



2+2=8

Michael Chekhov and his encounter with Rudolf Steiner

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THE PROJECT

Michael Chekhov and his encounter with Rudolf Steiner

by Enrica Dal Zio

When Reiner Maria Rilke saw the Torso of Apollo, also known as Belvedere Torso, in the Vatican Museums in Rome, he was so impressed by the intensity of movement which the artist carved into the stone that he affirmed: “What is art? It is an experience in which a work of art awakens in the onlooker the feeling that he is not yet a human being in the fullest sense of the term, and in that very moment he feels the need to change something in his life”.

In his book “On Directing and Dramaturgy. Burning the House” Eugenio Barba describes his dramaturgy and at the same time some significant episodes of his own life. Barba refers to three types of dramaturgy: the actor’s dramaturgy (organic), the script’s dramaturgy (narrative), and the one he calls “evocative.” This last one is the most complex and mysterious and its aim is to address the audience and convey something through the artistic creation: a question should arise, a wish to change, and to create a window into a new dimension of reality.

Are we able to lead the audience beyond the surface into a deeper dimension? Can we let the audience truly experience the secret which is hidden inside reality? This is a central impulse in Russian actor Michael Chekhov’s life and acting technique. Are we able to create some space for our free creative individual presence and action in our artistic production?

Chekhov says the actor must overcome a limited view of his physical and psychological instrument, a view which is only subjective and materialistic: he must explore wider dimensions to express what is beyond his small self, he would otherwise just repeat himself, his work become a cliché. The actor should become a window into another dimension - a deeper one, and true for the audience. Chekhov’s entire technique guides us through several exercises: all have as a common thread the goal to develop an inspiring way of acting and a motivating dramaturgy, and to lead us to a more essential and objective expression.

The psychophysical exercises enable the body to express our inner experiences. The physical body expands its expressive skills to include plastic, fluid, light, radiant qualities of movement; we can find these qualities in the forms and movements of nature itself, and it can be a real training for the actor to master lively and at the same time perfect, original movements. In this way, the actor overcomes his own personal interpretations which run the risk to become stuck and look all alike, and a freer and larger space is created around the actor’s body. In this space, expressive elements can combine in new ways. The actor can now, as a full immersion in these elements detaches the actor from himself, come back to himself as if from the outside, discovering new riches and talents in his soul as well as new, expanding needs for his instrument.

Therefore by exploring the mood of a dramatic piece an actor takes the first step to get freely inspired by it rather than anticipating the character, the plot, and its development through a personal interpretation.

When practicing movement qualities such as floating in the space, falling, keeping one’s balance, we can find out how an intense experience of this practice produces much more expressive sensations and feelings compared to our personal moods. In fact, our own moods are more related to precise memories of life experiences; according to Chekhov sensations are like large packages we can slowly unfold to reveal the infinite nuances of their content. We can then go from “I am sorrowful” to “sorrow” as sensation in its manifold manifestations: all these ever new forms will communicate more and more inside our expanding expressive space, as we deepen the work.

And finally, psychological gestures offer the actor an important door towards another dimension in acting.

Are we able to get an overall view of how our character develops in the course of the entire piece we are working on? Have we asked ourselves what this character really requires? Can we condense our character’s ultimate deep will in a psychological, expressive, physical gesture? This scenario leads us to an objective interpretative dimension as it calls forth other dimensions in the will sphere. A will which is a mirror, image, and symbol for archetypal movements, movements creating a new wider background in the newly conquered free space, for all characterizations, feeling nuances, and environmental and historical moods in which the piece takes place. In this space, where things are continuously built and broken down again, the actor can invite his own creative individuality to be alive. He will combine all these technical elements to give his character a new and different life each evening; and each evening the actor will be able to follow that particular audience with their special request. His acting will be different, unique and particular each time and he will get close to a true dramaturgy - the one Eugenio Barba calls evocative and that the Greek philosopher Aristotle said to have the effect of catharsis.

The seeds of this research and deep interpretation skills are present from the beginning of Michael Chekhov’s acting career, and they grow through time, up to the moment he meets Rudolf Steiner. In deepening the knowledge of Anthroposophy and its artistic spiritual impulses, Chekhov is relieved to find that this path clearly, profusely, tangibly expresses what has intuitively lived in him. This meeting will become a self awakening event and will give Chekhov courage and tools to organize his experience and build the technique he is famous for all over the world.

In the free space created by the actor, 2+2 is the ever new number - which is more than its individual parts as it is a process awakened by a spiritual principle: the free creative individuality. This creative force allows each time a new synthesis of all the substance the actor brings into existence through practicing all the different and various elements of the technique. The actor’s work coincides with the rising of deep requests and impulses from the audience, and the result is a collaboration between the two processes.

Hints:

Some direct descriptions from Michael Chekhov.

Quote from Michael Chekhov "Lessons for the Professional Actor", Performing Art Journal Publications, New York 1985, Page 100

TRANSFORMED FEELINGS

... In our creative individuality there are both possibilities. There are limitless things there because we are able in our creative spirit to combine things which we cannot even think of combining in our everyday life. ...

What distinguishes these things from cliché?

I think we can imagine clichés as follows: Clichés exist only in the personal feeling life, and not in the transformed feelings where there are no clichés because there is complete freedom. Clichés are necessary because we are very limited persons, so we appeal to them as the easiest way, but as soon as we can penetrate into the realm of transformed feelings we do not need them. Of course, when we speak of a religious person or an atheist, if you will consider your intellectual conception of them you will see that is a cliché.

Our intellect is a series of subtle or crude clichés, but in our creative spirit are concepts of transformed imaginings, transformed feelings and will impulses. Since they are transformed and we have found an approach to them, and the whole method as I understand it is the way to open the door to this world of transformed things - then we do not need clichés. Of course, our body will force us to use clichés which are sitting here and there in us, but we have to gradually fight free of them.

Quote from Michael Chekhov "Lessons for the Professional Actor", Performing Art Journal Publications, New York 1985, Page 109

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE THEATRE

... To increase our own life of the stage means to be able to see everywhere - in the written words, in the events around us, and in our own psychology - gestures, gestures, and more gestures, but not states of mind. This is a very dangerous thing in the theatre, because the state of mind in the theatre is a fixed, dead, immovable psychology. But the state of mind which we must understand is one in which the inner movement goes on, and must not be understood as a fixed thing, but as an invisible psychological process going on in a certain definite way. "I am in a state of sorrow" - that means to produce a certain gesture, although it is called a state. I can be experienced - I can be sorrowful - in one physical gesture or another. I can produce this gesture physically or otherwise, when I am acting. The audience will respond to this better than if we imagine ourselves in a state of mind which is fixed and set....

Quote from Michael Chekhov "Lessons for the Professional Actor", Performing Art Journal Publications, New York 1985, Pages 110-111

CHARACTERIZATION - THE LANGUAGE OF GESTURE

... If we are producing these gestures, than we are accumulating, like a magnet, all the big and small particles which are coming to us, because we are occupied. Here again is another psychological trick. Our consciousness is occupied in these gestures, therefore, our talent is freed to such an extent that it will not remain silent, but will speak immediately as soon as we do not sit upon it and squeeze it out. The talent

can show, do, demonstrate, produce. When we do the gesture many times, we will suddenly see something. It must come of itself. That is the whole secret. It cannot be squeezed out of us by readings books and critiques, or by using our own intellectual ability to analyze things which should not be analyzed.

When the actor gets the part, if he is conscientious, he starts to analyze it. it is a great illusion. Our art is quite the opposite - it is synthesis. It is the process of synthesizing and not of analyzing. What do we have to analyze? What we have in our soul, in our creative imagination? There is nothing to be analyzed or dissected. It is a great illusion which actors have, hoping to get through their work more easily. It is the wrong way. The right way, as I understand it, is to synthesize everything which our soul, our super-consciousness, our creative individuality - call it what you like - can prompt us, being influenced by something, absolutely intuitively created, as the simplest and first bell which we ring, and this is the gesture.

That is the first sign which I send to my creative individuality, and in producing this gesture I am waiting, and the synthesis take place - all the things which my talent needs come by themselves from the simple gesture. If we are patient enough, and want to economize time, and to remain actors and not scientists, then this gesture will soon give us so many things that the whole character of Don Quixote, including is speech, his inner characterization, etc. will grow before our eyes and our imagination - our mind eye's - and in our inner emotional life. It will take the will and create itself. Our business is only to send the message, "I am waiting", and the answer will come and Don Quixote is there. When you are ready, you can use everything....

...When we produce such gestures we kill our stiffness. For instance, let us suppose we take the text and find happy modulation of the voice, then become terribly stiff, but the moment we produce this gesture we are free as newborn people, and we can change our gestures as we like. So the gesture is the most freeing thing, in comparison to all the other means known to the actor. In using gesture, we have the greatest opportunity to receive everything which comes to us from our partners, and from the director and the author....