

A PATH TO LIGHT

MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S *HAMLET* PRODUCTION

by Jobst Langhans



Translated from the German
with an Introduction

by Hugo Moss

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Introduction

In 2014 we invited Jobst Langhans to join the Advisory Board of Michael Chekhov Brasil. We have spoken every month since, exchanging news and keeping alive a connection between his studio in Berlin and ours in Rio. The history of the studios and working environment in the two cities could hardly be more different, but the knowledge Jobst generously shares with us about the realization and growth of a vision, the task and process of truly transforming the world around us, this has all been invaluable as we continue to expand and find our way in the world.

When Jobst sent me the initial draft of this article I knew immediately that it ought to be shared with everyone working with the Michael Chekhov technique (as well as this English translation, we are preparing a Portuguese version). It deepens our understanding of the various elements making up the early part of Michael Chekhov's life as an artist, and in doing so resonated with me in several ways. In particular, I sensed a strong echo of something Chekhov himself often told his students: the importance of keeping alive the simple will to act.

In late 2014/early 2015 I read through the 3,000 or so pages comprising Deirdre Hurst du Prey's archive "The Actor is the Theatre", the major part of which is comprised of transcriptions of the classes Chekhov gave between 1936 and 1942 at the Michael Chekhov Studio in Dartington Hall (England) and Ridgefield (USA). MICHA is preparing a new edition of Michael Chekhov's *Lessons for Teachers of his Acting Technique* and Jessica Cerullo invited me to co-edit a series of extracts from Deirdre's archive for inclusion in what will be a greatly expanded version of the original book¹.

One piece we chose struck me so deeply that a paraphrased version made its way into my discourse to every group of actors I've taught since. Here is Michael Chekhov speaking two years into the work at Dartington, in 1938:

We all came to the studio having a certain life inside of us which we call "I want to act". (...) You came to the school because of this and you got the method, and what has happened is that the method has killed this point which we may call "I want to be an actor". (...) If you are taking the method as something which you must put inside you instead of your desire to act, you are making a great mistake. If you are trying to keep your childish desire to act and you take the method by saying to yourself: "First of all I want to act, and now I will take the method and see how it can help me act", that is the right approach. But if you say: "I have to assume the method and my desire to act must be put aside", you are empty and the method cannot be applied to anything because the desire to act has been put aside.²

Elsewhere Chekhov talks frequently about the "Fire", the driving force of our creative being, the artist's will to create and transform. This is the "Fire" which is raging fierce when we stand up for the first time with the will to be an actor, and Chekhov warns his students of the dangers of losing touch with the nature, quality and force of that initial impulse. We develop or learn a technique, but instead of our method serving to allow the "Fire" to grow, it obfuscates it and eventually the "Fire" is replaced by "what we do".

As Jobst's essay reminds us, Michael Chekhov initially struggled to reconcile his own "Fire" within the turbulent times in which he lived. Then, through much courageous work on himself, he found a viable path to standing up as an artist and quickly put his emerging vision into practice, both as an actor and a director.

Most of us are probably more familiar with Chekhov the exile, the eternal foreigner who, like so many of his generation, constantly faced upheaval, being interrupted time and again in his work by external events as he trailed for close to three decades from Vienna and Berlin to Paris, Riga and Kaunas, then the school in Dartington and Ridgefield, and finally California. It is tempting to feel regret that Chekhov was never allowed the space of a decade or two in one place in which to develop a substantial body of work.

¹ Dovehouse Editions Inc., Canada, 2000

² Deirdre Hurst du Prey: "The Actor is the Theatre", transcript of class dated 3rd October 1938

But we'd be mistaken in thinking of Chekhov as a mere utopian who never got the chance to realize his "Theatre of the Future". He had already found and successfully created this theatre well before he left Russia, the apex of which was his 1924 production of *Hamlet*, the principle subject of the essay you're about to read³. If there is any sense of frustration surrounding his *Wanderjahre*, it is surely that he was hampered in his quest for the time/space to recreate this work so fully. He was nevertheless tireless to the very end of his life, produced an extraordinary amount and generously left us a vast legacy. Thanks to pupils such as Deirdre Hurst du Prey, Beatrice Straight, Mala Powers and Joanna Merlin, to name a few, this has been able to live on in all of us who practice his method and discover for ourselves what it means to be an artist in the world.

After reading Jobst's wonderful account, I knew that Michael Chekhov's "Fire" must constantly instill our own "Fire", especially now his teachings are becoming more widely taught and practiced around the world. This essay gives us a renewed sense of what he found within himself, something he never for a minute allowed to flicker or fade, and his example remains a vital lesson.

I do think there is a real and constant danger that the Michael Chekhov technique be reduced to a mere series of things we "do", rather than dynamic tools for keeping the inner "Fire" alive and growing. Chekhov's rapping of his students' knuckles in 1938 has lost none of its urgency. Each of us must find the courage to take in the work, be open to the transformation it brings about and not just remain content with "doing" or "showing", which will always be an empty thing. Perhaps this is especially important for teachers and directors, who may make the mistake they can in some way remain on the outside.

But for all of us, actors, directors and teachers, if the work is to have any value at all it must be created within ourselves daily and allowed to transform us endlessly, otherwise we will certainly fail in transforming others – students, audiences and the world around us – in what increasingly appears to be just as turbulent times as those endured by Michael Chekhov.

Hugo Moss

³ For further reading on this production, see also: *The Drama Review*, MIT Press 1983, Vol.27 (3) pp.34-45: "Chekhov's Russian Hamlet (1924)" by Alma H. Law; and *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, Routledge 2013, Vol. 4(2), pp.237-279: "Rehearsal Protocols for *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare", edited with an introduction by Andrei Kirillov and Franc Chamberlain

A Path to Light

Michael Chekhov's Hamlet Production

It is generally known that Michael Chekhov's acting method was inspired by Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy. The role played by Chekhov's coming to terms with the political upheaval of his Russian homeland, as well as its orthodox Christianity, is less familiar. With his 1924 production of Hamlet, Chekhov made a conscious effort to bring to life on the stage the Christ impulse that the Soviet Union was experiencing at the time. This article outlines the background and development of this landmark production.¹

While Michael Chekhov was attending acting school in St. Petersburg and acquiring his first experiences on the stage, the great social upheavals which would descend on Russia over the following decade were already taking shape. More and more people were demanding the end of the Tsarist autocracy. One of the early peaks in growing tensions was the Bloody Sunday of St. Petersburg in 1905, the culmination of a wave of general strikes. Thousands marched on the Winter Palace to demonstrate. They wanted to appeal to the Tsar for humane working conditions, agrarian reform, the abolition of censorship and religious tolerance, and to ask him to establish representation of the people. But they never reached their destination. Soldiers blocked their way and opened fire on the crowds. By the end of the day, around 400 had died. With this, the downfall of the Romanov dynasty was already marked out.

Chekhov however appears not to have taken much notice of these events.² He was young, his life was just beginning and the world lay at his feet. He came from a traditional middle-class family, had a kind mother and a very strong-willed father who, whenever money was short, always found a way of providing for his family. Furthermore, he was the nephew of the famous writer Anton Chekhov. In 1912, through the mediation of his aunt, Olga Knipper-Chekhova, the 21-year-old joined Konstantin Stanislavsky's company at the MAT³, where he soon became one of the audience's favourites. So he enjoyed an apparently happy and carefree existence as an actor at Moscow's prominent theatre and pupil of one of the world's most important directors.

But within Chekhov's inner life, a very different world was shifting. He sought deeper answers to the meaning of our existence. He was surrounded by imaginary figures who offered to explain the world to him. Among these, three "respectable old men" stepped forward – Chekhov called them his "masters": Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud and Arthur Schopenhauer.⁴

Darwin taught him that life consists of a cruel struggle for existence. Morals and religion may be fine things, but are merely an illusion. Man is nothing but his body, and all that he inherited from his parents. Through Freud, Chekhov entered the world of the subconscious. He learned about man's psyche in all its impurity, namely our sexual urges, which according to Freud are the root cause of man's behaviour. And Schopenhauer undermined this view of a world governed by inheritance, our sex drive and the struggle for survival. Through his melancholy pessimism he showed Chekhov the gloomy fascination of an aimless existence without meaning.

The more Chekhov occupied himself with these thoughts, the more they took hold of him. Although he sometimes resisted and wanted to protest, he couldn't really think of anything to wield against the fascinating logic of these masters. And so he submitted to the idea of man as an aimlessly wandering being, driven by compulsion. Tormented by fear, he read Tolstoy and tried to find a foothold in his way of thinking. But these books only brought about short-lived relief and pessimism soon darkened his soul once

¹ The present text is based on Chekhov's autobiographical records, as well as the lecture »L'Amleto di Michail Cechov: l'influenza di Steiner e il suo ›Impulso-Cristo‹«, by Fausto Malcovati on 3rd May 2013 during the international theatre project ›2 + 2 = 8 – Michael Chekhov and his encounter with Rudolf Steiner‹ held at Bologna University. See Fausto Malcovati: *Michail Cechov – Amleto – Steiner* in: *Due maestri del Novecento: Michail Cechov e Rudolf Steiner. Sguardi sul teatro greco contemporaneo. Culture teatrali* 2014, Lucca 2014, P. 16ff.

² There is no mention of these events in St. Petersburg in his autobiography *Zhish' I vstrechi* (*Life and Encounters*).

Translator's note: excerpts of *Life and Encounters* can be found in *The Path of the Actor*, ed. Andrei Kirillov & Bella Merlin, Routledge 2005. In the original text of this article, the author refers throughout to the more extensive German edition *Leben und Begegnungen* (Urachhaus 1992) and gives pages numbers. For any references found in the Routledge edition, I have followed suit.

³ MAT (Moscow Art Theatre) was the most important avant-garde theatre in Russia at the time. It had been founded in 1898 by Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, who wanted to modernize the decadent playing style of the Tsarist theatre. Their programme included Shakespeare, as well as works by contemporary authors, for which Stanislavsky was developing a new acting technique in order to present their naturalist style of writing.

⁴ *Zhish' I vstrechi* (*Life and Encounters*)

again, not least because the merciless fighting his masters spoke about could be seen only too clearly on Moscow's streets.

So Chekhov gradually became a cynic. He despised many of his fellow human beings and turned to alcohol with increasing frequency. Before long, there was a loaded Browning in the drawer of his desk. In his memoirs he wrote about these times: "My soul was so weighed down by the infinite heaviness of its perception of the world, that it no longer sought a way out nor did it hope for a different attitude to life."⁵

Meanwhile, Russia had entered the First World War. The initial euphoria quickly paled when the army suffered numerous setbacks and the first wounded arrived back from the front. The already cruelly mistreated Russian people grew weary from all the suffering and there were shortages of basic provisions throughout the country. The price of food rose inexorably and drove people into poverty. In the streets, the Bolsheviks' cry of "Bread and freedom!" fell on receptive ears. There was rioting and after three long years of war, the Tsar was forced to abdicate. A provisional government under Alexander Kerensky tried in vain to turn the fortunes of the war, but was overthrown by the Bolsheviks, who finally signed the tough Brest-Litovsk Treaty. However a civil war now broke out between the Communist "red" and counter-revolutionary "white" troops, and by 1923 it had claimed between eight and 10 million human lives.

During the First World War, Chekhov's external living conditions apparently remained satisfactory. He enjoyed artistic success and in the meantime had married his cousin Olga⁶, whom he loved passionately. Olga sensed his inner pain and wanted to help, but she was unable to rid him of his feelings of loneliness. He continued to eagerly study his masters, and new figures also came to join them – among them Nietzsche, with his postulate: "God is dead". But all these studies were unable to help him find a satisfactory explanation for the meaning of our existence. He was imprisoned by his world of thoughts, just like Faust in his dungeon.

During the revolutionary fighting in 1917, world political events began to make themselves felt in his own life. There was heavy fighting on Moscow's streets. A few doors away, the artillery destroyed a building held by some counter-revolutionary "Junker" officers. Gunshots rang out day and night on the streets, and people were forced to use cushions to fill in windows smashed by bullet holes.

It was at this time that an "adventurer" appeared in Chekhov's life, a fearless gambler who was circulating without hindrance along the front lines. As a shy boy, Chekhov had heard his father tell stories of such people, secretly delighting in hearing them. One day this man disappeared – together with his wife Olga. He had run away with her. Soon after this, Chekhov found himself standing beside the coffin of his cousin Volodia, who had shot himself using the Browning from Chekhov's study. As he contemplated the corpse's pale face, he felt nothing. This was especially harsh for him.

At the MAT they were rehearsing *The Seagull*⁷ by his uncle Anton. Was it the fighting in the streets, the loss of his wife or the death of his cousin which seemed to put a greater strain on his spirit than usual? Or perhaps it was the themes of play they were currently rehearsing. After all, it told of a young artist with new ideas who, failing in his opposition to life around him and finding no way out of his misery, ended up putting a bullet in his head. All these impressions and thoughts gnawed away at Chekhov's soul. He needed to find calm and asked Stanislavsky to give him time off from rehearsals.

But the calm he longed for proved elusive. He began drinking again and wrote wine-infused treatises about unspeakable themes. For instance, he described at great length, second by second, a man's state as he is run over by a tram. Later, when he read through the finished piece, he recognized with terror the path to madness he was heading down.

After a while, money became short and Chekhov needed to do something. On the advice of a friend he began to give acting classes. Before long, several students enrolled and he formed a small studio, the Chekhov Studio. This work allowed him to make ends meet and it distracted him. In those days, Chekhov never prepared for class. He experimented with Stanislavsky's system and made up exercises as he went along. But gradually structures developed which brought to light a comprehensive approach to the work. He later developed this approach further and named it: "The Theatre of the Future".⁸ But all these activities didn't help him overcome his inner crisis. On the contrary: his hearing became refined beyond the

⁵ *The Path of the Actor*, P.86

⁶ Olga Chekhova (1897-1980) emigrated in 1921 to Germany, where she enjoyed great success as an actor.

⁷ There are differing opinions here. *The Path of the Actor* describes him being involved in rehearsals for *The Flood*, while Fausto Malcovati says he was working on *The Seagull*. I find the latter more likely, because following Chekhov's crisis in 1920, he was asked whether he would like to play in *The Flood*.

⁸ See Jobst Langhans: Das Theater der Zukunft in: die Drei 2/2015

boundaries of normality and he started to hear voices. He had the impression he was able to overhear conversations on the streets of Moscow, while sitting in his room. Three doctors were consulted who might be able to treat him, but intellectually they were no match for Chekhov and he labelled them idiots, at which point Stanislavsky, who often tried cheering him up by talking about God, one day snapped at him: “You really can’t stand anyone, can you?”⁹

His condition only began to improve gradually through a course of hypnotherapy, and he regained some strength. His will awoke and helped him “to gain a victory over everything gloomy and oppressive”.¹⁰ He was able to be around people again and the inspiring discoveries in the studio awoke in him the desire to do something to revive the theatre.

Already in the Autumn of 1918, he returned to his acting work. The study of the literature of Indian yogis was a popular trend in Moscow at that time. One day he came across one such book and began to read it. To his amazement, the inner protest which normally appeared immediately whenever he read such things, remained absent, and he was thus able to read the book quite objectively. Sober and quite calmly, he began reflecting on the fundamental elements of Hindu philosophy, and in it he recognized a basic principle: the art of life. This thought was new to him and inspired him. Until then, his only understanding of art had been that which takes place on the stage. His concept of art now expanded.

The art of life – wasn’t this what they were already practicing at the studio? And surely it was related to the “Theatre of the Future”. Chekhov finally came to the opinion that art is a potential within people, and that the individuality is its source. He began vaguely to sense the difference between someone who performs art as an outer action, and one who creates it within himself. Through such thoughts, a new way of seeing the meaning and purpose of life emerged within him, and many of his previous attitudes became distant. For instance, it became clear to him that there was no longer any need to treat people with contempt. How people behaved had previously been the same to him as who they were, and from these actions Chekhov despised the whole person. Now he began to distinguish not only the person from his actions, but from his temporary traits, and directed his rage on the latter, while the person himself remained unprejudiced. And so he at last returned to an unencumbered interaction with his fellow human beings.

In the years 1919 and 1920 there was a great famine in Russia. But his students didn’t allow this to mar their efforts and enthusiasm, and the inspired working atmosphere in the studio was a source of strength for everyone. After the long days at work they relished their wheat groats without salt or butter. And if someone brought along a little honey, they had a meal of charred pancakes.

In March 1919, Chekhov’s mother died, but he wasn’t able to be with her at the end. There was a typhus epidemic in Moscow and because there was a backlog of burials, at the morgue he had to search for her among numerous corpses. They lay twisted on tables, entwined or lying on the floor.

Finally, the MAT called again: they needed him to go on tour to the Caucasus. Chekhov was forced to say good-bye to the studio and his pupils, and so this work came to a halt for the time being.

The real reason for the tour was the famine, which the MAT hoped to avoid. But the theatrical troupe weren’t the only ones being hounded by the famine. Hundreds of farmers headed south to the government districts where corn was plenty. They crowded trains, hid in the undercarriages, hung from buffers and running-boards, died under the wheels and collapsed in exhaustion onto the tracks. Under orders from the capital, they were forcibly driven back by soldiers, but the famine kept forcing people to continually press on.

In the light of these images, a thought grew in Chekhov’s mind that everything an actor does is without any meaning or purpose. He wondered what the nice neat rehearsals and performances which made up Vachtangov’s masterly artistic work, might mean in such times. Suddenly it was clear to him how abstract and lacking in feeling the ideas of historians and politicians about “mankind” were. What now interested him were the concrete, living people currently hanging from railway carriages, and he wondered whether the MAT artists, with their refined art, weren’t passing reality by completely? But these experiences, along with the memories of the emaciated inhabitants of Moscow, were soon forgotten when the actors, having reached their destination, pounced on the bread loaves and rolls.

Back in Moscow, Chekhov again devoted himself to the larger questions in life. Through his studies of Hinduism he came into contact with the ideology of the Theosophists. However it seemed to him that the Theosophists didn’t rate highly enough the significance of Christ, something Chekhov had in the meantime

⁹ *Zhizn’ i vstrechi (Life and Encounters)*

¹⁰ *The Path of the Actor*, P.90

begun to explore. So he went to Father Aleksei, a very old priest, for advice. When Chekhov began to put forward all his questions, he noticed that the old man wasn't even listening, but was carefully studying his face and hair. His gaze even rested above his head. Finally he said: "Oh dear, young fellow, your mind certainly is in chaos!" He gestured with his hand to Chekhov's head and added: "You'd better go and see Father Sergei, he'll talk to you. I'll let him know." And with that, he left.

So Chekhov met Father Sergei. Soon, this very young, at times angry-looking man became an important adviser to him. They talked at length about the Church and Christianity, although the strict orthodoxy that Father Sergei represented left several questions open for Chekhov, and he suddenly remembered a book by Rudolf Steiner that he had read some time before, *How to Know Higher Worlds*. He read the book again, and whereas on the first reading he'd laughed at its contents, this time it fascinated him. So Chekhov finally encountered the idea of an esoteric Christianity, something which would remain with him for the rest of his life.

In order to find out more, he got in touch with Andrei Bely, who was known in Moscow circles as an expert on Anthroposophy. But Bely was departing on a long journey, so for now Chekhov had to make do with the literature.

Meanwhile, the civil war was coming to an end and the Bolsheviks – who saw themselves as great educators – began to consider measures for educating the people, 80% percent of which were illiterate. Within this concept, theatre played a meaningful role and many Russian avant-gardists began working with the Bolsheviks. Agitprop plays began appearing on the stages of Moscow and St. Petersburg. The only style permitted for these performances was socialist realism. The events on the stage should outwardly reproduce reality with photographic precision, while the content was determined by the prevailing ideology. As a result, the quality of acting deteriorated, and imagination and originality withdrew into the background.

This "Proletarian Art", which would now be seen as an educational mission, was described by Chekhov as "street dramaturgy".¹¹ All plays which dealt with spirituality and religion were gradually banned from programmes. However the wax was still soft, the positions not yet hardened, and the plays of Goethe and Shakespeare were not put on the index.

May 1922 saw the death of Yevgeny Vachtangov, who had run the MAT "First Studio", and Chekhov applied to be his successor. In order to eliminate other applicants, he unceremoniously appointed himself "Dictator". This move so startled everyone concerned that no one questioned it. They let him take over the studio. Following this "coup d'état" he banned anti-religious tendencies and "street dramaturgy" from the studio and decided to put on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

The year 1922 was to be an important turning point in another respect, because shortly after this he met Rudolf Steiner in Berlin. We do not know what it was that the two men spoke about, but I'd like to speculate on a few possibilities.

They probably exchanged ideas about the spiritual art of theatre, esoteric Christianity and *Hamlet*. And they would almost certainly have talked about the events in Russia and the First World War. These subjects deeply moved both Steiner and Chekhov, especially the causes which lead to the catastrophic war. In 1919, Steiner had already addressed these themes in detail in a series of lectures.¹²

He believed that the causes lay in a one-sided way of thinking. Since the founding of the universities, over five hundred years ago, man had increasingly been seeing and shaping the world and mankind from the perspective of scientific knowledge. Materialist thinking had conquered all spheres of life and is the result of an understandable desire for security. People followed Galileo's appeal: "Measure what can be measured, and make measurable what is not so."¹³ Everything that is measurable brings security, and so our vision of living things became narrowed to that part of them which is measurable. They became numbers.

This culture came about thanks to the tremendous technical progress achieved by mankind, but at the same time it had progressively been losing sight of its inner nature, mankind's higher essential core. So the price for this progress has been spiritual illiteracy

Goethe, to whom Steiner often referred, already vehemently criticized this development, but his contemporaries weren't capable of understanding this. So in his *Faust*, he had Mephisto express all these things which were so close to his heart.

¹¹ *Zhish' I vstrechi (Life and Encounters)*

¹² The "Freedom of Thought and Societal Forces" lectures about the demands of modern society, in 1919.

¹³ Lecture by Joachim Daniel: "Die Gegenwart der Musen" - Anderzeit Drei - 2009

Mephisto sees through the absurdity of a materialist way of thinking and heartily mocks mankind for allowing itself to be lead astray; this is certainly the best way of diverting mankind from its original source – the deeply loathsome godly light. But he isn't able to entice Faust with materialist thought. He has already seen through this and Mephisto must resort to other means, although he can still use it to charm the student. In the student scene, Mephisto talks quite openly: "I council you therefore, my worthy friend, / The logical leasures to attend. / Then is your mind well trained and cased / In Spanish boots, all snugly laced, / So that henceforth it can creep ahead / On the road of thought with cautious tread". But the student understands none of this – just like Goethe's contemporaries. And Goethe chooses a very drastic image for logical thinking: in the Middle Ages, "Spanish boots" were among the cruellest torture methods used for extorting confessions.

In the same scene, Goethe caricatured the way people with a materialist leaning try to achieve insight about living things, with Mephisto's speech: "Whoever will know a live thing and expound it, / First kills out the spirit it had when he found it, / And then the parts are all in his hand, / Minus only the spiritual band."

This was all very familiar to Chekhov. Indeed, he had himself endured the agony of the "Spanish boots" and knew the Faustian dungeon. Like Faust (and Hamlet) he had, out of despair, recently been on the brink of taking his own life. And weren't the Bolsheviks in Moscow trying to push forward precisely the same Mephistophelian workings? Trying to lace up in "Spanish boots" the spirit of an entire nation, pushing through this dialectic materialism by all possible means and pursuing their idealism with such severity.

As brilliant as Charles Darwin's findings were, the consequences of their interpretation were disastrous in equal measure. What went for the animal kingdom was now transferred to mankind. The "survival of the fittest" became a scientifically founded justification for brutal exploitation as the superpowers built their colonial empires in the 19th century. Morals were abolished. Mephisto remarks: "You (God) make him a gleam of light from heaven; / he calls it reason, using it / To be more beast than ever beast was yet." The financial markets were also organized according to this mantra. And what went for nations, also went for the struggle of everyday people. Egotism became the dominant culture.

According to Rudolph Steiner, the only possible way out of this Ahriman-Luciferian¹⁴ bondage was for mankind to once again become sensitive to a perception of the living processes in the world and the higher self of man – both one's own self and that in others. In his view, Faust's fate was the fate of modern man. A way out was urgently needed, if the world was to avoid sinking further into destructive crises. Although peace now reigned again, Steiner was already indicating a new catastrophe looming. We're now wiser and know that this was the Second World War.

The raising of awareness of the higher self can be attained by overcoming one's own dead and rigid ideas: by overcoming fear, doubt and hatred. In being able to relate to our own thoughts as an experience, we can come to the gateway of living thought. We fulfil the spiritual act of rising up. This spiritual rising up is a central element of esoteric Christianity.

In the Spring of 1923 Chekhov began rehearsals for his *Hamlet*. At this time, three ideas had become manifest in his mind: the revival of the theatre, which with the background of the new aesthetics of "Proletarian Art", had clearly become more important; the idea that art isn't an outer action, but a creative process which derives from the individuality, man's innermost, essential core; and that art mustn't circumvent the reality of life, but have something to do with actual people – those "hanging from railway carriages"¹⁵

Hamlet seemed to provide the ideal material for achieving these three goals. Like a magnifying glass, it focussed the questions in life that had been stirring Chekhov: his biographical experiences, the social situation in Russia, and the birth of a new sort of person – someone of action, who has overcome pessimism. He was now 32 years old.

When Andrei Bely returned to Moscow, Chekhov invited him to give lectures about Anthroposophy to his company, since he wanted to approach *Hamlet* from a spiritual side and therefore was looking for new ways of coming to the material. His aim was high: he wanted to bring divine light into the performance.

¹⁴ Ahriman and Lucifer are two forces which represent the spiritual principles of evil. Ahriman is an expression of the process of hardening. This principle strives to turn all living things into dead mechanics. Lucifer is the antithesis. He seduces people and leads them to overestimating themselves. In *Faust*, Mephisto unites these two forces. At times he is dressed in black and callously aggressive, at others he wears red, a cock feather in his hat, and becomes the erotic seducer.

¹⁵ *Zhishn' I vstrechi (Life and Encounters)*

There was something surreal about the stage design, which depicted a gloomy world, symbolising the cold and unscrupulous violence of old Hamlet's murderer, Claudius. It was reminiscent of an Ahriman-like claw, and it was in this world of darkness that Chekhov wanted to make divine light become visible.

On the surface, the lighting was to be a stylistic means of making clear the drama's spiritual events. But it was also to emphasize the inner light. He told his actors that they should find their innermost source of strength and to play from there. Together with the cast, he developed countless exercises so that this inner light wouldn't be merely an imaginary event, but would become a perceptible reality. In doing so, he fell back on experiences at his studio, and also drew on ideas from Speech Formation and Eurythmy. He placed particular emphasis on work on the body, which should be capable of conveying these subtle, etheric messages. Chekhov worked a lot with gesture and said that the arms and legs are rays of inner light.

Time and again, he quoted the First Letter of St. John, which says: "God is Light".¹⁶ And wherever God shines, there can be no darkness. All those who are moved by this light, carry it within them and shine it out.

"The new actor must first learn – with the help of this new technique – to *sacrifice* his self-will, his personality, before he can recognize, understand and accept with his new consciousness the wishes of the new kind of spectator," he wrote in his memoirs. And: "But for this, he needs an organ with which he can hear this word of the present time, and this organ is the new acting technique which trains the actor to *sacrifice* himself within his art, rather than exercise his arbitrary self-will."¹⁷

These were great demands to make of his actors: to sacrifice their self-will; form an organ with which to hear the word of the present time; to sacrifice themselves to art.

The improvisations upon which the work was based were also new to the actors, who had been used to a more technical style of rehearsal process. This was a logical consequence of his approach, because life can only emerge in improvisation, not in mechanically fixed events.

The exercises and way of working described by Chekhov in his book *O tehnike aktera* (New York, 1946)¹⁸, in other words, the foundation of his method, were largely developed during the two years of rehearsals for *Hamlet*.

The lighting scheme for *Hamlet* was conceived as a symbolic battle between light and darkness. At various moments in the play, Chekhov used light to depict things not immediately within reach of the senses, or as a moment of resolution. For instance, he didn't perform the encounter between Hamlet and the ghost of old Hamlet in the usual way, with another actor, but instead used only light.

The fight scene at the end of the play, in which Laertes, Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius die, ended by allowing a great white light to gradually emanate – perhaps a metaphor for Denmark's liberation from Claudius's cold, heartless reign, but also for the end of the preparations for the war Denmark had been going to fight against Norway.

Ultimately, Chekhov pursued his goal to actually depict the Christ impulse¹⁹, which in his view lay concealed in the deeper strata of *Hamlet*: the growth experienced by someone with such an impulse. He wanted to show how a man's soul with the Christ impulse can achieve new discoveries and forces, and with them he is able not only to withstand the forces of darkness (Lucifer and Ahriman), but overcome them and thereby experience a spiritual rebirth. Anyone who has been through this renewal shares this experience with the people he encounters and in doing so changes the society around him. The Christ impulse will spread and therefore has an effect on wider social circles. This process of discovery was mirrored in Chekhov's rendition of Hamlet's story. He showed how man is able to create himself, irrespective of power and negative forces.

¹⁶ See 1 John 1:5, and also John 8:12

¹⁷ *The Path of the Actor*, P.127

¹⁸ This early work formed the basis of the book Chekhov wrote in English in the early 1950's, the manuscript of which was heavily edited by the US publishers and released as *To the Actor: on the technique of acting* (Harper & Row, 1953). Nearly 40 years later, the manuscript originally prepared by Chekhov was published under the title *On the Technique of Acting* (ed. Mel Gordon, HarperCollins, 1991), while the original 1946 book has never been published in English (German readers know it as *Die Kunst des Schauspielers*, Urachhaus, 2010).

¹⁹ There are numerous descriptions by Rudolf Steiner of the meaning of the Christ impulse. I'd like to single out the following example as being representative: "When a man can say: 'Granted, I can be ill, I can be weak, I can die; but from my own Ego I can make myself stronger, I can send into my organization something which gives me strength and force directly out of the spiritual worlds.' It is indifferent what he calls this; if the man comes to this feeling, he is gripped by the Christ impulse. That man is not gripped by the Christ-impulse who says he can have something from a teacher who has passed from incarnation to incarnation, but he who feels that directly from the spiritual world there can come impulses of force, of strength."

Let us briefly go over the plot of the play: Early on, Hamlet has an encounter with his father's ghost, who reveals that he was murdered by Hamlet's stepfather Claudius, and initially this leaves Hamlet deeply shocked. But this experience is inconsistent with what he has learned at Wittenberg University, where only those things which are provable by logic are recognized as the truth. Now he is confronted by a phenomenon which is deprived of this logic. Even his friend Horatio (ratio = reason) has to admit: they saw a ghost. The contradiction between a school of thought and this experience drives Hamlet to despair and he asks himself the famous question: "To be, or not to be?". He is saved by an ingenious idea: a theatrical troupe comes to the castle and Hamlet asks them to play out his father's murder before Claudius, so that he might observe his reaction. As he watches the play, Claudius becomes tense and so Hamlet knows the ghost was telling the truth. He is no longer in doubt and begins to fight the fight the ghost exhorted him to, and lent him the strength to confront.

In Chekhov's rendition, Hamlet becomes a new man through this fight, and heals Denmark. He saw in him an example of the idea that mankind can only exert justice and improve society through a new awareness of truth, inspired by the spirit.

In this production, Chekhov himself played the part of Hamlet. In researching this text I have often been left with the impression that Chekhov didn't only play Hamlet – he was Hamlet.

Considering the backdrop of Russia's political situation, this rendition was a very courageous undertaking. Chekhov and the actors in his company were risking a great deal, since the innuendo contained in the line "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."²⁰ would have been unmistakably clear to all Russians. And increasingly so following Lenin's death in 1924. Stalin pushed inexorably for power and caused a new wave of destruction of churches and the deportation of priests, monks and committed laity.

But Stalin also knew that Russia needed saints. And so, although Lenin had spoken out against a personality cult, he nevertheless gave orders to have his body embalmed and commanded the construction of a mausoleum on Moscow's Red Square, a pyramid-like structure resembling the Egyptian cult of the dead. Lenin's mummy was ceremoniously placed inside and put on display. For many years, the Russian people had to march past this corpse.

On the other hand, St. Basil's Cathedral on Red Square was closed down and the icons in the cathedral faded and lost their strength. Instead, the nation had a new "shrine".

In the Spring of 1924, the opening night of *Hamlet* finally took place. The audience received the play with enthusiasm.

In the MAT archives there are letters to Michael Chekhov which narrate how deeply moved audiences were. Many described how, through this performance, they came to deeply understand themselves, as never before. They were able to recognize in the performance all the difficulties, pain and harm they had endured in recent years, could grasp their situation in life. They left the theatre transformed.

Other audience members wrote that they had sensed feelings during the performance that they had believed they were no longer capable of experiencing. Andrei Bely described the play as a phenomenon and was highly enthusiastic about how it was able to arouse Russian audiences.²¹

But not all voices were enthusiastic. Many colleagues didn't like the nature of the performance at all. The aesthetic form was too surreal for them and the underlying spiritual quality, repellent.

However Chekhov didn't allow himself to be impressed by such criticisms. He had achieved a great goal and the success gave him strength. He took the liberty of sharing rash opinions about the new "Proletarian Art" with the Narkompros, the People's Commissariat for Education, where he defended his art. And because Chekhov was very famous and riding a wave of success, they were cautious towards him and merely whispered in his ear: "Comrade, have you forgotten what they did with disobedient theatre directors during the French Revolution?"²² But Chekhov remained true to his position.

In 1926 he met Starets Nektarij (1853-1928). The starets was one of the last living monks in Russia, who had achieved the highest state of asceticism. A poetess told Chekhov that the starets had seen a picture of him playing Hamlet and had said: "I see the sign of the spirit. Bring him to me."

²⁰ Spoken by Marcello in "Hamlet" at the castle walls as they overhear the preparations for war and meet the ghost of old Hamlet.

²¹ Lecture "L'Amleto di Michail Cechov: l'influenza di Steiner e il suo 'Impulso-Cristo'", Fausto Malcovati

²² *Zhishn' I vstrechi (Life and Encounters)*

Chekhov immediately travelled to see him. That night, the train came to a small village. The journey continued by horse and cart. Then, to avoid being followed, visitors had to wait another night before being brought to the place where the starets was hiding.

When the starets greeted him most deferentially with his full name and bowed low, Chekhov was left somewhat speechless. The starets sat down, laughed with a joyous look in his eye and said: “There are more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

They spoke about many esoteric matters and about Rudolf Steiner, for whom the starets showed great interest. “What Rudolf Steiner says is like a bouquet of flowers,” he said, and added: “But there also weeds among them”.²³

The Narkompros began summoning Chekhov more frequently in an attempt to persuade him to change his production. Since Chekhov refused, the net kept tightening around him. In 1928, at a reception held specially for him, an event shrouded in secrecy, he heard that he must leave Russia that very night, and was handed a passport.

Chekhov left Russia, never to return. He hoped to be able to put on his *Hamlet* again abroad – but this remained a wish that he would never manage to fulfil.

It seems amazing, but Chekhov apparently spoke only rarely to his acting students about the Christ impulse: at least I know of few examples. He did mention it to a couple of very close pupils who were interested in Anthroposophy²⁴, but otherwise didn’t go beyond the odd oblique reference in which the impulse can be clearly recognised. He had since developed an aversion to lecturing from the stage and found all forms of being persuasive in the theatre strange. He addressed the audience’s response in moral terms through the atmospheres on the stage. When we work mindfully in this way, it is possible to experience the transformation which brings about the Christ impulse, without it being spoken about. It takes place in secret.

I close by sharing a personal experience: during the International Chekhov Conference in Riga in 1997 I met a woman who was a shaman and had lived with Eskimos in Siberia and with Hopi Indians. The conference’s working theme was *Hamlet*. She visited my workshop and filmed the teaching sessions. One day we got talking and she told me about her work. She said that she restored the connection between people and their angels, when this had been lost. Then she changed the subject and explained: “The phrase ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark’ refers to the fact that the connection between the Danish people and their archangel had been lost.” When I showed further interest in her work, she laughed and said: “You’ve no need to learn new things. You know all that. I saw it in your work. You just need to trust it.”

I offer this as encouragement all colleagues who work with Michael Chekhov’s “tools”, but who from time to time begin to doubt and lose the inner light.

Jobst Langhans

²³ *Zhishn’ I vstrechi (Life and Encounters)*

²⁴ Mala Powers, Jack Colvin – Michael Chekhov’s pupils in Los Angeles