

Michael Chekhov

(afternoon) December 6, 1937

STACCATO AND LEGATO QUALITIES
RHYTHMICAL FORM OF IMPROVISATION
RHYTHMICAL ACTIVITY

Moskvin
Sulerzhitsky

STACCATO AND LEGATO QUALITIES:

The Deluge:

Let us try to explore the legato and staccato qualities in this improvisation. The legato must anticipate something which is about to happen. The staccato is nothing if it does not express something, which in this case is the business life and the feeling of enemies. It is staccato because of our psychological state, not because of tempo. The staccato must express this psychology of enemies. The same is true of the legato. The scene becomes more and more legato because we are anticipating something which is inevitable.

Criticism:

As we work on this sketch, it becomes less chaotic and some separate scenes and moments are beginning to appear. This is very precious and it belongs to the actor's psychology to feel the different moments and scenes in a play. This is a very good sign, and I am very happy about it. We must appreciate this and develop it. It is like playing on the piano - when you strike a chord, you know that another chord in another key must not be struck at the same time. In time we must develop this rhythmical feeling, because the rhythmical form of

FFH1
M. Chekhov

December 6, 1937

improvisation is the highest type the actor can experience.

RHYTHMICAL FORM OF IMPROVISATION:

Almost all of you have tried to elaborate your own acting with more and more care, using things which are not usually seen on the stage. For instance, Paula has performed a long scene fighting with the table on which she sits. To be able to act with things in this way is a very good ability. Blair did something in a very strange rhythm, and this was another kind of elaborating something out of nothing. The actor of the future must know how to act out of such things on the stage. Terry was jumping up and down in a slow rhythm, while on the stage there was an entirely different rhythm going on. He found his own rhythm to show his action in the crowd. Your artist's instinct has suggested these things to you and you have taken them. This is very important.

Another good point is that you have begun to repeat less and less. That means that you are free enough to discard what you have already done. This is very seldom found among actors. As a rule, when actors have found something, they cling to it and get more and more tired as they repeat it. Once, when I was a very young actor, I was acting with Moskvin, an old actor, who, seeing that I was clinging to one or two good things, asked me why I did this. He gave me courage to trust in inspiration instead of clinging to old habits. Also

M. Chekhov

December 6, 1937

Sulerzhitsky once asked me whether I had created a certain moment; and when I said yes, he asked why I clung to it, and said that if I was capable of creating such a moment, I could create many, many more.¹

But what was not good was the staccato moment. It was not really staccato. You only had an illusion about this. Unless the quality lives in our whole being, we will never be entirely staccato. It must come out of the whole being and not out of the brain which belies us so much. Our illusions come from the brain and not from our whole being. But even when unfulfilled staccato went into the legato, it was very charming - even by giving a hint that there are two kinds of activity, one of which flows into the other.

When we live in the intellectual content, we are nothing more than nurses who speak to the audience. But the same content becomes a piece of art when we express the content with rhythmical means which seem to have nothing to do with the content. The rhythm then is the content. Try to imagine that you see a play in Chinese, in which the staccato gradually becomes legato - for you this is the content.

RHYTHMICAL ACTIVITY:

Therefore, today when you tried to be staccato and then legato, it was very charming and was more speaking to the audience than the plain content. How charming is a thing of

M. Chekhov

December 6, 1937

rhythm. It was charming to see how the idea was changed only because of this simple thing which we have done - from staccato to legato. Now imagine that we have mastered rhythms on a big scale. We will do marvels. We can do this, and some day a group will be formed who will give the content of the play in rhythm. By rhythm I do not mean meter, but the music of our art.