

Michael Chekhov

(afternoon) February 3, 1938

STYLE  
SCENES FROM SHAKESPEARE  
FIRE  
OUR METHOD  
SPEECH

Dr. Rudolf Steiner  
Shakespeare

STYLE: [Our Phantoms - The Possessed]:

We are going to rehearse Mr. Shdanoff's play and do different scenes and characters as before, but everything should be done in the style which we are trying to explore, and this is a very clear form which is full of inner content or inner impulse. The audience must always get the impression that the form is going to burst.

Exercise:

I want you to jump up with a very clear form, with the impulse to shout in very great despair, "Leave me alone." Now, sit down slowly with a very clear form, "I will remain like this forever." Try to keep it as the future style for our performance.

Now get up, and imagine that before you is a door, and you have to open the door and cross the threshold with the impulse, "Now we have to solve the problem."

We have spoken about the staccato and legato in this style. Fall down in staccato, then legato, in expectation of a blow. Sit down in the clear form, and, while sitting there, start some action.

Follow me with your imagination: Two persons, one is the son and the other is the spy. The spy has prepared a

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

big revolutionary organization in the country to which they belong, and here, abroad, is the center of the whole organization. The spy finds that the moment has come when they must go back home and start their real revolution in earnest. The son, who is one of the members of this revolutionary organization, is already in an inner state of doubting this organization for certain reasons, but the spy needs him because his idea is that the people in the country where the revolution must be started, need somebody who may be shown to them as an ideal person - a dictator as it were - to whom after certain preparations the whole country will look to with devotion. This person must sit on a very high pedestal, actually being nothing and doing nothing, and very far removed from the people. The spy wants to do everything under the guise of this man.

We shall start the scene at the moment when the spy says to the son, "Now we are going home," and the son replies, "I am not going home." This means the whole organization is shattered. When the spy hears this something happens in him, and he becomes at once powerful, like an animal; his whole idea is shattered and he catches the son physically and shouts, "You have to go with me." He is then flung to the ground by the son who says, "Let me go."

I want very few words. We must have the impression that the form is going to burst. This is the quality we

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

must keep throughout. Then the spy jumps up with terrific speed and repeats this manoeuvre, and the son says with great contempt, "You fool."

The son's character is suffering through the whole play - as a human being he suffers tremendously through many questions that come to him. By being absolutely free and relaxed in body, it will indicate that his suffering is entirely spiritual or mental.

The son is always listening to something and waiting for an answer, and the suffering is not passive but active. Where is the answer? When he looks at anyone he looks through them.

When the son speaks, the audience must get the impression that he speaks not his own thoughts but something he hears, except in certain scenes with his mother. He is a person with many potentialities, and the spy feels that if the son could be shown to his people this would be a great triumph. Repeat the scene.

Now the spy changes his tactics and tries to be friendly. He is not even aware that he is being thrown down and hit. The son is a powerful person but he does not use his power. Therefore, he listens to something which will tell him where to apply his tremendous powers. He is very strong in body. He is well dressed.

The spy now pretends he has nothing to say. He is

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

too clever and, therefore, too dangerous. He has great organizing ability. Repeat the scene.

Try to find inner justification for this thing. Inner characterization. The scene is full of the expectation that things may happen. Justification can be quite different in each case.

Next scene:

The meeting where the beggar girl tells the son fairy tales. Try to hear the fairy tale with the whole being. (I am speaking to you as actors, therefore, you must find grounds for what you do.) The fairy tale will be the development of their growing confidence in one another. The beggar girl must create the fairy tale as she goes - not something which has ever happened before.

Scene:

Drawing room of the general's widow. We shall start with the moment when the son appears. Everyone guesses that there is something very scandalous about the situation. Very long pause. The mother asks, "Who is this woman?" and the son answers, "This is my wife." The son approaches the beggar girl and takes her to him and they go out of the room. Repeat the scene.

The mother takes a certain psychological gesture. She is a very involved person. She is not simple at all. When she is angry she laughs. When she is happy she cries.

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

The son is to the mother still a small boy. The mother says to everyone in the room, "Now, this girl is under my protection." This gesture must be done with the form of the play; the impulse which is bursting. Repeat the scene.

Next step: The mother is exhausted and sits down and says, "I am tired."

I want you to explore the figure of the idealist. He is very young and awkward in his thoughts and movements, like a clumsy bear.

Addition: At the moment when the governor and husband of the bride are almost out of the room, the bride, who likes the son very much, calls after the son as he goes out. The mother must take this action into consideration.

SCENES FROM SHAKESPEARE: Criticism:

We have today to see the new students' Shakespeare scenes - the Ghost scene from Hamlet, and the scene with Ophelia. We must watch and try to help our friends by giving suggestions based on the Method, not from the point of view of interpretation, as Paul did last time.

Ophelia	Valerie, Mary Lou, Daphne
Ghost	Hurd, Woody, Sam

Paula:

In every case the preparation for the scene for the performance was very good, but in some cases you prepared by removing yourselves, instead of preparing for really giving

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

to the audience. You did the preparation, then retreated into yourselves. The audience did not get the benefit of the preparation. It is there, but all that is left is the head. The second suggestion is that whatever ground you take, you must take with the whole body, because in instances we were left with the head, and the voice went into the head. The actual preparation was good in every case and was there but it didn't always do what you meant it to do.

Anna:

I didn't, in all cases, feel what grounds they had prepared. In some cases I felt they had taken many grounds, and were not truly in them. Perhaps they took too many, and I felt they did not take long enough to prepare themselves. I suggest that they take the things more systematically - take the objective, and then go on to the next, even if it takes longer to prepare themselves.

Deirdre:

Fire was never even touched. Perhaps it was there in some people, but they were frightened to touch the fire. Had they realized that we were warmly receiving their work, they should have done it fully - all out. Many of them tried to get it through their voices, and that was all that was on the stage. They should try to get through this closed cham-

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

ber in their work. They should be more brave. The form in each instance was very good. I would caution everyone to be careful of shoulders and arms. They hold you in a vice. In Hurd's particular case I felt that by his long walk he defeated his own tempo, even as a ghost. Everything came and went. A moment the person - a moment the picture. This was true of everyone.

Catherine:

Two suggestions. One for the girls. It might perhaps help if they imagined a larger circle. We have the feeling of a small space around. If they imagined, they could fill a larger space. In the "ghosts" I felt in almost every case there was no feeling of urgency.

Gavin:

I think much the same as Paula. However, the following suggestion might be helpful. Do a psychological gesture for yourself of opening to give, so that after that you are able to give all that you have prepared.

Alan:

Perhaps they could apply the Method we use of imagining with the aim of finding the fire in the imagination. This morning we were working and I saw great progress being made in one morning's work on an exercise. I think if you

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

will all take that same method from the point of view of penetrating the fire in the image, it would develop.

\* \* \* \* \*

FIRE:

On the principle there is something wrong in our approach to the idea of becoming actors in time. You must understand me rightly because I feel I must explain a very serious problem. You see, when we speak about fire, does it mean that we want to have a performance in which voices are loud and movements are wild? It is something which is deeper, and much more essential, and much more artistic, and much more human at the same time. It is something which lies in our artistic nature and serves us not less than the sun shining in the sky serves our whole world. The same with our actor's nature. Take our fire away, and the nature of the actor becomes cool, cold, dark, intellectual, dry, dead. This comparison is absolutely exact. The life comes from the sun for the earth, and the life comes from the human heart and fire for artists.

I make this comparison because I want you to understand my word "fire," "feeling," in the right and deep way, not in the way in which you may think we can substitute something for the fire - we cannot any more than we can substitute the sun. The moon is always the



M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

moon - always cool and mirroring something, but we never mistake the moon for the sun, which we do in our work. It is our disaster. No less. Because, if you will imagine that in the audience are sitting people who are listening to our Shakespeare interpretation, and to our Shakespeare content, you will realize that we pronounce the "Oh," in Shakespeare's text as if we were reading an "Oh," in the newspaper.

This is a very big mistake which we perhaps do not know. This mistake lives inside of us and kills us. Imagine that the audience is sitting and listening to such a performance as we have seen today, or as on the stage of the present day. Then imagine one of the spectators will read the play for himself. Do you think he will do this less well than we have done it? He will get pleasure from his reading, but he will never get the pleasure from this dead performance. When he reads, he will imagine what he wants, and he will get as much fire as he needs at the moment, but he will feel when he has seen such a performance that he is far away from Shakespeare. He will say, "Why don't they act politics instead of Shakespeare?" There is nothing written mightier or more majestic than Shakespeare. Nothing more modern, nor more human than Shakespeare. When somebody enters the room in our present life, and we ask, "Where have you been?", is it not the same question as

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

Othello puts before his wife? It is the same thing, but increased through Shakespeare's genius to a world dimension. When Shylock is running through the small and narrow streets of Venice - this old, suffering Jew crying, absolutely torn to pieces inside and out, and the children jeering at him. Is it not full of fire - a human volcano? For instance, in our soliloquy, "burned and purged away" - what does it mean for the spirit to be burned away? Imagine for one moment that you see it burned away. Yet, today you were absolutely cold.

Even in these small examples we see how wrong we are in certain very deep grounds in our approach to the theatre. This is not a small mistake done by this student or that student. It is much deeper. I speak about the fire. Mary Lou told me yesterday that she did not know what fire really meant. It is wrong that Mary Lou does not know what fire is, because all of us are human beings and everybody has a head, shoulders, legs, heart and nerves, and how can it be that one does not know what fire is? It cannot be, as it belongs to the human being. Everybody thinks. Everybody feels. Therefore, it is quite wrong and unjustifiable to say, "I do not know what the fire is." But, Mary Lou might have said, "I do not know how to get the fire." If I say to myself, "I have no fire in me," I belie myself and stop my own activity from finding the fire. If I have no fire I have

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

nothing to strive for. The only thing we can say is that we do not know yet the real way to get the fire. Then we must find the way to the fire we possess as human beings.

OUR METHOD:

Here is again the only answer I can give you. In our profession, and in our school, the Method is given for use in getting the fire. I cannot give any other answer. Of course, I might suggest that you meditate on very religious themes, but you will say that it does not belong to your professional work, and you would be right. I cannot say to you, imagine some special religious work that will inflame you - enlarge the circle of your interests. I cannot tell you to do certain exercises as human beings to inflame your hearts. There is quite a clear problem. If you say to me that we have done everything to inflame our hearts, I will laugh at you and say you have not yet done anything to inflame your hearts. Because you are always deceiving yourselves and taking your intellectual illusions for your actor's reality. You are always making this mistake.

No one today had any idea of the suffering of the Ghost. Sometimes we got an impression of the "spirit" but when the "spirit" began to move it was quite a friendly, fleshy thing. We knew him very well. You may ask how it is possible to have an image of a "spirit" which you have never

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

seen - neither have you killed Desdemona. If you do not believe in spirits as an artist, that is not art. An artist believes in everything. If not, he is not an artist. This believing in everything, that means to have fire.

Therefore, I think that the best criticism of today would be really to see where our approach to our profession is on the right basis, and where it is not, and to replace it on the other basis. This is work which is worthwhile doing, and this can be done only by very intimate talk with yourselves. Why am I here? What is our Method in reality? What shall I do from now on? How shall I work? What do I really understand of the idea to work?

I must repeat, that if you will take our Method, point by point, paragraph by paragraph - if you will find the right idea, what does it mean to work with method, you will discover that it shows you your own fire in your own heart, and you will be a different person. I want you to make a real effort to use the Method as the key to this room where the fire is. You will not understand because the Method is fire. Empty minds - empty ideas. And only you, each for yourself, must and can discover the Method. I cannot do it for you. I can suffer with you and for you, and do everything to awaken in you this will, but I am not able to sit in your individual hearts. I want to do the whole work, but it is not possible.

This is the tragedy of our connection sometimes,

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

because I feel your helplessness, being absolutely full of desire. You have to take the Method, otherwise I am helpless. I have the illusion that I give, but nobody takes. You are always taking your intellectual illusions for your actor's reality. The smallest exercise we do must be thought through. The whole approach to the work must be thought through, then our Method will be discovered. It is not yet discovered. The Method is described by me, but not yet discovered by you. When you discover it you will say, "now I begin to live."

~~The human being who has no fire has only the il-~~lusion that he lives. This fire has nothing to do with unbridled passions, with our animal nature. Everyone has an animal nature in him, but it has nothing to do with real human fire. Not unbridled fire, but real fire which is different - real warmth from the human heart. By the restraining gesture which we do, we kill not only the animal nature in us, but the real human being as well, and we become empty forms - human forms but not yet the human beings. When we are artists this is an absolutely wrong picture which rises before us. Who shall then act on the stage? If everything is restrained, then no one is there to act, to be an artist, to show themselves to the audience. The spectator can do the same thing at home by reading Shakespeare, or the newspaper.

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

SPEECH:

The same thing is true with our speech lessons. I don't think we have discovered the real depth of the method which Miss Crowther brings to us, which has been created by Dr. Steiner. I am sure it is not yet discovered, because if you had discovered even the Eurhythmy gesture for "A" - this is fire. This is great fire of astonishment. Again, if you will take the gesture "OO." It is fire, the fire of tremendous, limitless fear. If we did the "OO" gesture with the desire to discover this "OO" mystery (because everything which is discovered is a mystery) it would overwhelm us and give us new power as artists. If we really discover "E" that means that we begin to be somebody, while the undiscovered "E" is just wasted time.

It needs time, but time is not enough. The desire must be there also. You must want to discover each gesture - why you are asked to speak like this or like that. It must be discovered, otherwise it is only funny. Who can do this? Not the teacher. We must each rediscover it for ourselves.

It is very easy to criticise things, to be amused at Eurythmy; to criticise Stanislavsky's Method; my attempts to give something in the form of a Method. It is true, it is very easy to laugh, but behind all these things lies the real fire, and something to which we can devote our lives, and this is the important point. We have to devote ourselves. If we are not able to do this we will gain nothing. Perhaps

M. Chekhov

February 3, 1938

a few of us in time will develop, but this is not the theatre, not the group we are waiting for. Even the smallest things in our everyday life must be newly discovered.

I don't want to criticise, but I must help you because we each depend upon one another. Therefore, it is necessary sometimes to make an effort to help each other. I don't want to scold, I am so far from this, but I want to help you by speaking with you, by feeling with you, by suffering with you, by having pleasure and joy with you - I have no other means.