



The Curious Karma of Chekhov and Steiner  
By Lisa Loving Dalton

In 1917, the famous Russian actor, Michael Chekhov, experienced a severe mental-spiritual crisis and ultimately Steiner's *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* was the turning point toward his recovery. Spiritual Science became a lifelong commitment. Steiner and Chekhov met and when the Speech and Drama course was given, we know copies of it were sent to Chekhov who eagerly awaited them.<sup>1</sup> We also know that Chekhov seriously considered becoming a Christian Community Priest. Then, Mr. Chekhov was advised by Spiritual Scientists and by a renowned Russian Orthodox Mystic that his destiny was to keep his resources and spiritual activity focused on the professional art of drama. Why?

What if those advisers knew Chekhov could alter the path of human evolution and the growth of the Christ consciousness through the arts? Perhaps it was his destiny which could only develop outside the Society, Christian Community and School of Spiritual Science. Only exoterically could Chekhov's empowering training be developed through the freedoms and limitations of the professional and/or commercial world where Academy Awards and nominations triggered demand for his work. While Chekhov's work fell into obscurity with his 1955 death, in the past thirty-three years, it has expanded around the world due to the support of spiritual science. This deed, still unfolding, has happened, perhaps unconsciously, by various anthroposophical people and organizations globally. Now, my question is: Can Chekhov bring back to Spiritual Science what could not have been otherwise developed? If this is true, Karma must be at play, and we have further work to do.

My first exposure to Anthroposophy came in the early 1980's in New York, when I, a rather atheistic recovering Catholic, began exploring Chekhov's approach to acting with Ted Pugh. We met through a mutual "clown" partner, Trish Gray and together Trish and I approached Ted asking him to be our teacher. This led to Ted arranging to meet Friday afternoons at the Rudolf Steiner High School, from which the Actors Ensemble with Fern Sloan and many future notable teacher/artists such as Glen Williamson, Melania Levitsky, and myself would emerge.

Now, the Michael Chekhov Technique, which was an obscure actor training developed by an unknown nephew of a famous Russian playwright, is approaching its well-deserved promise of being standard practice in performing arts communities. It is a living social art with gifts for all who choose to engage and a direct antidote to the common, often poisonous and debilitating, artist training processes. It trains the human to infuse vitality in their art in a way the digitalization can not. We care because the results impact us as audiences-we heal with the Christ-centered consciousness in Chekhov. This is found nowhere else in the professional training world. In fact, there are Chekhov artists who shun the mention of Rudolf Steiner and his inspirations and yet Chekhov's Sun/Love-centered work inculcates the same spiritual power - a rose by any other name.... I see an irony here because it's likely their Chekhov world would not

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<sup>1</sup> See recent article by Joerg Andrees in the Section Newsletter Addendum, *Michael Chekhov and the "Dramatic Course" by Rudolf Steiner*, Spring 2024. This article provides more explanation of the techniques and Mr. Chekhov's own words in relation to Steiner.



exist without Rudolf Steiner-inspired people having chosen to support it. So, allow me here to offer gratitude for that support that I personally experienced as evidence of the picture I am building.

In those early 80s, the NY Rudolf Steiner High School offered Ted the use of a room every Friday afternoon. As the artists there practiced Chekhov's ideas, we had various anthroposophists join our work. Diane Tatum led us in eurythmy, Alheidis Von Bothmer taught us gymnastics, Daisy Aldan shared her poetry and eventually, we had speech work. In 1987, the Anthroposophical Society of New York opened a new space, and we had our first three-month intensive. This opportunity from the New York branch allowed an entirely new event to occur which had not been possible elsewhere. The long-term intensive training became a standard for the Actors Ensemble and this led to the trainings supported at Sunbridge College and relocation up to Harlemville, NY with the Michael Chekhov School.

At the end of our first 3 month intensive in the fall of 1987, I moved to Los Angeles and through Ted, connected with Chekhov Estate Executrix and committed anthroposophist, Mala Powers. She was a Golden Globe Nominee for her performance as Roxanne to Jose Ferrer's *Cyrano De Bergerac*, and a direct student of Mr. Chekhov who inspired her life with Steiner. Mala and I co-taught for the next eighteen years. She brought me to Dolly Odessa Ferris, a 3-time Waldorf Grades teacher and music/speech/singing teacher for private lessons. Like the exposure I had to Eurythmy, Gymnastics, Speech and Drama in New York, I now had more training in the "pure" Steiner lineage. When the Los Angeles Branch opened their building in Pasadena, Mala and I soon were there on a regular basis. Eurythmy with Christina Born became a favorite prelude to our work. Eventually, Odessa retired from her studio and offered her space to us for the Michael Chekhov Studio, providing another anthroposophically inspired space in which to develop the work.

Meanwhile, in 1988, Ted Pugh connected through Anthroposophy with director/teachers Jobst Langhans in West Berlin and Joerg Andrees in East Berlin. And when Joerg left the East, he joined forces with Jobst, who was also operating at Forum Kreuzberg, a community of people inspired Steiner's Threefold Social Order. In 1992, they created the First Michael Chekhov International Workshop and the 4<sup>th</sup> MCIW in 1995. Support from Anthroposophical sources were essential to these endeavors. And Sarah Kane, Speech and Drama artist/teacher from Emerson College, UK was a participant.

From this Berlin event unfolded another in Russia in 1993 led by Vladimir Baitcher whose wife, Tatyana is a speech artist. Sarah Kane picked up the baton in 1994 at Emerson College, as Artistic Director of the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCIW. The Emerson conference grew to nearly 300 over three weeks and confirmed in our hearts the deep spiritual need artists have and Chekhov's path to filling that. From here can be traced nearly all the global Chekhov impulses of today.

The Anthroposophical support that we as second-generation leaders in the Art of Michael Chekhov received three decades ago allowed us to develop today where Spiritual Science continues to support Chekhov classes around the world. Yet many Chekhov advocates have been disinclined to acknowledge the influence of Steiner. My gift back to those Anthroposophical



people and organizations who have been so generous to the Chekhov community is to fearlessly convey Steiner's influence publicly and by seeking to embody the principles that awaken love in our profession. Through Chekhov, thousands of people who now know there is such a thing as Spiritual Science are free to respond to the call.

Thank you to all the Anthroposophists who have, do and will provide space and resources for the Chekhov work to continue to evolve in freedom. May we be worthy.

Can we do more than say thank you? In my work creating workshops, pageants and mystery dramas in the ASA, I engage participants in gesture, atmosphere and to explore moving in their own creative form, not aiming to repeat a "correct" form. The vitality that follows when affirmed of your own creative individuality is joyful and works towards balancing emotional and psychological conditions to restore wholeness. It expands thought into embodying spirit in your individuality, especially helpful for those of us whose knowledge outweighs our limbs. The work is fun, filled with humor, lightness and ease and there's no way to 'get it right!' so freedom is present. This also makes it ideal for integration into Camp Hill and Waldorf schools for all ages and is particularly practical for the upper grades when rehearsing their shows. Building a grades curriculum is another Chekhov gift in development.

I hope someday that the ever-evolving Chekhov work can bring something back to Anthroposophy as a karmic deed. These possibilities present themselves currently:

- Interweaving the S&D curriculum with Chekhov to increase relevance to 21<sup>st</sup> Century artists.
- Enlivening Waldorf and Camp Hill training with the easy accessibility of Chekhov.
- Cultivating our creative individualities with psychophysical movement to balance physical and mental wellbeing that strengthens concentration, imagination, inspiration and intuition, as a personal, healthy, daily spiritual practice.

I invite you to contemplate this with me and reach out with your thoughts.

#### Author Biography:

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