

DISCUSSION BETWEEN MICHAEL CHEKHOV
AND DOROTHY ELMHIRST

"WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE THEATRE IN LIFE?"

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DOROTHY ELMHIRST: What is the role of the theatre in life? What do you feel that great role is? You speak of three main purposes.

MICHAEL CHEKHOV: About the meaning of the theatre - I think it has a social meaning, nothing personal or individual. If it does not serve a social purpose, it is a great illusion. Many actors think they come to the theatre for their own purposes, and it is like that almost everywhere. If you ask modern actors why they are on the stage, they will answer, "To act." This is a point of view which I cannot accept in my life at all.

Another great mistake is in our life today. When we think of social work and social ways of thinking, we mean - or the majority of us mean - that, first of all, it is absolutely political. And if it is not political, then it becomes very individual and very private, which is also quite wrong. Real social consciousness means to do whatever work we do, having in mind our usefulness to society. And this is the main thing which makes social problems in modern life so difficult. Many people make the mistake of paying less and less attention to their real profession and to the abilities which they are granted by God. They look more into the political life and, being amateurs, they spoil the politics under the impression that they do social work, and they spoil their gifts because they

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do not appreciate them in relation to social work.

DOROTHY ELMHIRST: I remember you said that one of the functions of the theatre was to prophesy.

MICHAEL CHEKHOV: I think there are many branches in the theatre from this social point of view, and one of these branches is to prophesy the future. Whether it is in the scientific, political, or religious life, wherever it is, the theatre can have such a great power to prophesy. But for this aim, of course, actors must be more concerned with their own profession than they are now.

One of the illnesses which the theatre can prophesy requires certain deeper understanding of the problems of our present life. This deeper understanding of the present moment or epoch requires, first of all, to shut one's eye entirely to the politicals [politicians] and then the brain can become free. These phantoms which walk on the earth as politicals [politicians] make everyone blind. What Hitler says has a meaning for us, but the whole world is under an illusion about what Hitler says. We cannot speak of prophecy from the stage unless we find the freedom of thought - that means not to be afraid of Hitler's speaking or to consider him as a prophet.

If we are strong enough inwardly to laugh at Hitler - sometimes laughter, when things seem to be serious, opens the door - if we can really laugh at Hitler, we can understand ~~about~~ about him much more than the most clever politicians can because they take him too seriously. For instance, Hitler has had so many possibilities and opportunities to start the war, but he does not start it. Every-

one says that he is going to, but why didn't he start before? This is the hypnotism and the illusion which makes us narrow-minded. But as the political world is under the impression of Hitler's unlimited power, so the world around him forces him to start the war. This is the danger. The world around us is so frightened, that we are making him and not he himself. The mission of the theatre is a social mission, but with free minds and free brains, without all these illusions and hypnotism under which we live now.

DOROTHY ELMHIRST: The theatre should not be led away by current problems?

MICHAEL CHEKHOV: In the long view, there are two kinds of thought.

Humanity of the present day hardly thinks of tomorrow. We are very much concerned with today and tonight and then stop, but we never think of the epoch actually. We never place Hitler in the big space of history and time. If we would do this with a long view, we would get immediately another impression of these creatures. This is the disease of our age, that we are short-thinking. Each thought becomes immediately a different one, when we are trying to place it in bigger space and time. This is what we are lacking. It is so difficult to speak about the ideal aim of the theatre because we are so narrow-minded. We can speak only of the ideal of the theatre in such vague, abstract terms, because our brain is not able to receive these conceptions of the bigger point of view. This is the only point of view as a social factor.

If we really try to get the idea of the theatre as a social factor, we should forget ourselves on the stage and think, rather, of the many people there before us. But we are so frightened before the audience: we cringe before the audience, we

smile and shout, but we are cringing before the audience instead of asking ourselves what we can give our audience as part of our social life. This we can do if we realize that the audience is before us, and not we before the audience.

If we really consider for a moment that there is in our brain and heart and being this instrument, this organ which can receive the life from the social point of view, in the real sense, then we will see immediately that the mission of the theatre can be, first of all, to show the bad and wrong sides of our social life. We must open our own eyes and help to open the eyes of the audience, to see some things which now seem quite natural. For instance, so many people are being killed and burned and destroyed in concentration camps. We read about it in the newspaper quite quietly - it means nothing to us. We know it. The Jews are being oppressed. We read about it, we understand it, but if we consider ourselves as servants of the social life, we must speak from the stage concerning all these things about the Jewish, or the Fascist, or the Spanish question.

We must try to revive our human connection with these things, and put them on the stage in an artistic form, and say again to the audience that these are the facts that are being read in the newspapers every day, but without feeling, because we have become accustomed to them. As artists, we have taken the mission to show them to the audience in an artistic way. Because of our artistic work, the audience will awaken and will understand these things anew. This is one of the theatre's missions.

Another mission is to show good things which are going on in our life. We

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forgot to show the good things which are going on also. At the present time human nature feels itself very happy if it can see only one side of the thing. Human nature is very unhappy when it is forced to see two sides of the same thing, which are sometimes quite contradictory. It requires some consideration and thinking, but we must be brave enough to look at both sides of an issue.

The artist is, of course, not a simple newspaper reader - he is something more - he must think of events, he must feel these events, and he must desire and wish for things more than the average man. Therefore, if he sees good sides in bad things, this is another mission. Of course, we need good playwrights and philosophers whose philosophy comes from the heart - we can all be philosophers from the head, but thought from the heart is another matter. Then we must see good things also, and part of this other side of the bad things.

We can find in our life purely good things. For instance, there are many good spiritual currents going on in the world, but we don't pay attention to them. We pay attention to only one line - to Hitler, for instance, as if he were the center. But there are so many wonderful things arising among young people, so many new ideas in the world of science and architecture, in education, in agriculture, in medicine, and in the church there are currents which are trying to renew the church. In religion and in philosophy good new streams and currents are there, but we do not pay attention to them. This is also something which we should show from the stage; this is again social work.

The themes are flying in the air - the question is only to take them and to show them to the audience by artistic means. But to take them means to make

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our hearts and brains free from the hypnotism of the time, and to make ourselves social-hearted, social-minded, and willing. You cannot be ordered to be social-minded - each of us must find in the depths of our soul this desire. We can speak about the social meaning of the theatre as much as we like, but it does not mean that we will become social-minded unless we find that these things interest us very intimately and we take the decision; then the way will be open because people are here who can help us.

Why did I, for instance, come to Dr. Steiner's teaching? Not because I have chosen him from the many, many mystical currents which I have gone through, but I should say because he has chosen me out of all this mystical part in which I lived so many years. This is very personal. When one says he is an Anthroposophist, it seems an accusation - they think that this egotist has chosen a very cozy life, but it is quite the opposite. When a person tries to overcome his egotism, he looks everywhere. Before he comes to Dr. Steiner, he falls into so many pits. Then he sees that Anthroposophy is the broader way for which he was seeking, and he gets new ideas of the social life, and then it seems quite different. Not the egotist has chosen Anthroposophy - quite the opposite - Anthroposophy has chosen the person. Better to say that Anthroposophy is strong enough to choose some people which it takes from life, and not the small egotist who takes Anthroposophy.

There are so many beautiful currents in our life which can draw us to them, if we only pay attention to them. But as we don't pay attention to these big currents such as Anthroposophy, for instance, it cannot draw people to it because

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people are blind and do not want to see the real good, pure currents which are there in our life. But if we can see these good currents in science, religion, and philosophy, then we can show these from the stage as well as the bad side of life. To show the audience both the good and bad sides of our social life, is to do social work without forcing ourselves to be political. It is a gift like painting or music, to be a politically-minded person.

If we are able to see social problems and to show the bad and good sides as they are, then we are able to take another step forward, which is to prophesy, and it will come absolutely naturally, without forcing it. There is again a very simple law - if we really see these two things, we can immediately prophesy. The prophecy comes immediately if we know something. This is our human nature - we cannot prophesy otherwise.

It is just the same with more complicated things. If we are able to see Hitler from several sides and put him in bigger time and space, then we can prophesy. It is human nature to react with a prophesy on everything which we know. The theatre will prophesy at the moment it says to itself, "We are going to explore some questions of life, not only from the newspapers, and not under the impression of this hypnotic picture of Hitler."

DOROTHY ELMHIRST: Would you say, then, that we must try to get another conception of both time and space?

MICHAEL CHEKHOV: It is a very individual and intimate problem. It is desirable, but when the moment comes to think of it, it is very individual. Another great thing is to appreciate the means of art. If the means of art are not growing,

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then it dies out. It is not possible to find the art which is alive unless it changes the means of expression. Therefore, when we are trying to explore certain means of expression - our Method - it is not in vain because if we don't do it, the theatre will die out. Not because we have the only right means, but because new means must come. Therefore, I am so obstinately trying to give you these means. Otherwise it is death. We will only repeat what other actors have done; and though we repeat their good sides as well as their mistakes, we will never be as good as the original. It degenerates. Only new means can give our art the possibility to make another step forward.

Perhaps you have noticed that the means which I have tried to suggest are somehow finer than usual means, and this is the step forward. For instance, to radiate is a much finer thing than just to be on the stage, and to speak with our Method is to use much finer speech than the usual. To have group feeling is again much finer than to be on the stage without having it. Of course, there are other ways which develop in crucial moments of the art, ways which develop outer effects instead of inner means of expression. All these decadent periods are trying to catch the life by showing it in different dimensions and rephrasing things, but it dies out because it is not the way to develop the art.

Therefore it may seem sometimes that our Method is somehow very insignificant - rhythmical gesture, radiation, etc. - they ^{seem} so weak and so vague perhaps, but I think that this is ^{their} power. If we make much noise and many different dimensions and complicated forms on the stage, it will not save us. It has been abused and used. It will not help us. All these outer means

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are only the effort to try to hide the necessity to develop inner means of expression.

Therefore, the other point of view - how the theatre can serve the social life - is to develop and refine the means with which this art can express its ideas. It is too obvious if I say that the finer the means of expression, the finer the ideas which can be expressed. By finer means of expression you can express things which will be striking to the audience. It will understand things without knowing how it got the idea - this is the secret. Without any striking effects, the audience will be satisfied without knowing why, because the means are so fine that the conversation between the audience and the actors becomes very subtle, therefore much more profound.

There is a danger, of course. If this subtlety means that instead of actors, there are angels without flesh and blood walking about, radiating, then no one will understand what is going on on the stage. But we must not do this. The finer the spirit, the more body and blood there must be on the stage. It is possible to combine the highest spiritual ideas with the strongest presence on the stage. Spirit as spirit means nothing - spirit is for the body and the body for the spirit - they are two friends. A really spiritually-minded person will always appreciate the physical life, and everything about it.

Another mission for the theatre is, of course, education in general.

This is really a wonderful time for creating something new in the theatre, and

it is so necessary. ^{This} ~~It~~ is the time to do it.

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DOROTHY ELMHIRST: Everything you have been saying means education, but do you mean something more specific?

MICHAEL CHEKHOV: Education in the sense that there is something we can take in, and through this thing change ourselves, and I also mean education for children.

GEORGE SHDANOFF: The mistake and the danger of the theatre all over the world today is the detachment of the theatre from the present life with all its complex problems, and as a consequence, the detachment of the public. The mistake is not that of the public, but that of the theatre, which becomes more and more cowardly and lacking in courage. The most important mission of the theatre is courageous leading of the audience and not a running behind the audience. The actors and the theatre in general today are brooding over the problem as to what is actually the taste of this or that part of the audience!

It is a problem which cannot be solved because it is not the mission of the theatre to run after established tastes. It is, on the contrary, its mission to establish taste. The taste of the public must be created by the theatre. The Moscow Art Theatre established an epoch in literature and theatre. Before it became conservative, it established certain new currents in literature and art. It had a definite influence upon the intellectuals. It was not able to teach the people at that time. It affected the actor's technique and elaborated a new one. It affected the social life because many problems were discussed, and, of course, one of the missions and problems of the social-minded theatre is definitely the education - of grown-ups as well as children.

One current which is employed by a social-minded theatre is the pedagogical line toward the audience, and the second line is to teach the children, to try to influence them. Our profession gives us a wonderful opportunity to go along these paths. Very few professions can give the opportunity to say and think what we feel in all these spheres - education of children, philosophy, etc.

In order to be able to serve this wonderful ideal or mission of the future theatre, we actors, playwrights, and directors, and all the members and workers in the theatre must work very seriously on our own development and technique, and minds and souls and hearts. This is the most important problem. In order to become able to express all these deeper thoughts and problems, we ourselves must, first of all, develop our abilities, professional actor's abilities, human abilities, and minds.

DOROTHY ELMHIRST: Do you think the artist's work only expresses his own spirit? Can a painter live a trivial life and paint great pictures?

MICHAEL CHEKHOV: If the artist relies only on his own spirit, then he is not an artist. He must definitely use inspiration and not be too egotistical and say that this is my creation and me. And from this point arises immediately the question of the personality being second. Another thing, all of us are, and will be for many thousands of years, two characters in one body - one is longing for something better and can accept inspiration, and the other will always make mischief and show such dreadful grimaces. It cannot

be avoided - we must act both the devil in us and the angel.

It is difficult to say whether the artist must always be good - he can be good at times and sometimes very bad. Chaliapin was sometimes such an angel with great spiritual power - an archangel with great power and might to do and to say certain things; and at the same time, I have seen him myself in such stupid situations, speaking with stupid words - it was such an example of two beings in one body. I have seen the grimace, but I have seen the archangel also.

We cannot require that the artist be an absolutely purified person - it is the Faust problem - two men in one being. Sometimes we must laugh at them. If one is too concerned with one's own sin, it is very difficult. We must be free, but we must not always laugh. - both must be there - we must be balanced. To show humor on the stage is so desirable as a social work. We make a big mistake when we are acting comedy - we begin to laugh, therefore the audience does not laugh. In tragedy we begin to cry, and the audience does not cry. In comedy we must be absolutely serious, and in tragedy there must always be a little laughter. We often make this mistake.

The theatre consists of audience and actors. The audience is the most important part of the performance, and not the actor. We forget that when the curtain goes up, the audience is so open to us and is willing to accept us, and we always spoil this marvelous moment. Instead

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of being with it, and giving it something, we do the opposite gesture. We want to take the audience's applause, and immediately we spoil the connection with it. It immediately becomes not so friendly towards us because it feels itself exploited. If we will take these things into consideration, we will establish quite a different connection with the audience.

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