

3. Love in Our Theatre: Art or Profession?

PROLOGUE: The subject matter of this chapter, which Michael Chekhov first delivered early in 1955 as one of his memorable lectures to the Drama Society of Hollywood, requires an explanation as to its origin: it was born in anger—Chekhov's. Whether his choler was leveled at me or at the playwriting theories I once held and worked by is of no moment. What matters is that the disputatious mood it engendered inspired him to formalize his thoughts on love for and in the theatre as an objective principle and guide for the professional and layman alike.

It happened at his home in Beverly Hills one afternoon when we were outlining the chapter on character structure (Chapter 8) from the playwright's point of view, particularly on how to motivate a character. It was then that I made the now fortunate mistake of telling him the story of a *reductio ad absurdum* which I had learned in my youth and had compulsively followed ever since.

I told him how, when still in my teens, I had tried to break into show business by getting a job as a bellhop at The Friars, a theatrical club in New York. I worked the night shift, and in the coat-room was a kid with similar ambitions named James Cagney. Jimmy had already cracked the ice; he was a member of the Lenox Hill Players, an amateur group at the old Lenox Hill Settlement under the direction of Burton and Florence James, who later taught drama at the Cornish School in Seattle, then at the University of

Washington, and subsequently created the Repertory Theatre of Seattle. Through Jimmy's efforts I joined the Lenox Hill troupe and, like him, was soon deep in the study of the theatre through books, rehearsals, occasional performances and many passes to Broadway shows, which we cadged from the various producer and director members of the club—and even its playwrights.

Incidentally, George M. Cohan was then the Abbot of The Friars and we saw him quite often, a fact which may help to account for Jimmy's remarkable portrayal of him some twenty-five years later in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, a performance so authentic that it won the Motion Picture Academy's "Best Actor" award for 1942.

Anyway, a highly successful playwright at the time was a cynical and seemingly lonely but democratic Friar named Eugene Walter, still remembered by old-timers for his *The Easiest Way*. His next play, *The Challenge*, also proved to be a Broadway smash hit and was then bringing him more money than he cared about. He was spending it lavishly at the Friars bar one night long after all other convivial members had departed, and when that oasis shut down, he reluctantly weaved his way toward us for his hat and coat.

We paid little attention to him because both of us were draped over the coatroom counter, engrossed in Jimmy's reading aloud from a text book on the early Greek dramatists. But Mr. Walter's derisive snort made us look up and snap to attention. Apparently, he had been standing behind us long enough to hear what was absorbing our interest, for before Jimmy could go fetch the man's apparel, Mr. Walter delivered himself of what to me became an unforgettable (now regrettable) theory, which I sustained through many years of theatre activity:

"You're wasting your time, kids. You can take all those thirty-odd Greek plots and chuck 'em down the sewer. There are only two human impulses, two human desires that underlie and motivate all plots and characters—*Sex* and *Property*. No play can be successful without them. Nothing in life can exist without them."

I can still remember how shocked I was at this brutal pronounce-

ment from a current oracle, and how vainly I tried to refute him.

"What about a truly sacrificial emotion like mother love?" I argued.

"Just another sex manifestation," he elucidated dismissively. "Besides being a survival mechanism, which is the reproductive function of sex, the mother needs the child to empty her painfully engorged breasts and to contract her womb so that she can get ready to bear more children. Her continuing love for the child far into maturity is still that survival mechanism, her posterity insurance, plus the lingering and grateful memory of that once necessary physical contact."

The dialogue may not be verbatim after all these years; in fact, I recall it as being much franker, and it is easy to see how it could make such a lasting impression even on two idealistic pubescents. Mr. Walter said many more indelible things as he rebutted and demolished every exception I tried to think of in negation. In short, I was a bantam fighting a heavyweight in age, intellect and experience. He took my best haymakers and reduced each to the two simple denominators, his basics for true and successful playwriting—*Sex and Property*. And thus, they remained my beacons until that day when I tried to shine them as directional finders for Michael Chekhov.

Chekhov was outraged by the precept, and perhaps with me as well because I gave it credence and quoted it as gospel.

"It is ridiculous!" he fumed. "It is a low and terribly sad opinion of human beings that they are motivated only by their glands and their greed! What happens, for instance, when a person has all the sex he wants and all the money or possessions one can acquire? Must he stop living—does he? Is there nothing else which makes living worth while? No, it is not so. There are much higher objectives to life and much better reasons for a play, even a good commercial play. There is, for example, a pure love of life itself and all its natural and divine mysteries; there is an honest and selfless love of people; and there is a genuine love of the theatre as a cul-

tural and creative force. Any of these gives the lie to the idea that sex and property are the only stimulants and indispensable ingredients of human existence—on the stage or off."

In the week that followed, Chekhov prepared the lecture which comprises this chapter. On hearing it, I gladly exchanged my role of catalyst for that of convert. Because it suddenly became clear to me what was wrong with the plays I had produced and those I had written—including even the one that was awarded some now forgotten writing honors by the Dramatists Alliance of Stanford University, and the one that Marie Louise Elkins was going to produce on Broadway and Gerald Savory direct, had a better attitude enabled me to rewrite it to their satisfaction. Had I held, instead, the view and respect for the fundamental ingredients of a play which Chekhov espouses in this chapter, I daresay that my years in the theatre might have been even more rewarding than I think they were.

C. L.

Deep within ourselves are buried tremendous creative powers and abilities. But they remain unused so long as we do not know about them, so long as we deny them. Although they are beautiful, powerful and wonderful, we are—and this is a disease of our time—we are ashamed of them. And thus, they often remain ignored and lie forever dormant because we do not open the doors to our hidden vaults and fearlessly bring them to the surface.

One of the treasures I would like to talk about quite shamelessly is the one we seem to be most ashamed of and frightened by. And yet it is the richest diadem that can crown our professional, practical and creative work, even our whole existence. In fact, the world could not exist without it any more than it could without oxygen, for example. But are we ashamed of and frightened by oxygen?

So, permit me to speak to you about—Love.

Have you ever watched two immature, frightened, inhibited people trying to express, to act love? They stare into each other's eyes for a while, begin to feel uncomfortable and start blinking. That makes them even more uncomfortable and they feel that they have to do something to conceal and overcome their embarrassment. So they tentatively touch hands, then start to giggle, then try to find escape in this giggling. Finally, they produce an almost idiotic smile on their faces and soon everything comes to a feral end.

It is a most pitiful spectacle, a mawkish pastiche which cannot even substitute for love. It is just one of the phantoms of our era that pass for love, copied from other phantoms like it, and is enough to dissuade any sensitive person from uttering or venerating the word. There are loves far more admirable.

Since a great many conflicting views are already rampant on the subject of love, it is not my purpose to add to the confusion but, rather, to ask you to examine another kind of love, one which is an ideal and an art and which inspires our creativity in the theatre. For, contrary to opinions engendered by some forms of entertainment and some show-business personalities, there is another kind of love in our theatre, and it is not the commodity or "profession" that the mercenary elements have made of love on the stage and screen.

In order to understand what real love in our theatre is and should be, let us first establish what love definitely is not.

It is not a commercial commodity in the carnal sense; it is not a peep show. Neither is it a sentimental something that we mistake for love. And it is certainly not the thing that is hawked and thrown at us so casually, so surfeitingly in cheap books, shoddy films and radio and television soap operas and violence vehicles, for the sole purpose of titillating us. That kind of love can have no other purpose.

But what is genuine love, love in our theatre, the love experienced by its creative persons—the playwright, director and actor?

Let us analyze that and see how it differs in theory and fact from the imitations that have been foisted upon us.

There are three kinds of love governing life, each very different from the other. The Greeks had to have three different words to classify them. We have only one, and that may make for some of our confusion and inarticulateness on the subject. Hence, a clarifying peek into what these three kinds of love are is necessary at this point.

One is the erotic love between the sexes and is the definition most commonly hurled at us, most easily understood and most readily accepted. Even its two poles or extremes are more or less familiar to us: its highest aspects we refer to as platonic love and romanticism; the baser, lowest end is just animal gratification. In between is a spectrum too wide to parse in these pages and not too pertinent to the kind of love we shall ultimately deal with. The only observation germane here is that the baser aspect of this erotic love is something which the theatre, being a visual and aural medium, cannot actually supply or even imitate, much as it often tries and pretends; the best such unworthy efforts can do is merely stimulate the carnal appetite for sex. That, to me, is not only cheating the theatregoer but cheating the theatre itself, which is capable of love's much nobler expressions.

This nobler love is definitely another kind of love. We might call it pure, human love. It is devoid of erotic elements; it is a love between one human being and another, regardless of sex. And this human love also has its higher and lower aspects. In its lower aspects it is usually linked with blood relationships, and here egotism plays an important part. It is the I-love-my-son, daughter, father, mother, cousin, brother—any and all who are “mine”—type of love. It is a form of I-love-myself-within-my-son, daughter—all the kinships. It is good and noble but it is not the highest or most selfless aspect of love. Somewhat higher, for instance, is our love of country. But even that is not yet its highest aspect.

Real and true love begins when we start loving every human being regardless of blood relationship or nationality, but only be-

cause it is another human being and we are able to love him without any specific reason, without the prefix of "me" or "mine." *That* is the highest aspect of human love. There is no need to know the human being personally. It might be somebody in China whom we never saw and perhaps never will see, but we love him only and simply because he exists.

By this I do not mean to suggest that we plunge headlong into the boundless, dangerous sphere of loving humanity in the abstract. Nobody loves "humanity" because nobody really experiences, feels or knows what humanity is. It is a generalization we cannot truly envision, much less portray. But if we say "I love human beings," we immediately get some firm, definite basis on which to build our ideas and emotions. Loving human beings, wherever they may be and whether we know them or not, is quite a different thing from playing with mass conceptions or generalities. Try to write, direct or act a scene demonstrating that you love humanity and you will invariably end up by showing that you have compassion for certain persons because they symbolize certain things and qualities with which you have an affinity.

And finally, there is the third kind of love, the highest of all its forms and expressions—Divine Love. This is a love so exalted that it is given to very few if any of us on earth to have any conception of it, much less experience it. It is the kind of love with which God or the Holy Trinity loves, and we shall not even attempt to profane it with meager descriptions and definitions. Besides, the purposes of this chapter will best be served if we confine ourselves to that frame of reference that we know as purely human love, and see what practical uses we can make of this treasure.

One unmistakable manifestation of that human love is the thing that devoted theatre people feel for the theatre per se. The question that inevitably arises in the minds of its creators is: What is it that we actually love so much in the theatre—and why?

The true professional loves everything in it, of course. Why? Primarily because he loves the wonderful world that is opened up to him through that magic of make-believe which is acting. "Acting"

is the key word. The playwright at work is mentally acting all the characters of his play; the director vicariously sees himself acting all the roles in the play while he is rehearsing it; the actor enjoys the pleasure of transforming himself into every character he plays and expressing himself through their masks or personalities.

The world at large knows very little of the sacrifices most people in the theatre usually make in order to become an active part of its viable creations. They read and hear only about the glamorous exceptions who "made it" the easy way, however they managed it, because those are the phenomena most freely glorified. But what about the numerous, untold rejections suffered by the average playwright before he turns out his first hit, and the bitter disappointments undergone by the average director striving for his first big chance, and the privations and humiliations endured by the average actor while waiting for his first big role?

Yet no force on earth could possibly divert them from this desire, this overpowering love which impels them to express themselves on the stage. If it were only the lure of money or fame, most of them could do far better at other careers and achieve them in far less time. There are much less painful and much more lucrative ways of securing one's livelihood and insuring one's comfort and position in life. But these mean nothing to the person who chooses the theatre. It is the love of creating through "acting" that leads him on despite all hardships. That, too, is a vital form of human love. Without it the theatre would have become extinct long before the days of the first Greek playwrights. They understood this love, and their imperishable creations are their monuments to it.

Besides this act of creating for and through the theatre, another thing we love is the creation itself. As soon as a play is born, the author begins to love it as though it were so many living beings. They exist for him objectively. Even if they are not perfect, and in spite of their fictitious existence, they represent human creatures and he loves them dearly. He loves even his most hateful, most despicable characters. He understands them and the forces that make them what they are, and to feel for them in this sense re-

quires not only a higher but almost a divine love. The same may be said for the director and actor when they bring the characters to life.

The same kind of love must be extended even to the audience. Playwrights, directors and actors may sometimes claim indifference to those "out front," may even say they hate them. It is only an illusion or perhaps a studied attitude. Did they honestly dislike the audience, they would not be so relentlessly driven to create for it. The unalterable truth is that they love it, need it and cannot live unless the audience reciprocates this love for their creations. Subconsciously they may resent the fact that the audience has the power of life and death over the characters; intensely loving the people they created, they fear and cannot bear to see them suffer or die. But that does not detract from their desire and efforts to please the audience and win its love (i.e., approval) in return.

Please note that at no time did I say that the playwright, director or actor *ought* to love his profession. I always said that he *does* love it. It is only a question of how much he is aware of this kind of love constantly working within him. And here we come to what I regard as a very interesting and even curious point in our professional psychology.

Among many others throughout the world, I subscribe to the spiritual philosophy which asserts that there are two currents working within us, two powers of influence constantly struggling for supremacy. One is positive, creative, helpful; the other is negative, hampering, destructive. Now, if we are not conscious and responsive to the creative powers, they inevitably become weaker and weaker; their influence upon us becomes negligible; they might even vanish entirely if we ignore or neglect them. Conversely, if we are not aware of the hampering and destructive powers working within us, they grow and develop alarmingly; their negative influence upon our creative work becomes stronger and stronger. However, if we know about and acknowledge the positive forces, it is they instead that grow and increasingly help us in our creative work. And by being constantly on guard against the negative powers, it is

these that diminish and eventually die out. With this premise I hope to establish my belief that human inspiration is forever the object of a power struggle between the forces of good and evil, creation and destruction, and it is only our degree of awareness that determines which way the battle will go.

The positive forces I refer to are, of course, implicit in the theatre creator's higher sense of love. So let us consider the practical rather than the esoteric values of this kind of love to the theatre professional who is courageous enough to acknowledge it and its latent power for wooing inspiration. Let us see how we can develop this higher sense of love within ourselves.

First, as I have tried to establish, all creative feelings on the stage—meaning the feelings of and for the characters—are based upon this higher love. We might even say they are its progeny. And if we think of this love as a field which must be properly prepared and cultivated, then all the creative feelings we grow upon it will be strong and healthy.

Consider a more extreme or inverted example of this love in action—say a character on the stage who is filled with hatred. Did we not create even him, too, with love, he would only engender hatred within ourselves and the audience, as it often happens in many a play. Without this love, the hatred of the character would become so realistic, so ugly and repulsive, that we could not write or perform him in proper perspective. He would exude hate, he would be all hate, devoid of all other qualities that humanize him and make him interesting for us to portray and the audience to watch. And what would happen when the curtain went down? We and the audience would continue hating. Whom? Nobody in particular, not even the character who saturated us with this hatred. Nevertheless, the hatred would remain and infiltrate our workaday lives, become one with us and confuse us to the point where we could not distinguish our creative from our personal emotions. That way lies failure for us as artists and irrationality as social beings.

If I were to be asked what the most characteristic feature of our

kind of love is, I would name its constant process of expansion. For it is not merely a state of mind; it is never static. Susceptible to the stimuli of attention and exercise, it spreads and permeates our inner artistic being, and our talent flourishes in proportion to its growth. The more we indulge and lavish it, the more it can give us in return. I have actually seen this at work in myself and in many of my colleagues.

Test this out for yourself by defining the essence of our profession or that of any other art. Its essence is to give—to give constantly. What is it that we in the theatre give? Instead of images on canvas or in the form of statuary or music, we give our body, voice, feelings, will, imagination—we give a form of pulsating art to life itself; we give it to our characters and we give it to our audiences. Nothing, absolutely nothing remains for us save the pleasure of having given pleasure. And yet it is only by this miraculous process that our love grows and our talent is fulfilled and replenished.

There are many ways of developing this very special sense of love right within the framework of our everyday life. The first step is to believe it and become more and more aware of its existence. Then, almost automatically, the opportunities to nourish it will present themselves in your daily routine. You will find, for example, that you can render help to people around you. It doesn't always have to be some grand gesture or a piece of superaltruism, and it doesn't have to be made deliberately and you don't have to go seeking it mechanically like a boy scout his daily good deed. It can be some trivial, spontaneous little thing like lighting somebody's cigarette or yielding the right of way in traffic. If it is sincere and unpremeditated, its significance will lie in the fact that by doing something for your fellow man you become cognizant of the positive qualities of considerateness and kindness. These are some of the foods that this love feeds on.

Another suggestion: There are many things around us which we feel are ugly, unsympathetic, unpleasant, and our impulse is to shun them, have nothing to do with them. That is an understandable, atavistic, animal reaction. But suppose the very next time you

encounter something unpleasant you try to find in it at least a grain of something which is not ugly or repulsive. I don't mean this as plain blind optimism; it literally *is* possible to discover something good or pleasant in everything unpleasant. It might be so minuscule that it is almost microscopic, or it might even be something intangible, but finding it will be extremely worth while. This act of kindness, this perceptive, artistic form of love, will help you to understand why no character on stage can ever be all black. In order to like and enjoy even the most hateful of our character creations, we must see in them or endow them with something admirable.

Still another suggestion: Listen to conversations and discussions of people around you and pay particular attention to the way they utter such possessive words as "I," "mine," "to my way of thinking," "in my opinion," etc. Frequently, they put more emphasis on those than on the things they have to say. Your impulse is to be highly critical of their egotism. But if you stopped to view this failing in a charitable light, you would soon be asking yourself, "Don't I measure the thoughts and opinions of others through the prism of my own agreement or disagreement?" I don't mean to say that nobody should express opinions; without them no discussion or conversation would be possible. What I am suggesting is that we curb this small ego within our own selves. The best way to treat it is with a gentle and tolerable humor; laugh at it, but without your justifiable sarcasm or cynicism. Learn to laugh at and discourage your petty ego because it is one of the numerous foibles that work in opposition to selfless love. Our kind of love, the creative person's love, must be all-pervading and expand us; the small egos of our life only contract us. These two cannot coexist; sooner or later one or the other must be victorious in the eternal battle for our creative souls.

One final suggestion: Try to develop the habit of thinking about everybody, like yourself, as a bearer of two different selves—the higher and the lower. In time this will grow into something tangible and expressible. For instance, when we speak about our love

of other persons in general terms, it implies that we accept each *in toto*, with his good, bad and indifferent qualities. But the moment we make that separation between the higher and lower selves in a person, it becomes inconceivable that we would choose the baser self in him any more than we would in ourselves. We instinctively prefer the better, higher self in everybody. Therefore, this habit of thinking and believing that there is a higher self in others will awaken a concrete sensation of the higher self within you as well. For it is from no other source but the higher self within us that our artistic, creative love derives. And love in the theatre is infinitely nobler as an art than as a "profession."