

Michael Chekhov

(afternoon) March 11, 1938

Shdanoff Play: [ The Possessed ]:

Meeting scene:

We will develop some atmosphere and objectives. Imagine the pompous entrance of Verkhovenski and Nicholas, after which the whole group feels itself uplifted in a very heroic, revolutionary mood. Each person feels that he is absolutely necessary for the cause - that on his shoulders lies the burden - that he is ready to sacrifice his life and to follow the great leaders. A very serious, very tense atmosphere of conspiracy in which heroes are sitting. Nothing ironical about it - absolutely serious. No attention is paid to the idealist. The two leaders are everything and everyone is for himself, everything - very strong "I am" experience inside. All these qualities are there at the beginning of this scene.

After the spy's first speech you make certain attempts to understand without being able to. How he speaks is a little strange to you. Through the whole scene the audience must feel that the group is more and more attracted to the spy, so that at the end of his speech he and they are really one being, one body. Great expectation is in the air at the end of his soliloquy.

The idealist is the only person who pushes away this atmosphere - he despises it - he wants to be alone - to give a blow to the whole thing later on. He does not

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want to be with them because he feels that everything is wrong, and that especially the person of the spy is wrong. Actually he is living in this big wave of impending "breaking of the form." His tension is quite different - the more the group is with the spy the more the idealist is away from him. He makes the psychological space necessary to prepare his blow.

Nicholas is always seeking, trying to find out whether a devil or an angel is behind what the spy says. The scene is on the basis of atmosphere - conspiracy. The spy speaks so mechanically that they cannot understand what he says. Without stopping - like one big nothing. Sometimes Nicholas hears, sometimes he looks, sometimes he is not listening or looking but simply guessing at different things, so that sometimes the audience must pay attention to him. Once he makes a very clear gesture looking at the idealist. The idealist gradually loses calm and poise and grows more unable to bear the noise, so that the moment the blow comes the audience is already prepared.

The group begins with the atmosphere of active, honest, heroic people, open and ready to receive, but gradually throughout the spy's speech they close more and more. When the spy asks for a pause, Nicholas feels what a fool, and when the group sees that Nicholas is not interested in them but only in the spy, the applause dies and they try to

find one another. The spy never gives them time enough for anything. He fills the whole room all the time and never leaves an empty space.

When the theoretician is speaking the spy is restless because he feels the time is being lost whenever he is not speaking. He does not listen but is only frustrated. It is a great relief for the group when the theoretician speaks - everybody gives him their attention in the hope that now they will hear something, but when he mentions ten evenings of study they begin to feel ashamed. They appreciate the energy and activity of the spy, although they are not quite sure what it means, so that when the old theoretician begins to speak, the more he speaks the more obsolete they feel he is. Then they begin to wonder what the spy and the leader will say - they begin to laugh and their laughter is painful laughter, dreadful laughter. The theoretician's whole life is in his book, Their laughter is an effort to excuse him. The spy does some small movements and noises so that the audience will be aware of his presence.

Occasionally the old theoretician looks at Nicholas so that the audience gets the feeling that they see what Nicholas is thinking about. In Nicholas's face there is a little sign that perhaps he will laugh. Therefore, the group is already laughing. He is quite shameless in the way he sits. From his behaviour and from the spy's behaviour, the

group knows that it is a mistake for the theoretician to speak and they want to stop the foolish old man, so they laugh the second time in a more exaggerated way, because their first laughter did not have the desired result. They become more and more serious and offended and angry, and at the end they are all speaking at once. This is all done for the benefit of the leader, who pays no attention to them, neither does the spy. At the moment when the wave of protest is rising, the idealist gets up and walks about and then sits down again.

Recall the atmosphere at the beginning of this scene, one of great expectation, each member of the group is really with the leader who has not yet arrived - only some words are there - their spirits are with the coming leader. The atmosphere is stately, solemn, serious and heavy, although happy. When the leader appears, they applaud to the point of ecstasy, then Nicholas says, "Put a stop to this."