

Michael Chekhov and Konstantin Stanislavsky – a Difference. Towards More Conscious Acting *

By Victor S. Tkachenko

In the many years of employing the Michael Chekhov technique in my work as a director and instructor, I have realized that there is a certain confusion regarding the technique's purposes. There is a common opinion that Michael Chekhov created his technique in order to evolve, or improve, or interpret in his own way the Stanislavsky's "System" or Method (in the United States), while the basic principles and purposes of Chekhov's technique and the "System" (the Method) remained identical.

However Chekhov's technique cannot be grasped and mastered by one whose understanding of acting is based on Stanislavsky's principles. The two great artists in their searches of the most comprehensive acting methodology proceeded from two contrary and incompatible points of view on acting and on the nature of art in general. Accordingly, their goals and the ways they choose to achieve these goals were extremely different.

The Method is based on the assumption that the two worlds, two realities, i.e. the reality of everyday life and stage "reality" are the same. Consequently, a man's behavior, that is, all his actions and reactions, intentions and emotions, sensations and feelings – on stage and in a real life must be of the same nature and follow the same principles. What all Stanislavskian acting schools and techniques are trying to do is to help an actor to feel himself and to behave in this totally unreal stage "world" as naturally as he would in real life.

This is how the distinguished American director Harold Clurman, one of the leaders of The Group Theatre, explains the meaning of the "System":

To act on stage means to behave under "unreal" or imaginary circumstances as though these circumstances were real. In this definition the word "behave" is crucial. Mimic ability or a capacity to imitate is valuable to an actor, but acting is not imitation. When I speak of "behavior" on stage I mean that the actor must bring to each moment of his role a sense of fully experienced truth – physical and spiritual – within the circumstances of that moment: he must see, hear, move, react and feel with organic completeness and definite intention.

Harold Clurman, *Lies like Truth*, The Macmillan Company, NY, 1958, page 245

"Acting is not imitation", an actor "must see, hear, move, react and feel with organic completeness

and definite intention” – what does this mean for Mr. Clurman and other the Method followers? It means that an actor on stage must not just *look* like in real life (not imitate!) but literally *to be*, to *actually* feel on stage the same as he would in his daily life – “with organic completeness and definite intention”. “To be, not to pretend” is the slogan of the the Method teaching.

The “System's”, or the Method's purpose is to help an actor to feel on stage, under the so-called *given circumstances* (Stanislavsky's term), or “*unreal*” or *imaginary circumstances* (Clurman) “as though these circumstances were real”. Therefore a “System” (Method) actor is one who is able to accept and to experience unreal, imaginary world of stage as real world of everyday life.

Why did it happen? How could artists arrive to the belief that it is even possible in illusory, imaginary world of stage to “see, hear, move, react and feel” as they would in a real life?

In the second half of XIX century a new trend called *New Drama* came on stage. The trend required new artistic language, one that is more naturalistic, more believable. Theatre artists of the time tried to reach on stage maximum similarity with reality. The new term: *life truth*, or *truth*, appeared.

Truth substituted *believability*, the term which artists of all times used to employ formerly.

Believability, a quality of looking *like* the real while not being real – that necessary ingredient of artistic recreating of reality, the magic elixir which artist gives his audience to make it following his ideas – was declared to be the wrong word for theatre people, and an antonym of what they called *truth*. And gradually, in their searches of maximum *truth* and naturalness of human emotions on stage, theatre artists lost an ability to differentiate between an *unreal*, artistically created world of stage and the real world of everyday life.

That is how the art of acting entered the era of The Great Confusion, confusion between two totally different, disparate spheres: world of reality and world of art.

Stanislavsky strongly believed in the “power of unconsciousness” and considered the creative process as an unconscious act.

The creative process, in a big part, goes on unconsciously – that is how our artistic nature constructed.*

K.S. Stanislavsky, *Iz zapisnyh knizhek (From Diaries)*, Moscow, VTO, 1986, vol 2, page 157

It is only when an actor feels that his inner and outer life on stage is flowing naturally and normally, in the circumstances that surrounds him, that the deeper sources of his subconsciousness open and from them come feelings we cannot always analyze. For shorter or longer space of time they take possession of us whenever some inner instinct bids them. Since we do not understand this governing power, and cannot study it, we

actors call it simply nature.

Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, Theater Arts Books, New York, 1973, page 15

This notion corresponds to Stanislavsky's conviction that an actor's purpose is to eliminate any difference between stage and a real life:

To be like reality, stage needs to become as real as life.

K.S. Stanislavsky, *Iz zapisnyh knizhek (From Diaries)*, Moscow, VTO, 1986, vol 2, page 38.

Consequently, in the Method there is no difference between feelings that a man experiences in a real life and the feelings of an artist who creates on stage. They are of the same nature. This is what Stanislavsky meant when he wrote of “feelings we cannot analyze ” that come from “ the deeper sources of an actor's subconsciousness”.

Yes, it is true: in real life most of human emotions, such as anger, love, hatred, joy, etc. are unconscious, and actions we undertake while being affected by these passions are unpredictable, spontaneous. In reality, emotions frequently prevail over intellect, so we can say that spontaneity, i. e. inability to control are the key characteristics of genuine human emotions.

In sphere of creative art, on the contrary, the intellect dominates, and everything is ruled by artist's consciousness and will, by his creative ego (higher ego, in Michael Chekhov terms). When artist creates, his *consciousness* is extremely mobilized, and all the powers of his soul, all his creative efforts and skills are focused on the process of creating a work of art. Such a state is *inspiration*, and the only “human” emotion that the artist experiences in it is the joy, sheer of creativity. *And it is essential for an actor to realize that there is no place for any other kind of human emotions on stage.*

Therefore, an actor who wants to become a creative artist should first liberate himself from the delusion of identity of two incompatible worlds. He should remember: every time when he comes on stage he leaves the sphere of emotional spontaneity and enters the sphere of conscious creativity, the sphere of artistic images, symbols, metaphors – which cannot be qualified as a world of real feelings, actions and reactions by no means.

Furthermore, he, the actor himself, becomes a part of this unreal world – as unreal and symbolical as everything on a theatrical stage. His “outer ego” – his body and voice – transformed into the

character's "body", on stage turns into an artistic image, metaphor, symbol. While actor's mind, his mentality, intellect, his creative individuality (higher ego) are totally involved into the *process of formation* this artistic image – the new stage character.

In this sense, the process of acting could be compared with the work of a painter, or sculptor, or any other artist. However a significant difference takes place: a painter and his work of art are separated physically, while there is no physical distance between a stage artist and his artistic creation.

Yul Brynner, a renowned actor and Michael Chekhov's dedicated student, wrote in his Preface to Chekhov's *To the Actor*:

When you are a pianist you have an outside instrument that you learn to master through finger work and arduous exercise, and with it, you as a creative artist can perform and express your art. As an actor, you the artist have to perform on the most difficult instrument to master, that is, your one self – your physical being and your emotional being. That, I believe, is where all the confusion of the different schools of acting stems from, and that is why your manuscript, which I hold in front of me, is worth more than its weight in gold to every actor – in fact, I believe to every creative artist.

To the Actor; Routledge, 2003, Preface by Yul Brynner, page L

The fact that an actor leads a "double life", as "a painter" and as "a picture" at the same time, makes people, including most of theatre professionals, confuse two different substances: the actor and his character. They sincerely believe that the character – who "sees, hears, moves, reacts and feels" – like a real human being, actually *is* a human being. While it is not; it is a theatrical personage created by a playwright and an actor, i. e. a symbol, a *sign* of something that had been never existed in reality – which only *looks* like a real human being.

No wonder if an audience makes such a mistake. It's even better if spectators consider people on stage real, it helps them to empathize with play's characters. But why should we professionals to share this delusion? How I, the actor of XXI century, playing the prince Hamlet may consider him a real human being which "reacts and feels with organic completeness and definite intention" while speaking with the Ghost – who, as I know perfectly well, is not a real Ghost and one who happens to be of my father – but my fellow actor? And the Ghost that he performs is not much more "alive" on stage than Leonardo's Gioconda on the canvas. And this Ghost refers to my colleague no more than a painting refers to its model.

They two, Hamlet on stage and Gioconda on the canvas are works of art. Yes, they do look like real

people. But that would be ridiculous to grant them with human qualities such as genuine emotions, reactions, etc. However, as a works of art they “must” artistically recreate, or *portray* the whole palette of human emotions, reactions, etc. And, although acting and painting deal with different materials (actor's body and voice, paint and canvas), the verb *to portray* characterizes the creative process of both arts most precisely.

This statement may seem quite axiomatic, even banal to those who are not familiar with most popular acting technique of the XX century. But those who learned the Method will tell you that terms *to portray, to show, to present, to perform* must be removed from the actor's vocabulary and replaced with *to experience, to be alive, to trust, to be but not to pretend (not imitate)*.

This successful purge has misled a generation of actors and brought them far beyond the sphere of art. Years of employing inaccurate vague terms and subjective evaluations resulted in the loss of criteria. And we, the people of theatre, eventually found ourselves unable to determine the essence of our profession.

The art of acting – what is it? What does it mean exactly? Who is he – the actor-professional? What is his skill? What is his subject, the ultimate goal of his art?

Michael Chekhov was one who knew the answers. He predicted the future of “naturalistic” theatre, theatre attempting to equate stage and reality – “no acting” theatre devoid of an actor-creator:

Naturalism will need to seek more and more stunning combinations of facts capable to affect spectators nerves with more power than it was done yesterday. It will be forced to give an audience a variety of “strong impacts” capable to cause a nervous shock by means of pathological effects. Images of horrible death accidents, tortures, bloody murders, heartbreaking catastrophes, pathological mental disorders, insanities, screams, yellings and gunshots will occupy theatre stage. All that will be a top achievement of the naturalistic “art” but also the end of it.

As a heritage, naturalism will leave behind calloused, mentally stricken audience with lost artistic taste. And that will take a lot of time to *heal* it.

Mikhail Chekhov, *Literaturnoye Nasledie*, Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1986, vol.1, page 69

Now we can see Chekhov's prediction came true: “pathological effects” dominate the global stage and screen displacing the art of creative acting.

But Michael Chekhov not only diagnosed the illness. He offered a treatment: an entirely different

approach to acting based on the principles common to all arts. The genius actor, creator of numerous masterpieces of acting, he happened to have an analytical gift; this unique combination allowed Chekhov to research the process of creative acting. He summarized his own and his fellow actors experience and concluded that the process of creative acting is identical to the creative process of any artist working in art.

An actor-creator is not one who is trying to bring on stage fragments of “real life” but one who creates artistic images of new artistic world – fictional, unreal world, just pretending “real”, imitating it in order to help audience to grasp artist's ideas. Consequently, the actor's business is not the real experiencing of unreal events but *portraying, recreating imaginary behavior of an imaginary character*.

This concept of acting is basic for Michael Chekhov's technique, the technique which represents the way of creating a *new artistic image* – a character. Chekhov found a way of constructing a character common to actors-artists of all eras, styles and genres. The actor begins, as any other artist, from sketching the character in his imagination and then step by step giving him “flesh” and body. This is what great masters of theatre always did – mostly unconsciously, led by their talent and experience.

Chekhov was the first who analyzed the process and described its phases, from the first actor's impression of the role to its embodiment on stage. He developed a theory of actor's transformation into the character which he considered the ultimate goal of acting. Chekhov regarded transformation as the most effective way for an actor to communicate with his audience and to share with it his ideas and beliefs.

Michael Chekhov's idea – that the character, while synthesizing creative energies of the actor and his co-authors (a playwright, a director, a costume designer, etc), evokes creative energy of a spectator and initiates an exchange of energies between the audience and performer – must be stimulus of fundamental research in psychology and philosophy of art. Perhaps such a research will be undertaken sometime by scientists, in alliance with professionals of theatre.

The goal of this series of articles on Chekhov technique is more practical: to help an actor in his work on a character.

Harold Clurman once said:

The theatre is not a lamp by which a text may be read. The theatre, under favorable circumstances, is a creative art.

Michael Chekhov technique allows us to make the theatre such a creative art without relying on the whim of circumstances.

* Excerpts from Stanislavsky diaries and Michael Chekhov translated by the author.

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