

# TO THE ACTOR

*On the Technique of Acting*

MICHAEL CHEKHOV



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 seemed so ordinary, flat and obvious before; how many 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

### Imagination and Incorporation of Images

penetrate their inner lives deeply enough. Some areas of psychology will always be obscured to you; there will always some secrets which you will not be able to discover. But not with your images; they can have no secrets from you. What becomes however new and unexpected your images may be, are, after all, your own creations; their inner experiences are own. True, they often reveal to you feelings, emotions and details of which you were not aware before you started using your active 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 else they have to offer; that is, until you yourself begin to feel what your image feels and wishes. This is one of the ways of awakening and kindling your feelings without laboriously 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 let it transform slowly into another image. For instance: A young man gradually becomes old, and vice versa; a young shoot of a tree slowly develops into a big, many-branched tree; a winter landscape slowly 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 man become a beautiful young princess; a wolf turn into a hand prince. Then start working with moving images, such as a troop of knights, a growing forest fire, an excited crowd of people in a ballroom with dancing couples or a factory busily at work to hear the speeches and sounds of your images. Don't allow attention to be distracted or jump from one stage to another so miss the transitory stages. The transformation of images should be a smooth, continuous flow, as in a film.

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