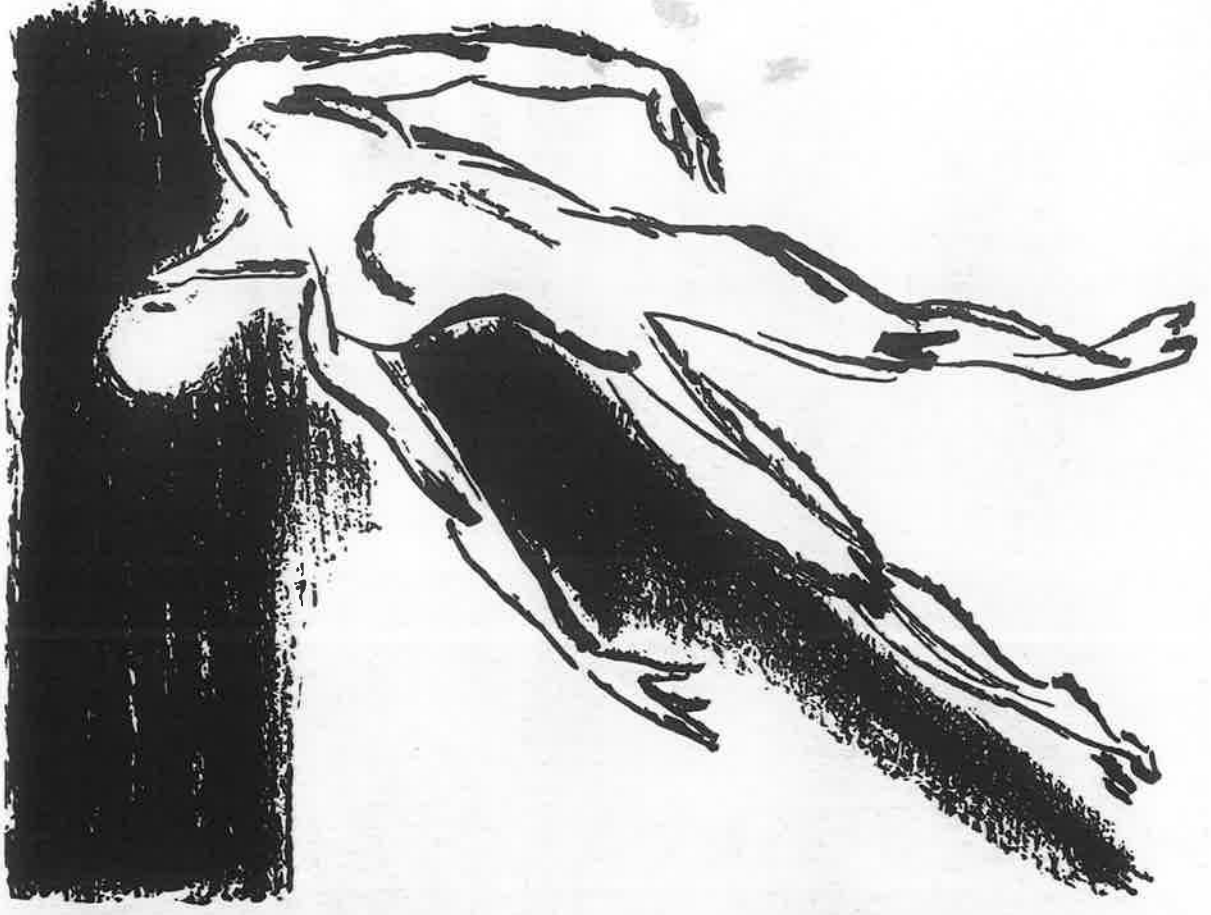


IO I HE ACTOR
On the Technique of Acting

MICHAEL CHEKHOV



so. You will find that your own efforts will intuitively awaken other players and inspire their collaboration.

Thus, in our first nine exercises, we have laid the foundation for the attainment of the four requirements which are basic to the actor's technique. By means of the suggested psychophysical exercises the actor can increase his inner strength, develop his abilities to radiate and receive, acquire a fine sense of form, enhance his feelings of freedom, ease, calm and beauty, experience the significance of his inner being, and learn to see things and processes in their entirety. If the suggested exercises are patiently complied with, all these and all the other qualities and abilities we have covered will permeate his body, making it finer and more sensitive, enrich his psychology and at the same time give him, even at this stage of his development, a degree of mastery over them.

chapter 2

IMAGINATION AND INCORPORATION OF IMAGES

Not that which is inspires the creation, but that which may be; not the actual, but the possible.

—RUDOLF STEINER

IT is evening. After a long day, after much work and many impressions, experiences, actions and words—you let your tired nerves rest. You sit quietly with your eyes closed. What is it that appears out of the darkness before your mind's eye? You review the faces of people you've met during the day, their voices, movements, their characteristic or humorous features. You run again through the streets, pass familiar houses, read the signs. Passively, you follow the motley images of your memory.

Unnoticed by yourself you step back over the boundaries of today, and in your imagination slowly arise visions of your past life. Your forgotten and half-remembered wishes, daydreams, life's aims, successes and failures appear as pictures before your mind. True, they are not so faithful to the facts as the recollections of the day just passed. Now they are, in retrospect, slightly changed. But

you still recognize them. With your mind's eye you now follow them with greater interest, with more awakened attention, because they are changed, because they now bear some traces of imagination.

But much more happens. Out of the visions of the past there flash here and there images totally unknown to you! They are pure products of your *Creative Imagination*. They appear, disappear, they come back again, bringing with them new strangers. Presently they enter into relationships with one another. They begin to "act," to "perform" before your fascinated gaze. You follow their heretofore unknown lives. You are absorbed, drawn into strange moods, atmospheres, into the love, hatred, happiness and unhappiness of these imaginary guests. Your mind is now fully awake and active. Your own reminiscences grow paler and paler; the new images are stronger than they. You are amused by the fact that these new images possess their own independent lives; you are astonished that they appear without your invitation. Finally these newcomers force you to watch them with greater poignancy than the simple pictures of everyday memory; these fascinating guests, who made their appearance from nowhere, who live their own lives full of emotions, awaken your responsive feelings. They force you to laugh and to cry with them. Like magicians, they call up in you an unconquerable desire to become one of them. You enter into conversations with them, you now see yourself among them; you want to act, and you do so. From a passive state of mind the images have uplifted you to a creative one. Such is the power of imagination.

Actors and directors, like all creative artists, are well acquainted with this power. "I am always surrounded by images," said Max Reinhardt. The whole morning, wrote Dickens, he sat in his study

expecting Oliver Twist to appear. Goethe observed that inspiring images appear before us of their own accord, exclaiming, "Here we are!" Rafael saw an image pass before him in his room and this was the Sistine Madonna. Michelangelo exclaimed in despair that images pursued him and forced him to carve their likenesses out of rocks.

But although Creative Images are independent and changeable within themselves, although they are full of emotions and desires, you, while working upon your parts, must not think that they will come to you fully developed and accomplished. They don't. To complete themselves, to reach the degree of expressiveness that would satisfy you, they will require your active collaboration. What must you do to perfect them? You must ask questions of these images, as you would ask questions of a friend. Sometimes you must even give them strict orders. Changing and completing themselves under the influence of your questions and orders, they give you answers visible to your inner sight. Let us take an example:

Suppose you are going to play Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Suppose you want to study the moment when Malvolio approaches Olivia in the garden, after having received a mysterious letter which he supposes to be "from her." Here is where you begin to ask questions such as "Show me, Malvolio: how would you enter the gates of the garden and with a smile move toward your 'sweet lady?'" The question immediately incites the image of Malvolio to action. You see him in the distance. Hastily he hides the letter under his cloak, to produce it later with triumphant effect! His neck stretched, his face deadly serious, he looks for Olivia. Here she is! How the smile distorts his face! Didn't she write to him, "Thy smiles become thee well . . ."? But his eyes, do they smile? Oh, no! They are alarmed, anxious and watchful! They peer from

behind the mask of a madman! His concern is his pace, his beautiful walk! His yellow, cross-gartered stockings seem fascinating and seductive to him. But what is that? Maria! This intrusive creature, this plague is here, too, watching him out of the corner of her mischievous eye! The smile fades from his face, he forgets his legs for a moment and his knees bend slightly, involuntarily, and the whole figure betrays his not-so-youthful body. Hatred now flashes in his gaze! But time is short. His "sweet lady" awaits! Signs of love, of passionate desire, must be given to her without delay! Tighter his cloak, faster his walk, nearer to her he goes! Slowly, secretly, seductively a little tiny corner of "her" letter appears from under his cloak. . . . Doesn't she see it? No! She looks at his face. . . . Oh, the smile! It has been forgotten, and now it turns on when she greets him with:

"How now, Malvolio!"

"Sweet lady, ho, ho!"

"Smilest thou? . . ."

What was this little "performance" Malvolio offered you? It was his first answer to your question. But you may feel dissatisfied. It does not seem right to you; the "performance" left you cold. You ask further questions: Should not Malvolio at this moment be more dignified? Was not his "performance" too much of a caricature? Was he not too old? Would it not be better to "see" him as rather pathetic? Or maybe at this moment, when he believes he has achieved the aim of his whole life, he reaches the point where his mind is shaken and he verges on madness. Maybe he should bear more resemblance to a clown. Shouldn't he be even more old and undignified? Shouldn't his lecherous desires be stressed more? Or perhaps his appearance would be enhanced if he made a rather humorous impression. What if he looked like a

naïve and rather innocent child? Is he entirely bewildered or still able to keep his senses under control?

Many questions like these may arise in your mind while you are working upon a part. Here your collaboration with the image begins. You guide and build your character by asking it new questions, by ordering it to show you different variations of possible ways of acting, according to your taste (or the director's interpretation of the character). The image changes under your questioning gaze, transforms itself again and again until gradually (or suddenly) you feel satisfied with it. Thereupon you will find your emotions aroused, and the desire to act flares up in you!

By working this way you will be able to study and create your character more profoundly (and more quickly, too); you will not be relying only on ordinary thinking instead of "seeing" these little "performances." Dry reasoning kills your imagination. The more you probe with your analytical mind, the more silent become your feelings, the weaker your will and the poorer your chances for inspiration.

There is no question that cannot be answered in this way. Of course, not all questions will be answered immediately; some are more intricate than others. Were you to ask, for instance, what the relationship is between your character and the others in the play, the right answer would not always come at once. Sometimes hours, even days, are required before you "see" your character in these different relationships.

The more you work upon your imagination, strengthening it by means of exercises, the sooner a sensation will arise within you which you can describe as something like this: "The images which I see with the mind's eye have their own psychology, like the

people surrounding me in my everyday life. However, there is one difference: In everyday life, seeing people by their outer manifestations alone and not seeing behind their facial expressions, movements, gestures, voices and intonations, I might misjudge their inner lives. But it is not so with my creative images. *Their* inner lives are completely open for me to behold. All their emotions, feelings, passions, thoughts, their aims and innermost desires are revealed to me. Through the outer manifestation of my image—that is to say, of the character I am working upon by means of my imagination—I see its inner life.”

The oftener and more intently you look into your image, the sooner it awakens in you those feelings, emotions and will impulses so necessary to your performance of the character. This “looking” and “seeing” is nothing but rehearsing by means of your well-developed and flexible imagination. Michelangelo creating his Moses not only “saw” the muscles, the ripples of the beard, the folds of the garment, but, undoubtedly, also “saw” that inner might of Moses which had created those muscles, veins, beard, garment folds and the whole rhythmical composition. Leonardo da Vinci was tormented by the fiery inner life of the images he “saw.” This is one of the most valuable and important functions of imagination, provided you take the pains to develop it to a high degree. You will begin to appreciate it as soon as you realize that you need not “squeeze” your feelings out of yourself, that they will rise from within you by themselves, and with ease, as soon as you learn to “see” the psychology, the inner life, of your images. And just as Michelangelo “saw” the inner might which created Moses’ outer appearance, so your “seeing” and experiencing your character’s inner life will always prompt you to new, more original,

more correct and more suitable means of outer expressiveness on the stage.

The more developed your imagination through systematic exercises, the more flexible and fleeting it becomes. Images will follow images with increasing rapidity; they will form and vanish too hastily. This may result in your losing them before they can kindle your feelings. You must possess enough will power, more than you normally exert in everyday activities, to keep them before your mind’s eye long enough for them to affect and awaken your own feelings.

And what is this additional will power? It is the power of concentration.

I anticipate your asking: “Why should I take such pains to develop my imagination and apply it to work upon modern, naturalistic plays when all the characters are so obvious and easy to comprehend; when the lines, situations and business provided by the author take care of everything?” If that is your question, permit me to take issue with it. What the author has given you in the form of a written play is *his* creation, not yours; he has applied his talent. But what is your contribution to the writer’s work? To my understanding, it is, or should be, the discovery of the psychological depths of the characters given you in the play. There is no human being who is obvious and easy to comprehend. The true actor will not glide over the surfaces of the characters he plays nor impose upon them his personal and unvarying mannerisms. I know perfectly well that that is the widely recognized and practiced custom in our profession today. But, for whatever impression it may make upon you, let me take the liberty of expressing myself unrestrainedly on this point.

It is a crime to chain and imprison an actor within the limits of

his so-called "personality," thus making of him an enslaved laborer rather than an artist. Where is his freedom? How can he use his own creativeness and originality? Why should he always appear before his audiences as a puppet compelled to make the same kind of movements when the strings are pulled? The fact that modern writers, audiences, critics and even actors themselves have become habituated to this degradation of the actor-artist does not make the charge less true or the evil less execrable.

One of the most disappointing results stemming from this accustomed treatment of the actor has been that it makes him a less interesting human being on the stage than he invariably is in private life. (It would be infinitely better for the theater if the opposite prevailed.) His "creations" are not worthy of himself. Using only his mannerisms, the actor becomes *unimaginative*; all characters become the same to him.

To create, in the real sense, means to discover and show new things. But what novelty is there in the stilted mannerisms and clichés of the fettered actor? The deeply hidden, and nowadays almost completely forgotten, desire of every true actor is to express himself, to assert his ego, through the medium of his parts. But how can he do it if he is encouraged, more often required, to resort to his mannerisms instead of his creative imagination? He can't because the creative imagination is one of the main channels through which the artist in him finds the way to express his own, individual (and therefore always unique) interpretation of the characters to be portrayed. And how is he going to express his creative individuality if he does not or cannot penetrate deeply into the inner life of the characters themselves by means of his creative imagination?

I am quite prepared for some disagreement with these views; it

is a sign that the actor is at least giving some thought to the problem. Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, let us find the best arbitrator. In this case I recommend the power of imagination itself. Start doing the suggested exercises that follow and you may change your mind upon seeing and experiencing how much penetration you develop while working upon your parts; how interesting and intricate your characters will appear to you, whereas they seemed so ordinary, flat and obvious before; how many new, human and unexpected psychological features they will reveal to you, and how, as a consequence, your acting will become less and less monotonous!

EXERCISE 10:

Start your exercise with recollections of simple, impersonal events (not of your own emotions or inner, real-life experiences). Try to recall as many details as possible. Concentrate on these recollections, trying not to break the flow of your concentration.

Simultaneously with this exercise, begin to train yourself in catching the very first image the moment it appears before your mind's eye. Do it this way: Take a book, open a page at random, read a word from it and see which image it conjures up before you. This will teach you to imagine things rather than confine yourself to abstract, lifeless conceptions of them. Abstractions are of very little use to a creative artist. After a little practice you will notice that every word, even words like "but," "and," "if," "because" and so on, will evoke certain images, some of them perhaps strange and fantastic. Fix your attention upon these images for a moment, then continue your exercise in the same way with new words.

After a while proceed to the next step of the exercise: Having caught an image, look at it and wait until it begins to move, to change, to speak and to "act" on its own. Realize that each image has its own independent life. Don't interfere with this life, but follow it for at least several minutes.

Next step: Again create an image and let it develop its independent life. Then, after a while, begin to interfere with it by

asking questions or giving orders. "Will you show me how you sit down? Get up? Walk? Ascend or descend a staircase? Meet other people?" And so forth. If the independent life of the image becomes too strong and the image turns obstinate (as it often does), turn the requests into orders.

Proceed with questions and orders of a more psychological nature: "How do you appear in despair? In a happy mood? . . . Give a hearty welcome to your friend. Meet your enemy. Become suspicious, thoughtful. Laugh. Cry." And many other similar questions and orders. Ask the same question as many times as you have to, until your image shows you what you want to "see." Repeat the same procedure for as long as you wish to continue your exercises. While interfering with the independent life of your image you might also put it in different situations, order it to change its outer appearance, or set other tasks for it. Alternate by giving it its freedom several times and then making your demands upon it again.

From a play choose a short scene having few characters. Act out the scene with all its characters several times in your imagination. Then put before the characters a series of questions and give them a number of suggestions—"How would you act if the atmosphere of the scene were different?"—and suggest to them several different atmospheres. Watch their reactions, then order: "Now change the tempo of the scene." Give them suggestions to play the scene with more reserve, or with more abandon. Ask them to make certain feelings stronger and certain others weaker, and vice versa. Interpolate some new pauses or discard the previous ones. Change their *mise-en-scènes*, business, or whatever will make for a different interpretation.

Thus you will learn to collaborate with your creative image while working upon your part. On the one hand, you will get used to accepting the suggestions which your character (as an image) gives you, while on the other, by means of your questions and orders, you will elaborate and lead it to perfection according to your own (and your director's) taste and desire.

Now, as the next step of your exercise, try to learn to penetrate through the outer manifestation of an image into its inner life.

In our everyday existence it is not unusual to observe people around us closely and most attentively, and yet not be able to

penetrate their inner lives deeply enough. Some areas of their psychology will always be obscured to you; there will always be some secrets which you will not be able to discover. But not so with your images; they can have no secrets from you. Why? Because however new and unexpected your images may be, they are, after all, your own creations; their inner experiences are your own. True, they often reveal to you feelings, emotions and desires of which you were not aware before you started using your creative imagination, but from whatever deep levels of your subconscious life they may have emerged they are nonetheless yours. Therefore, train yourself to watch the images as long as it is necessary to become affected by their emotions, desires, feelings and all else they have to offer; that is, until you yourself begin to feel and wish what your image feels and wishes. This is one of the ways of awakening and kindling your feelings without laboriously and painfully "squeezing" them out of yourself. Choose simple psychological moments at first.

Next proceed to the exercise for developing the flexibility of your imagination. Take some image, study it in detail. Then make it transform slowly into another image. For instance: A young man gradually becomes old, and vice versa; a young shoot of a plant slowly develops into a big, many-branched tree; a winter landscape fluently transforms itself into one of spring, summer and autumn.

Do this same exercise with images of fantasy. Make a bewitched castle transform itself into a poor hut, and vice versa; an old witch become a beautiful young princess; a wolf turn into a handsome prince. Then start working with moving images, such as a tournament of knights, a growing forest fire, an excited crowd of people, a ballroom with dancing couples or a factory busily at work. Try to hear the speeches and sounds of your images. Don't allow your attention to be distracted or jump from one stage to another and so miss the transitory stages. The transformation of images must be a smooth, continuous flow, as in a film.

Next create a character entirely by yourself. Start developing it, elaborating it in detail; work upon it through many days or perhaps weeks by asking questions and getting visible answers. Put it in different situations, different environments, and watch its reactions; develop its characteristic features and peculiarities. Then

ask it to speak, and follow its emotions, desires, feelings, thoughts; open yourself to it so that its inner life will influence your own inner life. Co-operate with it by accepting its "suggestions" if you like them. Create dramatic as well as humorous characters.

Working that way, the time may come at any moment when your image will become so powerful that you will be unable to resist the desire to incorporate it, to act it even if it is only a bit of a short scene. When such a desire flares up in you, do not resist it, but act freely for as long as you wish.

This sound desire to incorporate your image can be systematically cultivated by means of a special exercise, one which will give you the technique of incorporation:

EXERCISE 11:

Imagine yourself doing, at first, some simple movement: raising your arm, getting up, sitting down or taking an object. Study this movement of yours in your imagination, and then actually fulfill it. Imitate it, as it were, as faithfully as you can. If, when fulfilling it, you notice that your actual movement is not quite that which you saw in your imagination—study it again in your imagination and try it again, until you are satisfied that you have copied it faithfully. Repeat this exercise until you are sure that your body obeys even the slightest detail you developed when imagining your movement. Continue the exercise with more and more complicated movements and business.

Apply the same exercise to imagining a character from a play or a novel, starting with simple movements, business and psychological content. Let your image speak a few words. In your imagination study the character with utmost attention to as many details as possible, until the feelings of the character arouse your own feelings. Then try to incorporate your new vision as faithfully as you can.

When incorporating, you may notice that you sometimes deviate from what you have visualized and studied in detail. If this

deviation is the result of sudden inspiration while incorporating, accept it as a positive and desirable fact.

This exercise will gradually establish those fine connections so necessary to the linking of your vivid imagination with your body, voice and psychology. Your means of expression will thus become flexible and obedient to your commands.

When working this way with the character you are going to play on the stage, you might, to begin with, choose only one feature from all that stand before your inner vision. By doing so you will never experience the shock (which actors know only too well!) that comes of trying to incorporate the whole image at once, in one greedy gulp. It is this strangling shock that often forces you to abandon imaginative efforts and relapse into clichés and old, worn-out theatrical habits. You know that your body, voice and whole psychological make-up are not always able to adjust themselves to your vision on short notice. Going over your image bit by bit, you avoid this difficulty. You enable your means of expression to go quietly through the necessary transformation and be ready to comply with the respective tasks they have to fulfill. You will be better able to incorporate the entire character you are working upon if you do it gradually. It sometimes happens that after only a few attempts to incorporate its separate features, the character will suddenly leap ahead and incorporate itself as a whole.

While thus incorporating your character, whether exercising or while working professionally, add to your imagination all the things you did not foresee and now encounter only in reality—new business, your partners' ways of acting, tempos suggested by your director, and other such contingencies. With these new additions,

"rehearse" the scene you are studying in your imagination, then incorporate it again on the stage or while doing your exercise.

These exercises of attempting to incorporate your images will soon prove themselves the most effective means of developing your body as well. For in the process of incorporating strong, well-elaborated images you mold your body from within, as it were, and permeate it throughout with artistic feelings, emotions and will impulses. Thus the body becomes more and more the "sensitive membrane" previously described.

The more time and effort you spend on conscious work for developing the strength of your imagination and on the technique of incorporating your images, the sooner your imagination will serve you subconsciously, without your even noticing it at work. Your characters will grow and develop by themselves while you are seemingly not thinking about them, or while you are dreamlessly asleep at night, or even in your dreams. You will also notice that sparks of inspiration will strike oftener and oftener and with greater accuracy.

To sum up the exercises on Imagination:

1. Catch the first image.
2. Learn to follow its independent life.
3. Collaborate with it, asking questions and giving orders.
4. Penetrate the inner life of the image.
5. Develop the flexibility of your imagination.
6. Try to create characters entirely by yourself.
7. Study the technique of incorporating characters.

chapter 3

IMPROVISATION AND ENSEMBLE

*Only artists united by true sympathy
into an Improvising Ensemble can
know the joy of unselfish, common
creation.*

As pointed out in the preceding chapter, the highest and final aim of every true artist, whatever his particular branch of art, may be defined as the desire to express himself freely and completely.

Each of us has his own convictions, his own world outlook, own ideals and ethical attitude toward life. These deeply rooted and often unconscious creeds constitute part of man's individuality and its great longing for free expression.

Profound thinkers impelled to express themselves create their own philosophical systems. Similarly, an artist who strives to express his inner convictions does so by improvising with his own tools, his particular form of art. The same, without exception, must be said for the actor's art: his compelling desire and highest aim also can be achieved only by means of free improvisation.

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