into excellent account when I met Michael Chekhov.

I was born on July 16, 1906, and I think it was rather an important day, because my birth took place in a forest fire. My mother was in a little house bearing me, while my father was on the roof with the neighbors, trying to put the fire out. We were in tall, standing timber, and it was summer, and therefore very dangerous, but all went well. And as my sisters used to say, "She was born in a forest fire, and she's never stopped burning." Why, I don't know; but I always had all kinds of fire in me which had to be expended. I've been told that when my youngest sister Muriel was born, the old nursemaid brought my sister Phyllis and me in to see the new baby. When we were put on the top of a trunk to look down on the mother and child, I started hopping and jumping around, and the old nursemaid said to my mother, "That one will be for becoming a dancer." And I just kept on dancing until I was able to make a connection with the Cornish School in Seattle. In our teens my sister Phyllis and I became junior members of the Little Theatre Movement in Vancouver, with the encouragement of our mother. I think, frankly, that's where my whole life in the arts began.

When I first met Miss Cornish I found her to be a delightful middle-aged woman, absolutely devoted to the art world. She was determined to bring art to the children of Washington State, and a wonderful American artist -- Mark Tobey, who was living in Seattle, helped her in that endeavor.³ Nellie Cornish and Mark Tobey had similar visions, and they began what was called the Cornish School, which became very popular. Miss Cornish began then to be able to attract very prominent teachers from all over the country and abroad. Mary Wigman, the great German creator of the modern dance movement came with her company to Seattle and stayed quite a few days to give us some lessons.⁴ She was a very dynamic person, and Miss Cornish would have loved to have her come and take over the dance department. But of course Mary Wigman couldn't do that, but she left a member of her company -- Lore Deja -- who was a very good teacher, but a very difficult person to handle.⁵ She was very unkind in pointing out our poor points, the few of us who really needed more encouragement than we got from her. For me it was absolutely unbearable. I stood it as long as I could and then I ended up in hysterics, and I said that's an end of it. I'll just not put myself through this anymore. I think actually she was probably right that I had studied so long by myself, and with rather indifferent training in Vancouver, so that I had a style of my own. Very disillusioned, I went to Miss Cornish and told her if Miss Deja was returning, I wouldn't be coming back. When she asked me where I would go, I said, "There's a notice on the bulletin board with three black figures in a

strange, modern pose. And that little introduction says, 'Evening of Dance Mime in Dartington Hall, Devon, England.' That's where I hope to go." She suggested I write to the Elmhirsts at Dartington. Beatrice Straight, Mrs. Elmhirst's daughter had been at the Cornish School. I remembered that when I had joined the school in the fall, I kept hearing this name "Beatrice." I would be continually hearing about "Beatrice." And there was a little group of about seven students who were always talking about the trip that Beatrice had given them. I couldn't understand who this Beatrice was, but now I knew. So I wrote to Dartington Hall and told them my background, that my mother was a widow and that she had raised three of us, and also that my father was a Yorkshireman and that I had relatives in Yorkshire. In later years I decided that probably they were interested in my background because it was rather unusual; also the fact that Leonard Elmhirst was from the very next village in Yorkshire where my father had been born. I got a letter back inviting me to join them in England. And so my failure at not being able to conquer my problems at the Cornish School in Seattle was the opening of a door into a whole new world for me. I believe this was my fate.

That October I departed on the *Ile de France*, and I was a little nervous at what I would find at the end of the trip. We arrived at a wet Plymouth at dawn and when the boat was ready to pull away I was still standing there, a sad, solitary figure, with my trunks and bag. All of a sudden my feelings and my energy seemed to just run out of me with the rain. And I thought, "Oh, what have I done!" To be here alone with no understanding of where I was and what I was going to do. I really felt very lost on that wet, wintry morning. And then I saw a car coming up at quite a speed, a most elegant car. It seems to me, remembering now, that the top was down and there was a beautiful girl in the car wearing a beret and a tweed coat. She pulled up, jumped out and ran toward me. She was so apologetic. She said, "I'm Beatrice Straight. I should have been here much earlier to get you, but I was doing the same thing as this yesterday morning, and this morning I missed being on time. Anyway, get in; we'll soon be at Dartington." We got into this elegant car, drove along these lovely roads, until we arrived at a remarkable place, absolutely remarkable. We drove into the courtyard and there was a magnificent collection of buildings all around the courtyard.⁶ The day was just beginning for most people, and I was taken to the quarters where I was to have a room. It happened to be a modern building where a kindergarten was held everyday for the children of people working on the estate. But the one floor had been reserved for the students of the school of dance-mime, which I was joining.⁷ And so my work began. I had to take all the classes, which were music and art and puppetry and dance, of course, and quite a number of other classes. I would be required to go to all of them. But also, I was to assist Beatrice Straight in her position as manager of the little company that had come out of the classes in dance-mime, and so I had rather a lot on my plate. It would take time for me to be included in the magic circle, which surrounded this beautiful person, Beatrice Straight, the owner of the car that had brought me from the ship. But I did become very familiar with the person who taught the puppets -- Dicky Odlin, an American.⁸ He began to give me things to do, and seemed to find me humorous. I didn't think I was humorous at all. I was still feeling lonely at this time. He encouraged me to come along, and when the group around Beatrice jumped into her car, I jumped in with them. From then on I was a regular member of the inner circle, which was very charming and delightful and highly exciting to me because we were always doing something attractive. We would go on the moors and have picnics. Marvelous food

baskets would be put out for us in the kitchen in the Hall. We would drive up to the moors and roam around, following the tracks of the tin miners. It was very wild -- just cattle and horses and very few settlements. I loved it all. And we always got wet. The rain would come on and we had to seek a place to hide until we got the car going again and off we would go.

Life now just took on the most fascinating aspects for me, although I had a great deal to do in the way of adjusting myself to the classes and trying to catch up with the other students. That began a wonderful connection, which has lasted up until this time. Beatrice and I are still friends and are still in touch with one another. Many of the other people have gone, but we seem to have lasted an exceptionally long time, and have been close friends without ever a quarrel all those many years.

All these wonderful things happened to me in 1932, when my whole life changed. The minute I stepped into Dartington Hall there was a whole new world there for me to experience. I fell in love with it immediately, with the people, and experienced it fully. I came there at a very important time in the life of Dartington. It was still under great criticism from many forces. What they were really trying to do was establish a community in which everything necessary would be provided. There was a very modern school that was much criticized. The students would go down into the River Dart, which was just at the foot of their school buildings, and go splashing in there naked-boys and girls. And that was really a little bit too much, and it had been splashed across the papers at times, references to what was going on at Dartington Hall. It was a very serious endeavor on the part of both Dorothy Whitney Elmhirst and Leonard Knight Elmhirst to really help a way of life to be reborn in modern times.⁹ They had a modern school, and they began to use local farms, the chickens, the eggs, the apples and cider and all the things that could be made in the community, and of course, education. Dorothy said the children of the people working there had to be educated, and there were new ways of education that they wanted to experiment with.

Artists were attracted from the beginning. Beatrice had met Mark Tobey in the Cornish School in Seattle, and he was invited to come over and be the resident artist and art teacher. There were music people and dance and drama. We had two different schools of dance, one very modern; the other springing from Dalcroze eurhythmics. Ellen Van Volkenburg Browne directed our plays, Margaret Barr and Louise Soelberg taught dance. It was an absolutely extraordinary collection of artists and interesting people that were attracted to it and gathered there. One of the wonderful things for me was Sunday evening lecture gatherings in the beautiful solar room, part of the medieval building. It was really a small castle, or fortified manor house. We would gather there and have authorities from all over England come down and lecture and had various kind of entertainment on Sunday evenings. You couldn't be at Dartington without being very deeply in love with it and in harmony with it or else very much against it. There were people who were very much against it. It was, of course, a terrible time in England, when the economy in Britain after the war was so terrible that people were hungry. There was just a great population of people that were not being properly fed or taken care of. Often on the road when Bidy [Beatrice Straight] and I would be driving around, we would see a little family with all that they had in the world piled on to the baby carriage, mother and father and children trudging along. These people slept in ditches and hay ricks because they had no houses. Many times Beatrice would stop the car, and we would get out together and go over and ask them

where they were from and where they were going. She always put her hand in her pocket and pulled some money out and put it in their hands. I remember once getting into the car and turning round and seeing the expression on the face of the man and woman when they looked at the money that she had put in their hands. They had probably never seen in all their lives so many pounds. It was a very interesting time, and a very cruel time, a very grim time. But Dartington was a saving place for a great many people, and it had to struggle against criticism.

It was just a wonderful place to be part of, especially those early years. Then came the suggestion that the dance school should give over to another group that they had heard of that were wandering around Europe with no place of their own, because it was the beginning of the troubles in Germany, and the hatred of the Jews. The Jooss Ballet was wandering around without a home because they had Jewish members in their company and Kurt Jooss wouldn't dismiss them. One was the pianist who was responsible for creating the music for *The Green Table* ballet, which turned out to be a magnificent dance.¹⁰ So they were invited to come to Dartington. And that rather pushed out the little school of dance-mime, which is what I went over for. But neither Beatrice nor I had the capacity to be dancers, so we decided to go to America to spend a year in the theatre world and try and see if we could find a director who would come and lead the theatre group at Dartington.

That brought us to New York. It was at a very lively time, a time when the Group Theatre was going very strong in New York. Beatrice was going uptown to Madame Daykarhanova and Madame Ouspenskaya, two Russian teachers with whom she was working.¹¹ I was going down in the lower depths, I called it, 14th Street, where there was other theatre activity going on.¹² We got a message by cable telling us to be sure to see a very great Russian actor, who was going to be performing in New York. We immediately made inquiries, and it was, of course, an announcement of Michael Chekhov appearing in a play on Broadway with a small group of Russian players. We knew nothing about him, really, except through our Russian teachers. And they were very excited at the thought of seeing his work on the stage. So we went to an opening, and we were absolutely thunderstruck. We could never have imagined seeing acting of the kind that evening. Beatrice said afterwards that this is the man we should really try to get for Dartington. After watching Chekhov perform for several nights, we were taken back stage and met him. People were waiting to speak to him after his performance. On one side was Beatrice in her tweed coat and her beret. And on the other side was one of the members of the Group Theatre, all dressed up in very fashionable clothes. She wanted to talk to Chekhov and find out just what his plans were--would he come and work with the Group Theatre for a while? And Beatrice, of course, wanted to offer him the opportunity to come and create a theatre at Dartington. He knew that the Group Theatre would merely make use of him, and that when they had got everything they wanted from him, there would be no future there. If he were able to come to Dartington Hall, where he was offered the opportunity to have a school and a theatre of his own, he would be experiencing the desire of his life. His dream was to have just such a theatre group to train in his method, and to be part of a community where his work would be seen and appreciated. Following this occasion much talking went on between New York and England, and Mr. and Mrs. Elmhirst came over from Dartington and met with him, and all the plans were laid for him to come in the autumn. Madame Daykarhanova made it possible for him to give Beatrice and myself a few lessons during the day when he was not performing. Of course, Madame Daykahanova had to interpret

because he didn't know one word of English, except "Howdoyou do." He would say that to everyone with a slight bow. That's what he knew--"Howdoyou do." But he was very sharp. He would give Beatrice and myself some criticism as to how we were, what we were lacking in movement--a feeling of movement, and that sort of thing. He saw me making notes -- I was making shorthand notes, as I always did of any classes I took, -- and I remember feeling that he was looking at me. I think that he thought to himself that girl would be a great help to him in writing his book. I always had a pencil in my hair -- I called myself the pencil -- so that whenever he wanted to start writing or reading to me what he had written in his very bad writing, I was there right beside him.

The lessons were very interesting, but then he had to go on tour. I think he went down to Washington and various other cities on that tour. When he came back he went up to Connecticut where there was a gathering of homes of Russian theatre people, where he could go and be surrounded by Russians who were attempting to speak English. There he could devote his entire time to perfecting his English, which was essential, of course, if he was going to be able to create a school at Dartington.

He began that work with his wife Xenia. They went up to the Connecticut area, while Beatrice and I headed out crossing the country, and stopping at all the theatre groups and universities where theatre work was being shown. We stopped long enough to see what plays they did and the general atmosphere of theatre in each place. We worked our way right across the country. We had a station wagon, and Beatrice's mother had it all beautifully filled with cooking things, pots and pans and blankets; not enough as far as I was concerned. We could drive across the country and stop where we wanted, put up our little station wagon and sleep in it or on the ground, which we did many times. It was a very interesting trip that we had, and very rewarding because we saw quite a lot of theatre work. We went down to Hollywood, and saw theatre there at its highest, or busiest at least. We then worked our way up the coast to the Cornish School in Seattle, where we were greeted by old friends.

We all got back together in England in the autumn, and then Beatrice and I started out on a trip to the Orient, leaving Michael Chekhov and Xenia in a lovely little home for themselves, given to them at Dartington. He became, of course, a very quick student of English, and then began planning what he would do in forming the theatre and in interviewing people, who would be interested in coming to the theatre group when Beatrice and I came back. The interesting part of this search for students was the number of applications that were made from students in America. We put my sister Phyllis in charge of the New York office, which she organized with the help of Madame Tamara Daykahanova, whose office she moved into. Publicity was sent out, and people could apply for auditions. Phyllis would then arrange dates when two members of a company that had come with Chekhov -- Jilinsky and his wife -- could come and give auditions to applicants.¹³ It paid off because we got one or two students who came and stayed with us for the whole history of the Studio. It was absolutely a shot in the arm for what was going on in England because things were much slower over there. There were fewer applications, because we brought Chekhov into Dartington at the same time that Gielgud and that group of young actors were making their presence felt in London. It had not been so up until that time. People that might have come to us from London and other parts of England tended to go instead to London, which was at the heart of things. So we had serious problems

surrounding the number of applicants. As a result, the office created by my sister Phyllis in New York was extremely helpful.

Beatrice had wanted to go to the Orient for quite some time and planned to do it before she would be encumbered with all the work that would have to be done to set up a theatre studio at Dartington. We didn't choose one of the very large flashy P&O liners. We chose a small line, which would be putting in to all kinds of ports, which was actually what we wanted to see. We had really a remarkably good time on the ship and met with some nice officers in the British Army who were going back for the long trek up into the mountains as they were part of some of the famous regiments. But they were all very charming. Being two of the few young girls on the boat, we had a very nice time, though. I got rather a bad reputation because I was constantly reading travel books. I really wanted to know where we were going and what we might expect to see. Beatrice didn't care, but I did. And so I would be reading on deck, and not playing games with the officers that wanted to be entertained before they set out for those hill situations that they were facing for several years. So it was altogether very interesting.

Ceylon was lovely. Oh, I thought it was absolutely beautiful because they were a great supplier of tea, and we saw great farms of tea drying and being made ready for the market. We had several scares -- probably a small leopard or tiger that leaped over the car in one of the drives that we were taking. Then we had indications that there might be snakes. You know it was not really the safest place to be. One night we were in a small hotel, with pouring rain. It was very close in the little place where we were given accommodation to sleep. Beatrice and I went out in the dark, at night. Well, you know, when I thought afterwards, the roads were water and all the rest of it -- bound to be hundreds of reptiles. But Beatrice was absolutely devoid of fear, and I was absolutely filled with it, so somewhere in the middle we met, and we were able to go along and have a very good time together. But we did an awful lot of traveling, and that's when we met up with Uday Shankar, who was the great exponent of Hindu dancing.¹⁴ He introduced us to many people. The doors were open because he was very highly regarded as recreating the great wealth of Indian dance, which had been practically abolished by the British. Rabindranath Tagore, who we visited later on, gave full credit to Uday Shankar for recreating the dance in India.

We had a wonderful time when we took the train right up to the top of the Himalayas, Biddy and I, for Christmas. And, oh, the view of the seven holy peaks! Although we were not allowed into Tibet, we did go on a trip with a holy man from the nearby monastery. He took us to spend the night in a government shack, a little room the government puts up, and you can stay there and see the sun rising on the holy peaks. You see them all at one time. I often close my eyes and see myself standing up at the Himalayas and looking down, layer upon layer of terraced landscape. They were growing their crops there, very strange -- there was just one step after another down. In my dreams I've had recurrences of those pictures which passed across my eyes and my mind as I stood and looked at them -- the seven holy peaks of the Himalayas -- quiet, absolute quiet -- only little tinkling bells of the men with their goats or donkeys going up into the Himalayas with salt bags strapped either side, the animals quietly walking, just single troops of them walking quietly up into the Himalayas

We crisscrossed the country quite a lot, following Uday Shankar's performances. Wherever he was, we liked to be there because he would always introduce us to people of

some renown. Bidy and I then went on from India to Sumatra. That was very interesting because we had a letter of introduction to the Crown Prince, who was a very great dancer. Boys of that particular royalty were all dancers. They even devoted a whole evening over to giving dances for Beatrice and myself, which was quite remarkable. We saw dancing that we would never see again. We went all the way down and out as far as Bali where we had a little cottage to ourselves. By this time we were very aware that the Chekhov Theatre Studio was not going forward as fast as we had hoped. There were many, many problems. Bidy said, "I simply must go back. Darling, I'm going to have to fly. And I know you don't want to fly. You stay and come back by the boat. And it will be all right." I said, "No way. If you're going home, I'm going home too. It would give me no pleasure to be shuttling around if you're not there. What fun would there be?" I said, "I'll go on the plane." I remember I never had enough pocket money. That was always my problem, as I was always very anxious to pick up beautiful things. We saw so many of them and I had seen a lovely little ring that I wanted. I had just that much money left. I looked at it and I said to myself, "no -- I'm going to take out an insurance policy for my mother because I'm going on a plane!"

We were flying for days with no landing fields. We came down at sunset and went up at dawn. And we flew for five days. Can you imagine? Sometimes I'd look down, and there was a whole herd of elephants I saw down in the jungle. I said to somebody later on, that I'd rather not fall down in there. I'd rather fall down into the ocean if we have to come down.

When we returned to Dartington Hall Chekhov immediately told us what the situation was -- that things had not gone forward as quickly, and he was very distressed by it. We went at once to work. That spring of 1936 he gave just the two of us a series of eighteen lectures in order to prepare us to help him with the teaching. I went to help Chekhov with preparation of scenes and material that he wanted to use in his teaching and Beatrice took on the task of making it known that we were going to have a school -- making lots of publicity about the school. And when she said something, it got done. The most beautiful little booklet had come out about the school.¹⁵ Chekhov had all the work that he wanted to give us to do, such as sections from Shakespeare and other writers, but he couldn't get anyone to help him get it together. That's when I moved in to help him. From that time on I helped him until he left for California, and even when he was out in California. We never lost touch until he died. Never anything questionable, no sexual involvement or anything like that -- just a very close, very deep, very profound love -- he was papa, I was mama. And it was like that until the very end.

We began to get letters from various places -- Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Europe and all over, people applying to come and decide whether they wanted to join the group or not, and whether we wanted them. It was a very interesting and a very serious period of time. We got twenty students all together at the beginning and began our work with Chekhov in October 1936. It was such inspiring work. Chekhov was such a wonderful teacher, very demanding, of course, and so we had to work very hard. When he came in the morning we were all gathered around in our lovely blue practice costumes and our blue slippers, so that everything we did had a special quality about it. Some morning sessions would be on gymnastics or lessons with one of the teachers of the Jooss Ballet. And speech. We did a very great deal of speech with Miss Crowther from Australia. We really achieved a unified theatre speech. We were noted for that. Then there

would be music classes and body movement and various other things that he considered necessary for us. We were working all the time. We had to take a scene and be entirely responsible for everything to do with that scene-sometimes write the material for the play, or find a play that could be adjusted. Then we would give performances. Saturday mornings the people on the estate at Dartington were invited to come and watch our work. We had a balcony and beautiful, big rooms. They had been, of all strange things, big rough buildings for cutting up timber. There was much timber on the estate, and they needed timber for re-roofing some of the beautiful old buildings when they were restoring Dartington Hall, which was a ruin when they found it. So there was always some activity going on in these great big wooden buildings. It was decided to take the woodworking department to another part of the estate, and these great big wooden buildings were left empty for our use. We moved in so that we had a huge space in which to do our exercises and work on plays.

Chekhov taught us to have a profound love of and respect for the theatre and for what can be brought to an audience through the medium of the theatre by the quality of the actor. The actor must be trained to love his profession, respect it and to give of his whole being to his audience. Chekhov said, for instance, that when he was in Russia at the height of the famine and the tremendous cold, when people would come and crowd into the theatre and stand so that they could scarcely breathe, what the actors did on such occasions was send out love into the audience with their acting. That was for Chekhov what acting was all about -- that you could reach people, that you could feed them with what you were doing, you could feed their spirits so then they could leave the theatre with a sense that there was something that they could find-that they hadn't reached the end.

I think that one of the most important things Michael Chekhov left us -- his gift to artists everywhere -- is the need to develop and to feed the creative imagination. It is a world of its own, and the artist has to live in that world. This world of the creative imagination meant everything to him. Because with that you could imagine anything, and then you would try to achieve it. After we had worked on scenes, and he'd given us corrections, and after our great and marvelous lunches, we would lie down (very often fall asleep), and at this time we were supposed to go over our scenes in our imaginations so that the character himself would suggest things to you. You would gain from that another aspect of the character. The character itself would speak to you and tell you how to behave. That was what I would say was one of his great contributions, the world of the creative imagination.

Life at Dartington was a wonderful period for those people that were fortunate enough to be there. In 1939 we were about to do *Twelfth Night*, but we knew at this time that serious things were happening in Europe, and Chekhov, because he had lived in Berlin and in Paris and in Latvia and Lithuania, sensed that there might be war. So it was decided that in as much as we had a very curious combination of people from all parts of the world in our company that we should go to America, which we did.¹⁶

Beatrice found us a wonderful home up in Ridgefield, Connecticut. Beatrice was always so lucky -- she knew just what was the right place. She found a boys' school up in Ridgefield that had been abandoned because of the awful Depression that America suffered just a year or two before. The school could not survive it. The boys had to leave, and the school closed down, but it closed down with all its furniture and its bedding, everything complete. We just moved in, and Beatrice, with her great taste, was able to get nice

curtains and furniture, which came from the family estate in Old Westbury. It was really a very nice building with very large rooms for rehearsal. And there was also a small building lower down on the side of the hill, which had been the gymnasium for the boys' school, and we turned it into a small theatre. There we could work on a stage and try out all our plays before we took to the road.

We came into New York City with one play, *The Possessed* from Dostoyevsky, and it proved to be way beyond the understanding of the public. America was not ready at that time for the problems of Communism, which were in this performance. They just didn't understand. They were very much impressed by our acting, and particularly our voices, and the beautiful speech that we had on the stage. But they couldn't understand much of the content of the play. However, Chekhov bravely decided we would go on the road. We would take *Twelfth Night* and a children's play. We had twenty people all together in a company, traveling by station wagons. And we performed at schools, colleges and various groups and places where they wanted performances. We were very well received and it was a very good experience for us. Then we would come back, and start again to do other plays to take on the road. We were really doing very well until, of course, the war broke out. Chekhov knew that our boys would be called up, and they were. It was impossible to take other actors who were not trained in Chekhov's method into the company and go on tour. The touring fell through because of the war. We couldn't get tires, and at one point we had to use tires that had been patched. We were coming down a road in Oklahoma, I think it was, such a dangerous road, and we heard a tire go. We ran up the side of the road and turned over in the station wagon. I was in it -- eight people in all. Everybody was absolutely quiet. Someone felt the door, pushed the door open and we all got out. It was very frightening, and I was not at all unhappy when Chekhov wanted me to stay with him and finish the work on his book.

I started right at the very beginning working with him. Whenever we could get the time together, I took notes. He would write in a very peculiar way. He had very little use of English in a written form. His spoken English was good otherwise, but writing was very difficult. So I began from the very beginning working with him on everything that he wanted written. And I stayed off the road. I did not go on the last tours, but stayed and worked with him on his book *To the Actor*. That's how it got done.

When the Studio closed at Ridgefield all of its financial and business records were safely stored in the stables at the Elmhurst/Whitney estate, "Applegreen," in Old Westbury on Long Island. When the estate was sold in 1953 no one knew what to do with the records, and on the last day of the auction they were put on a bonfire. My own record of the classes we had attended with Chekhov along with much else fortunately remained in my care.

Editor's Postscript

The formidable shorthand record of Chekhov's 500 English language lessons that Deirdre Hurst du Prey kept from the Studio's inception in Dartington Hall in 1936 until its disbanding in the United States in 1942 forms the manuscript archive she has transcribed and calls "The Actor is the Theatre." It served as the basis for Chekhov's manuscript "Michael Chekhov: To the Actor," which he completed in 1942 with the help of Deirdre and their colleague Paul Marshall Alan. A heavily edited and popularized version of this manuscript, one that omits much of the author's unique spirituality and artistic vision was

published in 1955 by Harper Brothers as *To the Actor*. This version left out most of Chekhov's references to the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, in particular his ideas regarding the art of speech formation and harmonious movement (eurythmy), both of which were regularly taught at the Chekhov Theatre Studio in England and the United States. The late actor Hurd Hatfield, an original member of the Chekhov Theatre Studio, assisted Chekhov in writing a chapter on speech formation and eurythmy, which was left out of the final form of the book published in 1955. A revised edition, which includes some of the earlier edited material, was published by Harper Perennial in 1991 under the title *On the Technique of Acting*.

After completing her work with Chekhov, Deirdre became a successful and much loved lower school teacher and drama director at the Waldorf School of Garden City, New York, where she opened the doors of the creative imagination for several generations of children that passed through her classroom. She also taught graduate courses in drama for the Department of Speech Arts and the Children's Centre for Creative Arts at neighboring Adelphi University. Deirdre has lectured extensively on the Michael Chekhov acting technique in the United States and England. She has published books and articles on the subject, most recently a transcription of the earliest lessons Chekhov gave in English to her and Beatrice Straight in 1936. Deirdre has mentored many young theatre students and teachers interested in understanding Chekhov's method from one of the only remaining members of his original English company. She is currently working with her son, Professor Pierre du Prey, toward establishing a permanent home at Dartington Hall, England, for her Michael Chekhov Theatre Studio Archive.

Notes :

1. Michael Chekhov to Deirdre Hurst du Prey, Hollywood, 21 February 1946, included in "The Actor is the Theatre: A Collection of Michael Chekhov's Unpublished Notes & Manuscripts on the Art of Acting and the Theatre" by Deirdre Hurst du Prey, Westbury, NY, 1978.
2. Mark Tobey in *Miss Nellie: The Autobiography of Nellie C. Cornish*, ed. E. Van Volkenburg Browne & E.N.Beck, University of Washington Press, 1964, 272.
3. The American artist Mark Tobey was unknown at the time he was recruited to teach art at the Cornish School. He eventually moved to Dartington Hall to teach art at the community, but maintained a close friendship with Nellie Cornish. According to Michael Young, who has written an in depth history of Dartington Hall, Tobey discovered "white writing," his unique painting style at Dartington. (Young, M. *The Elmhursts of Dartington*, 222).
4. Mary Wigman was one of a number of international figures in modern dance who guest taught at the Cornish School in the 1920' and 1930's. Others included Martha Graham, Louise Horst, Ronny Johansson and Michio Ito.
5. Lore Deja, member of Wigman's company, arrived at the Cornish School in fall 1930 and taught modern dance there for three years.

6. One of these buildings was the Barn Theatre. Walter Gropius, who founded the Bauhaus, completed the final stages of the conversion of the Hall's barn into a theatre.
7. In 1925 the Elmhirsts purchased Dartington Hall, a late 14th century manor house in ruins and the surrounding four thousand acres. The restoration of the main hall and the construction of living quarters and a school were done in stages and took several years. Eventually the estate contained buildings that housed numerous educational, artistic and agricultural endeavors.
8. Richard Odlin was a student at the Cornish School where he first learned to work with puppets. He later toured and taught puppetry at the Cornish School as well as at Dartington Hall.
9. The Elmhirsts were working within the British utopian tradition that held education as a key in the creation of a peaceful and just society, founded on shared manual labor, non-conventional spirituality, and the creative life. At Dartington there were to be no uniforms, corporal punishment, compulsory games or segregation of the sexes. "Everyone, staff and children was a member of the household, as garden and farm were part of the household economy." Rumors of nudity and food fights in the staid and conservative Devonshire countryside attracted rebels such as Bernard Shaw, whose son attended Dartington. (De La Iglesia, ed. *Dartington Hall School: Staff Memories of the Early Years*. Devon: Folly Island Press, 1996, 118)
10. Fritz Cohen, Jooss' principal composer and musician. In July 1933 Jooss refused a Nazi order to release Cohen and several other Jewish members of his company. In August he was forced to flee Essen, Germany where his troupe was situated. During an earlier London performance of the *Green Table*, Jooss had been invited by Dorothy Elmhirst to join the community of distinguished artists that she was drawing to Dartington Hall. After fleeing Germany, Jooss brought his company to Dartington where he introduced one of his teachers, Rudolph Von Laban. Laban stayed there from 1938-1940. According to Young, the English phase of Laban's work influenced British education by incorporating dance as a part of primary education.
11. Tamara Daykarhanova and Maria Ouspenskaya had been members of Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre (MAT). They were living in America at the time Deirdre and Beatrice studied with them.
12. The Workers Studio, directed by Benno Schneider of the Habima Theatre.
13. Andrius Jilinsky and Vera Soloviova had toured the States with the Moscow Arts Theatre and worked with Michael Chekhov in Paris. In 1935 they came to the U.S. as members of a Russian émigré theatre group—the Moscow Arts Players. For more on Jilinsky's teaching see Mary Hunter Wolf's article in Laurence Senelick, ed. *Wandering Stars*.

14. Uday Shankar was invited to perform and teach at Dartington Hall in June 1934. This connection led to Beatrice's and Deirdre's trip to the Orient and helped to initiate his school in Almora, Uttar Pradesh. Shankar's integration of Western technique with traditional forms helped to revitalize the art of the Hindu dance in the 20th century.
15. One of the original publicity pamphlets, the *Prospectus*, introducing the Chekhov Theatre Studio is included in Deirdre Hurst du Prey's archival collection.
16. The Chekhov Theatre Studio remained in Dartington until the threat of war sent them to the United States. Their farewell performance in England was in December 1939. They relocated in Ridgefield, Connecticut, where Chekhov intended to bring the members of his Studio to another level, and engaged in an energetic course of rehearsals with the goal of mounting a Broadway production. The Chekhov Theatre Players presented Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* in October 1939. Dorothy Elmhirst was to play the role of Mrs. Stavrogin, but had to leave for fear of being separated from Dartington Hall during the War. The play received mixed reviews, to Chekhov's great disappointment. He had hoped to give the performance as a warning about the dangers of the communist revolution, but felt the American public was not ready to understand the depth of his method and the complexity of the Russian story. Beatrice Straight received good notices, however, and she went on to have a successful stage and film career after the Chekhov Theatre Players disbanded.

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