

Michael Chekhov

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Given by Michael Chekhov

THE THEATRE OF THE FUTURE
THE ACTOR IS THE THEATRE
 "LIFE" ON THE STAGE
 DIMENSION OF SHAKESPEARE'S CHARACTERS
 MATERIALISM - THE CLICHE IN ACTING
 THE ACTOR'S TECHNIQUE
 ATMOSPHERE
 THE LIVING PERFORMANCE
 WHAT THE AUDIENCE NEEDS
 THE IMAGINARY AUDIENCE
 THE CREATIVE PROCESS - FOUR STAGES
 INSPIRATION - TWO STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Groek
 Don Quixote
 Goethe
 Hamlet
 Hitler

THE THEATRE OF THE FUTURE:

Our theme is the theatre of the future - a very broad theme. We can approach it from so many points of view, but we must choose one of them. I think that if we speak about the theatre of the future from the point of view of the actor of the future, then we can see more things than if we were to choose another approach.

THE ACTOR IS THE THEATRE:

I think the theatre consists of the actor and that is all. Nobody else is important in the theatre, from my point of view. If the actor is not there, then there is no theatre. All that the director, the author, the designer do

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

will not make a theatre.

Therefore, I think the actor is the one who has to worry about the theatre, and to create a new one. And we can help him by our belief in his ability to create the theatre of the future. I mean we, the audience, and his colleagues and friends. Of course, it will be difficult for him because there are so many things which stop the actor's development in our times. For instance, the box office is a very pleasant place, but it is disturbing. The actor cannot concentrate on his profession if the box office says stop or start. But the actor, and only the actor, can overcome even this difficulty.

I think a group of actors, of "pioneers," will very soon find each other and really start to fight. But how? Not to change things which cannot be changed such as closing the box office, but to train themselves; and if they are patient enough to train themselves, then the audience will become convinced that there is something new going on, and the audience will decide everything - even about the box office.

"LIFE" ON THE STAGE:

Now let me say what the actor can do for this future ideal theatre. Actors everywhere - I was once an actor myself, and the negative things I am going to say to you I say about myself as well - we actors are blind to certain things on which we actually stand, or should stand, and feel ourselves on firm ground. One of the most important of these things is

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

that we have lost the sense for "life." In a minute I will tell you what I mean by this term "life." We don't see life and we hate to portray life on the stage. All these difficulties we have on the stage, all the clichés are signs that we have no real connection with life, and we substitute it with dead forms. I am convinced that each one of us actors is much richer, much more talented than we sometimes seem to be. But we don't discover ourselves, and, therefore, we think we have to use different clichés and mannerisms, and all the things which are so obviously false. We cannot deceive our audience with this bad imitation of life. We show them things which make us unhappy.

What is this "life" which the actor of the future will try to find a connection to? All the events which we actors see around us, all the events are only an outer expression of something which makes these things, which moves them, develops them, etc., and this second level is the "life." For instance, let us look at a tree or a plant and try to imagine what happens in this plant which makes it into a plant. This is the "life" - not an abstract life, because abstract life means nothing - but the real power which is there working now. The power which is quite obviously directed from the ground up to the leaves, and even above them and around them. This is not life or power in general; it is a special kind of power which forms and molds this kind of plant.

2428
M. Chokhov

February 17, 1942

Now let us imagine an oak, for instance, and compare the plant with the oak. We must see that there is a different kind of life in the oak tree because the leaves are different, the size is different, and so on. This power in the oak tree is something we can think of. We can think about it and accept it. There must be a certain power, otherwise the plant or tree would not grow. But for the actor, who incorporates everything, it is not enough to know about it, to accept it intellectually. The actor has to be able to grow with the plant together, not in general but with this particular plant. He must be able to mold inwardly this kind of leaves, and to mold the oak form differently. When the actor tries to penetrate into all these life currents, life events which are everywhere around us, what does he do? He awakens the life in himself, the life which is the only means by which he is able to perform on the stage. Of course, we are speaking about the ideal case and about the actor of the future.

Now let us look at an animal. How should the actor look at an animal? Let us imagine a lion, for instance. What we know about a lion is approximately the shape of it; it seems to be yellow and beautiful, but what else? I don't know. But this is not enough. We have to plunge into the lion's life, and we will see how different it is from the life which molds the plant or the oak tree. We shall see that the power

3428
M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

which molds the lion's paws if we penetrate through them into the life which molds these paws; we will get the impression of passionate will which is always looking for victims, for grasping, for catching movements, and so on. The form of the paws will speak to us actors about things which we do not know exist in us, but they are there.

Then we shall discover that all of us are lions, are animals, plants, trees, angelic beings, and so on. We must only penetrate into them and rob them of their specific life, then we will understand that we can do everything on the stage. We can be angels or devils, Romeos who love so much, or Iagos who know how to hurt, and hate, and be happy that the person is dead. We can be murderers, judges, victims, everything, but to discover this thing in us we have to breathe in the life which is around us.

DIMENSIONS OF SHAKESPEARE'S CHARACTERS:

I will not dare to speak about Shakespeare except for one word. I doubt that we actors can really and truly perform Shakespeare if we have not discovered in ourselves all these lions, cats, plants, oaks, angels. I think Shakespeare never wrote about "us," but always about beings who are either lower than we are, or higher. I don't think we can find a single character which is just like we are. But this variety of characters which Shakespeare created shows us that this is the variety which is represented in heaven and in hell. We

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

have to be devils, and we have to be angels, then Shakespeare will disclose himself for us, and we can then discover Shakespeare for ourselves.

When we are reading Shakespeare, we do not yet know what it is, and only after having plunged into the tremendous, and sometimes terrible life of his heroes, do we begin to guess what they might be. Othello, for instance. Now try to imagine what we have to awaken in ourselves to become so passionate and so tender, so willful and so weak - what kind of walk we must have to express Othello. How offensive it is when we see an actor who walks into his dressing room or onto the stage as Othello as though it were just the same - whether he loves or is jealous, it is just the same to such an actor. How very disappointing it is to see a Hamlet on the stage who is just as we are. But this is a mistake - either we are all Hamlets or he is different. So it is with all the characters of Shakespeare.

Now let us see what the actor can do to awaken the life within him. First of all, he must go through certain mental work. He has to recognize that he is living under the pressure of materialistic thoughts which are killing everything, killing his life and his ability to see the life around him - his ability to catch the life and to take it from everywhere.

There are more dangers from this materialistic world

8428
M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

outlook. If the actor has a philosophy, if he is an honest, logical materialist, then it is one thing. But what we see in the majority of cases is that the actor does not know whether he is a materialist, a spiritualist, or an idealist; he simply lives from hour to hour, or even from one half hour to another, being under this materialistic influence which is everywhere in our epoch. It is a shame to speak about angels because the air is filled with materialistic thoughts. The last wave of materialistic thought was at the end of the last century, when we were thinking of materialism as proudly finding new ways, in art, in religion, in essential questions - finding through logic an approach to the scriptures, to vitalism. We actors think we are all right in our minds, but we are not. We have retained so many habits of the materialistic kind of life, which is more dangerous than if we have a firm conviction that the world consists only of matter.

MATERIALISM - THE CLICHÉ IN ACTING:

The actor who wants to be a pioneer in discovering the new theatre, who wants to know how Hamlet looks, how Othello looks, how Claudius shouts, "Give me some light!", must discard his materialistic way of living. That means to substitute new habits for old habits. If we have become accustomed to sitting with arms crossed, for instance, it seems quite innocent, but it is not because it is already filled with materialistic impulses. To sit in another way is

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

uncomfortable, but do it and then something will break in you and some new meaning, some new feeling, some new connection with the plants and trees will be there. That is the way to throw away this heavy blanket of materialist habits which are hanging upon us.

So, as actors, we have first to realize that we are not quite ourselves. We are somehow slaves of thoughts which we call materialistic thoughts, which are everywhere in the air around us, in our bodies, in our manner of seeing and hearing things. The actor has also to realize that the materialistic world outlook, however harmonious it may seem, has degenerated in our day into this world disaster we are living in. All the things which torture us now come from this degenerated, materialistic point of view.

When the artist first begins to flirt with concrete things instead of his imagination and his ideas, and he falls in love at first slyly with these things and many more things become attractive to him, then he feels he doesn't need his imagination because everything is given - the shape, the form, and the colors with which to paint it. Then the artist comes to the point when he really falls in love with such things so deeply and profoundly that he begins to think that he is a thing which has to be dressed, made-up, and shown from the stage.

This is the price which we must pay today for this

0228
M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

flirting long ago with real things. But if the artist of today wants to be honest with himself, he will say, "I must go on flirting. I have to love tanks and machine guns and all the things which are shown on the news reel." But how can the actor, loving tanks, act Hamlet? I think it is impossible. The tank is a thing which is mighty enough to kill us as artists, not only physically, as it is happening in the world now, but psychologically as well.

If I don't love this tank, then I have to go the whole way back. It is not enough to say I deny the tank, but I accept the cliché in the theatre - they are the same thing. The dead cliché on the stage is the same thing as the tank on the battlefield. All these illusions have to be thrown away, for as artists we are people who have to do with life, or we are subconsciously slaves of death. What is the second thing which the actor has to do? He has to see life everywhere, and to say goodbye to all materialistic thoughts and habits of life.

THE ACTOR'S TECHNIQUE:

The third thing: We, as actors, must have our technique, which is just as fine and as complicated as the technique of any other artist. Our means of expression must become different ones from those which we have now. Our instrument which serves to convey to our audience all our imagination and feelings and

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

will-impulses and everything, this instrument - our voices and body - has to be remade, re-created. It has to be consciously changed.

How can it be done, and what kind of change can we get? Let us say that we are moving on the stage. We can move by using our muscles - just by using them. We can take a chair and know that the physical body moves it and puts it down. But have I experienced something more than the usual manner to move on the stage? If not, then it has to be re-created. How? I have to discover in myself as an actor that this kind of movement, which starts abruptly and uses only muscles, must be dropped. I have to find something else, which is first the life impulse and a concrete one.

First the impulse to move, then, within this impulse, to let the body move and follow the impulse - not the opposite. When I have put the chair down, and I feel that my action is finished, that would be wrong. If I have a life-impulse first, then I allow my body to follow it and take the chair and place it down, but the life-impulse goes on, sustains, then stops. The life-impulse has to be started, and the life-impulse has to go on after the physical movement has been accomplished. Then we shall feel our bodies in quite a different way. We shall feel that our bodies serve us as instruments for expressing things which are more than physical. To express will-impulses and life-impulses is something which

4228
M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

the audience must get, and on the waves of which we can radiate to our audience fine things. Hamlet's psychology, for instance. We are not able to convey what Hamlet thinks or wishes without it, but with the life-impulse we can, on these waves, convey to the audience such things which will be the closest possible things to Shakespeare.

We do not know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but the nearest thing we can do is to use these life-impulses and waves on which we can convey to our audience the finest things which we can find in Shakespeare's plays. There are so many means to revive and to fill with life our own bodies - there are so many means to make alive the surroundings - but we have not the time to speak about all the possibilities of developing and re-creating our bodies - we must speak now about other things.

ATMOSPHERE:

The surroundings of an actor are also dead nowadays. When the actor enters the stage, he knows his business, he knows his cues and his partners' cues, and they are things separate from each other to such an extent that when, for instance, I have said certain words and now my partner speaks, what am I doing? Nothing. I simply disappear into nothingness, and only if I am an experienced actor will I try not to show it. But actually I am at home with my dog - when I hear my cue, I go on, but where have I been in between while? In a

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

psychological emptiness.

Here we must try to find out what is in the actual air around the actor. The air is always filled with the atmosphere, which is the only air that the actor can breath in and out. When he is surrounded by the atmosphere, he is there, he is present, he does not need to disappear into nothingness. The atmosphere is something which we can create around us consciously. We don't need to wait for the happy event when suddenly the mood or the atmosphere comes upon us, and we have a happy rehearsal for half an hour, and then again a dry business takes over. We can create the atmosphere, and, in fact, we are obliged to do so.

What is the atmosphere on the stage? Two things are very akin but not the same. There are the personal feelings of the actor which he uses for the character, but the atmosphere is something different - it is an objective realm of feelings around us. As an example, we can easily imagine an accident on the street. We are approaching this catastrophe. Don't you think there is a certain point where first we see the catastrophe, and then as we approach it nearer and nearer and we are surrounded by the atmosphere of the catastrophe, as if we were really approaching the space filled with something very tangible for the actor - it is not the same air which is just two or three feet before it.

When one comes into the general atmosphere of catastrophe,

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

he may find that all the words he may speak, all his movements, all his desires are different because of this general atmosphere of catastrophe. This general, objective atmosphere inspires one to move, to speak, to think, to feel, to radiate different things. This is the air which gives inspiration to the actor on the stage. That is what makes the performance alive.

Now we have the catastrophe on the street - one person is frightened, another person fights with his fears, a third is happy that it didn't happen to him, a fourth is trying to help but does not know how to, another helps and is busy. They are all in different personal moods, yet all of them - including the policeman - are members of this general objective atmosphere of the catastrophe. We can find these atmospheres everywhere if we only become sensitive enough to them.

For instance, imagine a clinic. Has it not its own atmosphere? The general atmosphere is there, whatever the mood of the people in it may be. Then imagine Broadway in the evening, in the morning, at noon, at midnight - everyone is different. To be able to catch these atmospheres and to allow them to influence us so that everything which will be done or spoken will be under the influence of the atmosphere, then the space around the actor on the stage will be filled with different kinds of life - just as with the plant or

2228
M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

other kind of life which the actor can see and live in. Then the space will not be empty around the actor.

The atmosphere is not only very helpful for the actor while acting or preparing his part. The atmosphere, it seems to me, has a great mission in the future theatre. In which sense? What are we looking at now when we go to see a performance? We want to see a star, but the theatre does not consist solely of stars. We want to see and to hear what the author has written about, and what else? If there are no stars? Perhaps that is all we are going to see - the play - but where is the theatre? Where are the actors if they are not stars? "Have you seen the play?", we ask. Why not. "Have you seen the performance?". Because there is no performance.

This is what happens on the stage. There are the author's ideas, then a gap, then actors' bodies and voices, clever, humorous, or whatever the author's ideas are. We understand them from the audience, and we see - if we are sitting near enough - the actors moving and speaking, but nothing in between. The idea and the will. The actors are moving and doing their business - that is the will - but where is the heart that is in between? Very often there is no heart-beat in the performance. Imagine for a moment that we have brilliant ideas and a strong will but no heart. What is it? A fine machine, a clever machine, but not a living being. Without the heart-beat there is no life. I wanted to say that

2228
M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

Hitler is a good picture for such a machine, an inhuman machine, but that is not right because he is not clever, and he has no will - he is only a puppet. But such a person is a cold, frightening machine.

It is an extreme example, but still it is what happens on the stage. We have the author's ideas and the actors' business, but no one is very worried about it. No one is frightened, no one is sorry, but it does not touch me at all because the actor is cold. He fulfills his business and speaks the author's ideas.

THE LIVING PERFORMANCE:

Now the atmosphere is the heart-beat of the performance. The atmosphere is the thing which the future theatre and the future actor must take care of, just as we take care of our physical hearts. If our physical hearts are somehow in disorder, we cannot think as well as before, we cannot fulfill our business as well, we must lie down. But the theatre is much more than that. When the heart in the theatre stops, what are we looking at? Nothing. There is nothing on the stage if there is no atmosphere. Guessing and pretending, that is all. It is nonsense. The performance must have a soul. The spirit is the author, and the soul is the actor, and the body which moves is the director, costumes, and everything. Body, soul, and spirit, then it is a living thing. Otherwise, it is perhaps more dangerous than a Hitler.

4223
M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

WHAT THE AUDIENCE NEEDS:

Then we have to discover one thing more, we actors. We have to find out what for and for whom are we acting. If we act for ourselves to have satisfaction, it is wrong. We have to act only and exclusively for the audience. We must be able to sacrifice ourselves completely while being on the stage and serve the audience faithfully. We have to answer their questions, we have to satisfy their needs. But for that we must know what the audience needs, and here again is a difficulty with the box office, because the box office also knows that the audience needs, and the box office is a poison office in this sense. But the actor must have a different point of view. The actor must be able to open his own mind and soul and will and to listen to the audience, listen to what the audience desires and what its needs are.

First let us see just superficially. Before the war - I mean before this war - there were certain plays produced in New York. Now everything is changed, inside of us, in our lives, we have different dreams, our feelings for time is different. We feel we have started to live a different life. But the box office remains just as it was before the war. No change in the theatre. It is as if the audience is just the same. As if the needs of the theatre are just the same - to feed the box office.

8228
M. Chekhov

1428
February 17, 1942

THE IMAGINARY AUDIENCE:

Here the actor must do the following work: There is the imagination. Every actor who wants to be a pioneer has to imagine the theatre, has to choose a play - let us say it is Hamlet again. The actor must imagine that he sees the performance going on, and he sees the audience in his imagination. Now he must perform this imaginary performance and listen to the imaginary audience.

What is the audience's reaction to Hamlet today? If the actor will exercise this way, he will very soon discover that he has different ears, different eyes, and he knows the audience and what it wants from the performance of Hamlet, from the performance of Othello, or any modern play. The imaginary audience will tell him when he is free from all disturbing elements. This imaginary audience will tell him what they are suffering, what kind of humor they need, whatever they need. And then the actor will feel himself somehow with the audience while he is acting on the stage. He will no longer believe the newspapers or his friends or his enemies, he will know what the audience of today is. In this imaginary audience will be included Pearl Harbor and Churchill's speech and Hitler's mask. Everything will be included - all our hopes, beliefs, conflicts, and doubts, the audience will speak about these things to us. And when the actor opens his heart to the imaginary audience of today and hears the voices of the audience, he will act differently,

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

he will move differently on the stage - how we do not know.

In this way the actor will find the audience and will have the audience in his soul forever. Then the director will be the audience itself...the best director...the finest and wisest. The actor will also feel that the audience has its needs which must be satisfied, and the audience has things which it will digest, but it does not need very much. The audience gets these things, laughs and sometimes giggles, and pays money for it, and the actor feels, "Perhaps I will not do this business. It is not the right time."

The actor, through this imaginary audience, will feel that he is here, playing a modern play, but he is also in the war in the Pacific as well. He is not isolated egotistically, and is able to be responsible for all he does on the stage, for all he thinks and imagines, and for how he moves on the stage. Then another thing will come. Often we hear that Shakespeare's humor is not humorous at all, that it is dull and the sentences are long and indecent. But the actor who is able to be here and in the war zone at the same time, he will be able to discover how terribly humorous Shakespeare is. How his humor comes from such a depth where it is so near to tragedy.

Often we think that here is something very humorous, and here is something very tragic, and nothing in between. But they are really together. If you laugh at the clown,

0028
M. Chekhov

8428
February 17, 1942

Groek, you are laughing and crying at the same time. What happens? The new actor of the future will be able to put the theatre on the ground of such things which now seem so far apart.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS - FOUR STAGES:

Then the actor will discover one more thing. He will discover that the creative process is not a floundering thing. The creative process is a most exact process. Nothing of floundering. Freedom is not license. The creative process, which the actor of the future will know from inside, consists of four definite stages which the actor will love.

The first stage is when he feels that the part he is going to perform, the play he is going to perform, is something which he can embrace entirely as a general atmosphere which comes nearer and nearer. No details yet, but a pleasant atmosphere of the play called Romeo and Juliet, let us say. It is a world. The Tempest is quite a different world. Othello is quite another world, Hamlet, another world. The first step is to listen to the future play, to the future performance as if to music. To listen and to enjoy and to take in more and more, without interfering yet with this marvelous process of conception. The child must be conceived, it must be surrounded by this atmosphere and be prepared. The actor will know that this is the first stage, and he will be sly and wait.

The second stage: More details begin to sparkle in the imagination. Not yet in reality, which is full of cliches and habits. Images beginning to appear here and there. My part, your part, his part, all our parts. They sparkle and begin to appear with promises - they let us guess, and they entice us. Gradually, in this second stage, the actor of the future will very carefully put his hand on the moving world of images and will start to move them with his own will, asking Don Quixote, for instance, to show his arms and hands when he is standing on guard, and the image shows him. "Show me how you are eating this dry fish.", and the image will show. "Show me how you kiss this prostitute, thinking she is a princess." "Show me how the prostitute looks." "Now move, come together, separate." "Show me this moment," and so the performance begins to grow in one's imagination.

This is the second stage, when the actor will create the performance in his vivid imagination which he has got from everywhere, and can manage and can influence his images so lightly and easily that they will dance under his questioning gaze, and perform, perform, perform - the whole thing will be almost there.

The third stage starts when all these images must be distributed into different bodies. Into the body of the actor who is acting Don Quixote into the Duke, into Sancho Panza, and so on. Different bodies filled with the life, and

2370
M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

they start the third stage of incorporating these movable images. The actor has seen Don Quixote so many times in the world of the imagination - how he walks, how he moves - and then the body is filled more and more, and inspired more and more with the image which was there and which has shown its life. When the image is there and the actor can glance as Don quixote and move like him, when the character is everything and the actor looks at himself absolutely objectively, not egotistically, then the character moves and speaks out of him.

INSPIRATION - TWO STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS:

Then comes the fourth stage which we can't do - it comes of itself. The inspiration comes, the imagination stops and the inspiration is there. It means that I am two persons. I have given my body, my will-impulse, and it [the image] has me. I am Don Quixote because he wants me to be, and there is another "I Am." Absolutely free, calm, and quiet, looking at this Don Quixote - looking and magically leading it.¹ The second "I" foresees everything that will happen on the stage. If Don Quixote is sitting at the table, the other "I" knows that he is getting up before he does it. Therefore, I tell him to get up like this or that, and he does it, being sure that there is his guide, his inspiration, in a strange form of a second "I."¹ It is not mere fantasy that I am speaking about. We know that Goethe was a scientifically sound man,

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

but he had this ability to divide his consciousness in a creative state. He was one Goethe in his life, and another Goethe who looked upon the other. Two Goethes, and the second was actually the artist, the great Goethe. We know that he was - without hating himself morally, without hating the girl he loved at the moment - at the most critical moment of his life, he was still Goethe. One Goethe was with the girl and the other was looking at them both, accepting this thing because Goethe was a pure, artistic nature. Then the other Goethe wrote about his own love experiences very often, and wrote so that we are astonished how he knows such things, such fine, subtle, mysterious, hidden things, when he and she are in love. Because he sees himself looking at himself and at the girl, - creating there the divided consciousness. And the actor of the future will be able to do this, and will know that there is no other way than to go patiently through the four stages, one after another - at the end the inspiration and the two consciousnesses.

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Question: You speak about the atmosphere which influences the actor. Perhaps you could expand the whole question of the transition.

Answer (Michael Chekhov): The atmosphere is one thing, but there are others. For instance, if we develop the ability to

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

move in different ways. If we train ourselves to move in different ways, for which there are special exercises, then the body itself can inspire us very much. We know that very often we actors are instinctively avoiding things which our bodies cannot do. For instance, the actor might like to imagine Don Quixote in one way, but because he is not flexible enough in his body, he finds it better to imagine the character more simply. When the body is developed more, the imagination will be more free.

Question: But how about the objective? Would not the objective take care of the trap of doing nothing in between speeches?

Answer (Michael Chekhov): The objective, as I understand it, fills the whole scenic time on the stage. The question is only how to use it. If we take the objective only with our minds, it will not help. If the intellect understands something, it keeps it there longer than necessary and does not allow the will to use it. But the objective, which we take by means of our will, is there during the whole performance, and there are no gaps because the actor has his objective as a character, and he is going to fulfill it. So the objective helps very much to avoid any gaps on the stage.

Question: When you were speaking about what the audience wants - about comedy and tragedy - the way in which you arrived at it is not clear to me. When you say you know what the

audience wants, I don't understand this unless you know it in terms of yourself.

Answer (Michael Chekhov): As soon as we see with our imaginary eyes the "reason," the "intellect" is somehow limited or bewitched. Of course, there is something of yourself because the artist is always an individual who has to say something to the world. The artist has the right to express his opinion, doubts, and convictions through his art. It is a combination of "guessing" what the imaginary audience wants and adding to it what the artist wants as a creative individual.

There is one great illusion in our art when we think we can perform and interpret the part absolutely objectively. There is no objective point of view at all. The artist has not the right to be objective, otherwise he has nothing to say, nothing to perform. It must be objective in the sense that I am living in my time - I must know what happens - I must know what Hitler and Mussolini and other quasi-great characters are. I must know everything on earth and, more than that, I must guess what will happen tomorrow. And then, on top of all that which is objective, I must throw my subjective light on such things and hate Hitler in my own way.

Question: To throw away the habit of material things - to give it away is comparatively easy, but what do you give them instead? How do you get the actors to be able to imagine and

M. Chekhov

February 17, 1942

to trust their imaginations. To let it flow and say there it is. What is it?

Answer (Michael Chekhov): First of all, I never recommend my colleagues or students to drop all their habits immediately because it may be just as dangerous as you say - the habits are gone and nothing new is there to substitute for them. The way to drop old habits in time is to follow certain development, a certain Method, as we call it. Of course, I cannot even give a hint of our Method in such a short time, but there is a method which can gradually substitute all the habits, giving the actor the ability to create anew at each moment, without worrying that there will be empty spaces and gaps. It takes time and training on the one hand, and on the other hand, we must not drop the habits until the new things are coming along to take their place.

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