Chekhov's Lithuanian lessons

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An old proverb says, "One's own shirt fits closer to the body." In Soviet times Chekhov's teachings were forbidden, and efforts were made to erase them from Soviet theatre. Nevertheless, they found their way into my heart and mind, although I was a Soviet student, and determined the course of my personal life as much as my professional destiny. In 1970, at the age of 18, I entered the Faculty of Directing in the State Institute of Theatre Art in Moscow (known by its acronym GITIS).[1] There was a considerable contrast between the calm life in my tiny country, Lithuania, where a close connection could still be felt with nature, and the intense rhythm of life in the megalopolis of ideology. It knocked me off balance emotionally. Learning the dogmatized Stanislavsky System, which, according to Vsevolod Meyerhold, was ready to take over even the central post office of Moscow, depressed me and stifled my creative energy. I began to think that the theatre studies I had dreamed about since childhood were just not for me. Just then a typewritten manuscript of Michael Chekhov's book On the Technique of Acting, which was much frayed from many readings, fell into my hands. Underground publications such as this were known in the USSR as samizdat and were used to circumvent the authorities and censors; they were very popular among intellectuals and students. The text had been typewritten in Russian in the USA and reproduced in the most primitive fashion, making it very difficult to decipher. I was able to borrow it for one night as was customary. Once I got it, I was awestruck. It became apparent that Socialist Realism, which was being thrust upon us and which was able only to create a gray reflection of a gray reality, was definitely unessential. What's more, it was not the only manner of creativity available! I learned that imagination happens to be one of the fundamental elements of creativity. Imagination was something I'd been blamed for having too much of, so it was always being quenched in me. I rushed to jot down the main points and practice exercises from that book to the extent the circumstances allowed. These tempting and mysterious teachings restored my self-confidence and became the guiding light for my future studies and professional development. Most importantly, they clearly demonstrated that one's inner life, one's spiritual world, is no less real than the material one – it is a tangible reality. They encouraged me to dig deeper into the mysteries of existence as an antidote to the ruling communist doctrine of materialism. As I held the Higher Self in mind, as well as its creative expression, I would try to search for values suitable for me and to form professional skills that would be independent of official Soviet doctrines. Chekhov's imperative of a free and creative spiritual life prompted me to become actively involved in Lithuania's "singing revolution," which liberated it from totalitarianism. Even now, while living in a consumer society, this imperative empowers a person, as we used to say, "not to pray to the specificity of the everyday." These are the basic attitudes I try to convey, not only to my students; I also try to share them with others when I am delivering lectures or leading creative workshops aimed at different members of society.

Transplanting an acting method: the Baltic experience

By 1928 Chekhov had achieved excellent results in his creative work by discovering anthroposophy, a spiritual doctrine that corresponded to his aspirations, and put- ting it into practice on stage. It is futile to conjecture about the possible evolution of Chekhov's method in Russia, about how it would have evolved if he had remained there and worked with Russian actors.[2] Yet it is evident that by working in a multi- cultural space, trying to create an international theatre, and by testing in his role of teacher various principles of acting with students of diverse nationalities and mentalities, he could not help make his method, which he considered a work in progress, more universal. Chekhov removed himself from the rising tide of stultification in his homeland and tried to share the fruits of his spiritual quest with the Western public, alas, with no success. This failure hardened him and drove him to seek new opportunities in Latvia and Lithuania. He explained to a correspondent from the Lithuanian press:

A new art can only be born in a country that has a vision of a new world and basically recognizes it as such. Theatrical innovators who try to create something new and are interested only in theatre are destined to fail completely. After all, theatre is a part of the life of every country, and at the same time it participates in the culture of humanity as a whole. It is therefore evi- dent that a new theatre will only appear in those countries that value their culture and subscribe to the prospect of an extended cultural renewal; in short, in countries that have their own vision of the world. The younger a country is, the more it thinks about culture, the more it is ambitious, the more it is preoccupied by culture, the greater will be the possibilities of creating a new theatre.

(1932)

Driven by these ideas, on 26 May 1932 Chekhov left Riga for Kaunas, the interim capital of the Republic of Lithuania, in order to participate in its cultural life.[3]

Lithuanian professional theatre had been established only in 1920, and was com- posed of companies on tour directed by graduates of various Russian schools of dramatic arts. The first decade was marked by a complex mix of tendencies, styles, and theatrical credos. It was only in 1929 with Oleka-Žilinskas' production of Šarūnas that actors appeared who were prepared to create a modern theatre. Chekhov encouraged them and strove to make the process irreversible. He surrounded himself with a group of students and, for the first time in Lithuania, initiated them into the fundamentals of Stanislavsky's doctrine as seen through the prism of the Second Moscow Art Theatre (MAT 2).[4] In the productions he directed, Chekhov became aware of the young actors' desire to act in a creative way, but also of their lack of professionalism.[5] In 1932, during his first conversation with his new students in Kaunas, he asked a series of questions, which were not simply rhetorical and intended to motivate his listeners, but marked out the territory for an essential quest. At least some of his pupils not only understood the ins and outs of his thinking, but even put them to paper with a view to using certain aspects in their own future creative activity. For example, Algirdas Jakševičius (1908–41), who was recognized as the great hope for a future Lithuanian theatre, wrote in his notes of Chekhov's lessons: "The mark of talented

actors is the ability to transform themselves using bodily technique, leaving their individuality aside. A talented actor simply represents the image created. Only the mediocre actor has recourse to feelings intended to represent the character" (Blekaitis 1999: 64).[6]

Chekhov's lessons

In the first class in Kaunas, Chekhov warned his pupils against creative stagnation by sharing with them his Goethe-like thirst for knowledge: "I am little, a new-born babe. I don't know how to move or speak or think. So, like babies, we are going to learn to move, speak, and think by following, like them, the laws of nature" (1989: 6). The key to the secret Chekhov had brought with him lay in this thirst for knowledge and constant self-creation. In an interview he elaborated his view of the actor's task:

There is a secret to which unfortunately not all actors have access. [... T]he public always perceives and evaluates the person behind the image produced by the actor, whether it does this consciously or unconsciously. The nature of the link between the actor and the audience depends on whether it accepts or rejects the person behind the image. This link or these contacts with the public determine whether the actor who interprets the character will be accepted or not. This is why the budding actor who has grasped this secret will work not only on his character, but will continue to enrich his own personality, because his future roles will be determined by his own traits and by everything that he radiates. (1932)

In order to understand and reach this goal, Chekhov acquainted his students with the notions of "second actor" and "interior actor" without, however, amplifying their definitions. After each exercise, he pointed out to the students how their "second actor" was progressing and being reinforced. By refusing to offer a definition that would be fixed for all time, he led his students in a complex, intuitive manner to the heart of the spiritual creative process. He thus imperceptibly enriched and intensified their subconscious. When the actor carried out a bodily exercise, Chekhov stressed its value in provoking an inner reaction and developing the "suppleness of the soul." In the first ten lessons he proposed a series of exercises concerning movement and posture. By the time of the eleventh lesson, when the group had become united in a strong creative atmosphere, he presented a clear and simple outline of this complex process, hypothetically dividing the individual into three elements: body, soul, and spirit (1989: 32). In a very pragmatic introduction he demonstrated how this structure works:

Everyone has a greater or lesser force deep inside them, and everyone feels it to a greater or lesser extent, but of course no one knows its limits. Its innate possibilities are unknown, because they are beyond our senses and remain hidden. Yet at the same time we instinctively feel there is such a force. To exploit this inner treasure given to us by nature, one must find how to channel it. (21)

Chekhov's research focused on this hidden force and the techniques for accumulating it and transforming it into artistic action. He also sought the genesis of the "inner actor," the

“second spiritual actor” (subsequently termed the Higher Self), and the “creative individuality,” as well as the interaction of this force with superior worlds and the creator himself.

Chekhov’s teaching in Kaunas comprised a series of group exercises. These came in very useful in the preparatory work on Hamlet. There are reports of work with balloons, a technique already used at the MAT 2; the use of symmetrical figures in groups of seven (Chekhov 1989: 12); and many other compositional exercises involving music, objects, color of the space, etc. While making actors practice these exercises, Chekhov was not content to observe the movement of the bodies: he repeated that one had to feel the surrounding space and time with one’s whole being. In all the tasks he assigned, communication was generally indirect, in a way non- psychological, being executed without looking at one’s partner. It did not seek to reach a goal in the given circumstances, but was aimed at perception of the Other and listening to oneself. Years later Chekhov explained to Bergstrom:

What would happen if the human being, through meditation, prayer, way of life, or some other method, became aware of the presence in the self of the higher self? If only, even partially, on certain occasions, one learned to say “the Christ in me” instead of “Me”? [...] The “I” of the other person would suddenly emerge, become illuminated, and, little by little, progressively, would awaken and become conscious of itself. There is a little “miracle” that one can always try to achieve in the other, for the other. (1995: 1.506)

This “little miracle” that the exercises were intended to achieve was Chekhov’s gift to his pupils in Kaunas. Later, when he lost interest in the theatre, these themes continued to preoccupy him. In all the published versions of his method they receive detailed treatment despite editors who, in the name of clarity and readability, requested simplification and cuts.

The language of images

After presenting the structure of the creative process in the eleventh lesson, Chekhov turned to the fixing of the image in the imagination (1989: 27); he did not, however, deal with the imagination as a whole nor with the question of the interpretation of the role, which he would go on to discuss in subsequent works (2002: 21–35). The actors were tasked with trying to grasp the technique of observing and fixing the creation of primitive images. As he stated: “The actor must love the director as an image of his imagination. The director must love the actor because the actor is embodying this image that he has of him” (1989: 34). It is by exchanging images and learning from one another how to embody them that an atmosphere of plenitude is born (11), which is the first condition of creativity. Chekhov would develop the dialectic of love in his 1955 lecture “On Love in our Profession” (1995: 2.337–49). In the fifteenth lesson he declared that in the ideal Theatre of the Future, actors and directors would discover a new language – the language of images: “The director of the future will speak in half-words, but in such a way that these words will engender images in the actor. A language of images will be developed, not a language made of words” (1989: 38–39).

Rethinking the rhythms of natural phenomena

In Kaunas, Chekhov used the term “arrhythmic phenomenon” to designate what- ever in life we call chaos, disharmony, or ugliness. Every work of art, as well as every natural phenomenon, is necessarily impregnated with rhythm. Everything that is devoid of rhythm is sickness (1989: 44). Already, during the rehearsals of Hamlet in Moscow, he stated: “Everything comes not through the meaning, but through the rhythm” (1995: 2.412). In Kaunas he declared that, to understand the notion of rhythm, one had to rethink natural phenomena:

Only then will we arouse in ourselves a feeling for rhythm, without which there is no creative work. One must create in oneself a little philosophy of rhythm in nature, in the world, and in the human being. Find time, even as little as ten minutes a day, to lose yourself in the contemplation of rhythm. [...] If we immerse our consciousness in Rhythm, it will calm our nerves, which are per se an arrhythmic phenomenon.

(1989: 44–45) This teaching reposed on a theoretical reflection, but also had a practical application:

All the exercises we do would have no meaning if we did not repeat them persistently and systematically every day. [...] Each actor must try to grasp as clearly as possible the reason for the exercises given in the program and think them through many times in order to become cognizant of and feel the force hitherto unknown to him hidden within the bodily husk. [...] Only through cognition can the actor acquire creative harmony and ultimately establish inner balance. (21)

In Chekhov’s letters from Kaunas to Boner in Paris he revised his conception of the “place of the event.” In another letter that he wrote to the collective of the Kaunas studio on 4 October 1933, we find the first (and undoubtedly the most detailed) description of the notion of atmosphere. In some of the exercises going back to the Kaunas period, it is possible to discern the prototype of the Psychological Gesture (PG) already present in the work of Vakhtangov and underlying the defense of rhythm found in Chekhov’s first lessons.

Chekhov’s Lithuanian disciples

In the difficult context of the twentieth century the majority of Chekhov’s pupils managed to preserve their aesthetic conscience and have a decisive impact on the development of Lithuanian theatrical culture (Sruoga 1938: 212–36). In 1933 the graduates of Oleka-Žilinskas’ school of dramatic art, influenced by Chekhov’s ideas and his dream of a Theatre of the Future, founded the Youth Theatre as an alter- native to the established State Theatre. In a letter from Riga written on 20 March 1934 Chekhov praised his young colleagues in the following terms:

Believe me, despite the differences between us, I still love you, your energy, your artistic and human strength, your goals, and your perseverance. If you permit me to be absolutely frank, I envy you. [...] What is important is that you know how to fight for enlightenment against concrete, crude, earthly difficulties! (1995: 1.414)

Lacking a venue and financial support, the Youth Theatre lasted only one season, and Chekhov's actors had to choose their different paths in life. Romualdas Juknevičius (1906–63), who left us his course notes, obtained an internship with Meyerhold. In 1936 he had a brilliant debut as director with The Wreck of "The Good Hope" by Herman Heijermans. In 1940 he founded the Vilnius Drama Theatre (now the National Theatre), and survived persecution and exile during the occupation. Under Soviet rule, when Socialist Realism had become the aesthetic norm, Juknevičius gave his productions a refined theatricality and a subtle atmosphere. Juozas Gustaitis (1912–90), one of Chekhov's most devoted pupils, and his compatriot Edvardas Kaštaunas joined his English studio at Dartington Hall, unfortunately only for one semester. In Lithuania Gustaitis had some success as an actor and director. Juozas Grybauskas (1906–64) and the actor Henrikas Kačinskas (1903–86) published for the first time Chekhov's letter to the actors of the Kaunas studio on atmosphere (Grybauskas and Kačinskas 1936).

Under Soviet rule, however, Chekhov's name was very quickly erased from the his- tory of Lithuanian theatre. His teaching was out of bounds for an entire generation of students of dramatic art. One small exception from the rule was necessary for it to be passed on.

That exception was Kazimiera Kymantaitė (1909–99), one of the last Lithuanian students of Chekhov, whom I have had the good fortune to meet. She was very lucky, both in her life and professional career: during Soviet rule she was the wife of the minister of culture, as well as an actress and director at the National Theatre. She received permission to direct several Lithuanian plays, unlike other Lithuanian directors. Throughout her life she remained faithful to Chekhov's teaching. In her production of Blood and Ashes by Justinas Marcinkevičius (1961), Chekhov's method was very detectable, despite the strong presence of Soviet ideology.

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According to Byckling, the two years Chekhov spent in Riga and Kaunas "were years of success after the Paris fiasco" (2000: 133). It was certainly a period of great creative energy thanks to a fertile and friendly environment.[7] Chekhov was particularly encouraged in his research by the open-mindedness, curiosity, and enthusiasm of his idealistic students, who mostly came from little villages. In this process the person responsible for Chekhov's teaching program, Oleka-Žilinskas, played an important role, participating in the courses and exercises and encouraging Chekhov to consign to paper the essential principles of his lessons, so that students would have access to his method.

Traveling between Riga and Kaunas, touring in the Baltic cities, vacationing abroad or simply on the bank of the River Nemunas, in a villa rented by Oleka-Žilinskas and Vera Solovyova, Chekhov felt as if he were immersing himself in a painting by Čiurlionis. In contrast to the cities where he had lived, Lithuania led him to appreciate a natural

environment still inhabited by the primordial spirit of pagan lands with its green plains and sprawling valleys. These spaces, hardly touched by civilization and modern implements, became an object of his curiosity and experiments; they satisfied his tendency to investigate atmospheres and rhythms:

I read a great deal, studying Rudolph Steiner's cycles of lectures, and continued to write down my thoughts on acting technique. Little by little I began to discern the rhythm in phenomena. Lying in the garden on clear sunny days, I studied the harmonious forms of plants; in my thoughts I followed the process of the rotation of the earth and the planets, seeking harmonious compositions in space and gradually began to feel the externally invisible movement that takes place in all worldly phenomena. This imperceptible movement of play of forces I inwardly named "gesture." Finally I began to notice that these were not simply movements – they were filled with content. They bore within them volition and feelings – various, pro- found, disturbing feelings. Through them, it seemed to me, I could penetrate to the very essence of phenomena. (1995: 1.237–38)

Although there is little direct evidence,[8] it would appear that Chekhov was notindifferent to the "musical" painting of the Lithuanian artist Čiurlionis, who, in concrete form, tried to paint images from the spiritual world. Thus the cultural and spiritual context of the Baltic countries stimulated Chekhov's artistic life, despite his forced departure, and allowed him to develop his method.

For many years Chekhov sought the spiritual code of creation and tried to master its secret technique by immersing himself in the primordial flow of the universe. He wanted to reach the unity hidden behind the diversity of phenomena. We may echo Knebel in declaring that wherever Chekhov set foot he produced "an outburst of spiritual energy" (qtd in Chekhov 1995: 1.20) outside of time and space. Innumerable proofs exist that the path chosen by this Don Quixote of theatre continued to be a fruitful one. The future of this unique conception of theatre will no doubt depend, to use Mala Powers's felicitous phrase, on "the Power of the Imagination, both individual and collective" (2002: xlv).

Chekhov's method and my professional advancement

Chekhov's method underwent a revival in Lithuania under Khrushchev, when Socialist Realism lost ground and Stanislavsky's System, the only one taught hitherto, ceased to monopolize theatre. This renewal was brought about by directors who had studied with Mariya Knebel. Some of them had become familiar with underground materials during their studies at GITIS in Moscow. Lithuanian artists of several generations more or less knew Chekhov's method, which was becoming more and more respectable. For some it was their daily bread; for others, an exotic approach.

Back in my studies in Moscow, as soon as it became obvious that some of my classmates at GITIS were also interested in Chekhov's method, we began applying it independently in our daily work of directing and acting études or excerpts of performances. Our daring

rehearsals under demanding conditions, often lacking the most elementary understanding, making mistakes, and "reinventing the bicycle," as Lithuanians say, eventually bore fruit. We tried out a great many elements of the method on our own by the seat of our pants; it was the school of hard knocks. The results became our most valuable aesthetic and methodological discoveries and helped us establish our own style. It came as a huge surprise to me when once, while in Lithuania on vacation, I learned that Chekhov had worked in Lithuania for several years. I ran into his former student Kazimiera

Kymantaitė, who I mentioned above – Kimočka as he lovingly called her. I took notes on the many things she told me about Chekhov's lessons, rehearsals, and life in Kaunas. Most memorable were probably the words Chekhov relayed to her about his odyssey through so many countries: that it was not by chance, that he must "transmit the key to the secrets of acting to actors from different countries" (Chekhov qtd in Byckling 2000: 188). I went to the archives of the Lithuanian Theatre and Music Museum and discovered, deciphered, and compared the notes taken by the sixteen students of the State Theatre School who attended the lessons taught by Chekhov.

Once I started my professional career in the theatres of Lithuania, I began using elements of Chekhov's method, to the extent of my abilities, in rehearsal. I encouraged actors to delve deeply into this method to stimulate their creativity. Unnoticeably, little by little, I started sharing my modest experiences in the practical sessions I was teaching. The dizzying opportunities to meet with Chekhov's students – Mala Powers, Hurd Hatfield, Joan Merlin, and others – arose after the fall of the Berlin Wall and after Lithuania had again become an independent country. Now I was able to get a great deal of experience firsthand. I began participating in international laboratories and conferences devoted to this method; first as a student and later as a teacher. Currently I lecture on this method in three languages – in Lithuania, in Russia, and in different Western countries.

Teaching premises

As I am preparing to teach, I always remember the teacher's vow that there are no purely physical or technical exercises in this method. There must be some philosophical insight, even a minor one, to serve as the basis for each exercise. Therefore I try to rotate exercises that introduce and in still elements of the method with a miniature "Plato's Academy," provocative, passionate talks, even if they aren't completely coherent or deep, based on feelings and on contemplations of the "here and now." I very much appreciate the "poetry of pedagogy" as Knebel (1967) used to say; thus I try to conduct every lesson like a jazz improvisation – I know which elements we'll be working on, but not which exercises we'll be practicing. Exercises generally emerge of their own accord and they also disappear on their own before there's been a chance to record them. Some cannot be found in the official Chekhov handbooks, but I do not doubt that they are in keeping with his spirit. Upon starting to work, no matter what country I'm in or what age group I'm with, I make an effort to generate the unexpected, the unusual, and an uplifted atmosphere. In other words, I try to knock the participants off balance, off their daily state of equilibrium. Inspired by Chekhov, I suggest they accept the teacher, not as a real person, but as a certain image that is only here to transmit some unexpected news. I ask

everyone to believe that some revelations and transformations, even minor ones, are bound to happen in the creative lives of the participants as a result of our collective work. The essential condition to achieve such a creative revelation is for the teacher to reveal him- or herself to the group and to every member not in a familiar but in a creative way, encouraging everybody else to do the same. It also requires a subtle sense of humor, first of all poking fun at oneself, which must come into play from the very beginning of a session. It is much easier to achieve revelations mutually and to create a powerful field of creativity by working in some unexpected place, for example, outdoors, and then incorporating live natural objects like trees, flowers, flying birds, clouds, and the like. This stimulates the organic energy of the participants, which constitutes the main "fuel" of creativity. When I'm working indoors, I absolutely must play a great variety of music, but not for the purpose of setting up the usual anodyne background music of a household. It is meant to become one more active participant in the lesson, generating the needed spiritual structure. It is not possible here to describe the entire process of studying sequentially all the elements of the method. In what follows I shall identify several aspects that are important in developing one of the essential elements: imagination.

Teaching imagination

Imagination has always been one of the main instruments of innovation at every period of human evolution. The ability of individuals or groups "to make the invisible visible" is a fundamental motor driving various fields of human activity. Our society, which exists on the basis of inorganic energy consumption, is drowning in the noise of constant information. It is no wonder that human imagination, which is based on the consumption of organic energy, is clearly weakening. Teachers from theatrical schools, Western as much as Eastern European, name the lack of imagination or its weakening among theatrical youth as a major problem in the teaching process. This prevents future stage artists who have recognized and developed their creative natures from unfurling them to their full potential in plays based on authentic experiences. Chekhov's method, the cornerstone of which is the arousal of the imagination, its purposeful development, and maximum exploitation in the creative process, is a priceless tool for tackling this ulcer both in theatrical pedagogy and in living theatrical practice. I believe this is why the method has been gaining in popularity so rapidly around the world. It is not only being applied widely for the needs of theatre, but it is also being successfully integrated into various programs for fostering creativity, as well as into fields that are quite distant from the theatre. I have been teaching this method for many years, and I always devote a great deal of attention and time to the development of sets of exercises, conversations, and improvisations to be used for training the imagination.

Imagination training exercises

According to Chekhov's method, developing the imagination in students and actors consists of two parts. First, right at the beginning of the teaching process, as the skills of organic existence on stage are being shaped, exercises on imagination related to images and experiences from childhood are called into play. In every person's life, childhood is a time of firsthand recognition of the world and of unrestrained fan- tasy. The retention of a

certain primordial naivety, impressions, and evaluations from childhood and the ability to use them in the creative process are greatly valued and upheld in all kinds of ways in our pragmatic world. Exercises to develop attention provide direct access into the world of the imagination. Ordering yourself or some other person to concentrate is a complicated matter. This is a mistake teachers often make, usually with undesirable results. In Chekhov's method attention is an easily mastered psychophysical process which, when appropriately carried out, always achieves its objective. This process takes place in four beats:

1 The actual chosen object is observed and looked over.
2 The person doing the exercise imagines the object approaching.
3 The person also imagines approaching this object.
4 Finally it seems as though the object penetrates internally and a merger occurs.

Once students have been induced to perform this exercise using real, visible objects and have accomplished the task freely, devoid of any tension, the object is left at home. They then practice with some non-existent object, for example, a toy they had in childhood. After that, we move on to people, those who exist in reality and those who only exist in memory; for example, a classmate who sat next to them in the first grade. Each time, students are given an object that is more and more complex to concentrate their attention on, one that evokes more and more associations and one that arouses more and more emotional memory. This is repeated until they have completely mastered this process.

At this point, a complex exercise of imagination development is given based on the topic of the "childhood home." Students are told to stand in front of the door leading into their childhood home and to examine it meticulously – what material is it made of, its texture, its color, and different features of the time. Further, they are asked to take hold of the door handle and feel the material of its composition. The student must open the door, all the while knowing precisely whether it opens to the inside or to the outside. Then the student walks onto the staircase, or into the hallway, or the room at the entrance of the building, recalls its scent and notices its lighting. The next stage consists of a proposal to remember the scents of favorite dishes wafting from the kitchen of one's childhood home as well as mother's or grandmother's voice urging, "Go wash your hands" or "Hurry up and get to the table while the food's still hot." Next, the student is asked to imagine the table in the dining room or kitchen, its meal-time setting, and the plates set out for the meal. Children's games at the table must not be forgotten, such as, for example, building a tower with the potatoes in a bowl of soup. These are ways to approach the central image – the aroma of one's mother's or grandmother's kitchen and the comfort of her presence. Right here, it is suggested students imagine a close person from child- hood in his or her evening attire. Later on, students imagine taking a walk with that person or taking their first trip together, holding hands or going to kindergarten or school.

Exercises on transformation or change are also advisable because these contribute significantly to the essential skills students must gain for comprehending and implementing. Their mother or grandmother is imagined in the surroundings characteristic to her at different ages in her life, going back as far as her childhood or even infancy. The sequence of such "childhood home" images may vary depending on how

open the person leading the class is to suggestion and on that person's own creative ability to observe and transmit the images. The next step involves a student's personal space in the childhood home: for example, seeing a streak of light streaming through a crack in the door. What is that tempting and interesting adult world like that exists beyond your door and which is going on after you're supposed to be sleeping? How does your room seem when you awake during the night and strange shadows dance on the walls and ceiling? Other fascinating images involve family celebrations of annual holidays in the childhood home. There is an entire chain of childhood images out in the yard under different weather conditions – starting from the actual weather on the day of the practice session. An imaginary "movie" emerges of scenes from the yard that goes through all the meteorological conditions sequentially from then on; it proceeds full circle through all the seasons and can incorporate all the games played by the students in the given climatic con- text along with their respective, participating friends. When practice sessions on imagination are based on images from real-life experiences, however, they eventually lose their effect. At that point, students can shift to combinations of different fantasies.

One exercise always considerably enlivens students – when they are asked to imagine their childhood home located in different places, such as in Trafalgar Square, on a sand dune, in a jungle, on an ice floe, or on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. They can also be asked to imagine this home at the present time or, if it doesn't exist anymore, to imagine it becoming dilapidated and getting torn down. Another meaningful exercise from the "childhood home" cycle of sessions is having all the students sit in a circle and convey memories to the entire group. Here, it is in order to remind everyone about Stanislavsky's suggestion, "Do not speak to the ear but to the eye." This exercise is also useful in training students to speak from the stage. Once everyone in the group has shared their imaginings, each student is asked to name the most vivid imagery witnessed and develop it in some individual manner. An ensemble begins forming with this exercise, which leads to teaching the basics of theatrical teamwork. Because the "childhood home" exercises relate to the closest people in one's childhood, they always evoke a lively, mischievous reaction, refresh emotional memory, and reawaken very personal experiences among the students. As a result, we learn to transmit our imaginings to others using artistic imagery. Thus, students begin to delve into primordial images. They learn to work creatively with the images of this "film," derived from the material of a multi-faceted reality; their imaginations become more flexible and ready for the second stage of its adaptation: the performance of a specific scene or a part of a play or creating an étude.

However, before all this happens, the students should be provided with specific examples of the power of imagination in life, such as the famous Renaissance mas- ters Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Another example are the stories told by ordinary Lithuanians who were banished to Siberia and survived under the most difficult circumstances by recalling in their imagination their homeland, people close to them, and happy moments from the past. Students need to develop the habit of devoting several minutes every day to practicing the exercises on imagination on their own. No special time need be designated to work on this personal "film" of imagery. It can be practiced as one is doing normal household chores – cleaning the apartment, doing the laundry,

waiting in line, or traveling by public transportation.

Another very important exercise must be done before falling asleep and also needs to become a daily habit: visualizing the day's events like a film being run on rewind. Students must grasp the importance of the imagination in the creative process and in honing their own skills, creating and recording images thanks to their systematic practice sessions. Now they are ready to move to the second stage of using imagination in the creative process – creating a role. In the Chekhov method the primary duty of the actors and directors in creating a character is to imagine an entirely realistic person living out his or her life in some sort of real environment, regardless of stage conventions. First, students are urged to imagine an intimate person they have known. Where is this person? What is this person wearing? What is this person doing? What surrounds the person? Who are the people surrounding this person? Usually this is an easy assignment. When a smile crosses the face of a student, it means the student has imagined a congenial link with this close acquaintance.

The same technique is used to penetrate, step by step, into the life of the character and to observe his or her behavior. To start, one must try to imagine the character in his or her daily surroundings, then later envisage the character in more complicated circumstances, closer to those in the play. It is very important for students to develop their ability to observe the images in detail as well as the surrounding atmosphere. Once the observation of a character's exterior life has become second nature, the character can be asked questions. These questions are not couched in verbal form. Rather, the student wishes to see some action by the character and realize its reasons and consequences. In other words, by beginning from the observation of a character's external world, we can keep on penetrating his or her internal world more deeply and understand the processes occurring there, so that we can eventually make them our own. Of course, the success of such an association with an imaginary character depends not only on a student's open-mindedness, concentration, or level of training of the imagination but also on the conviction that the occurring imaginary processes are true and meaningful. Only when the imaginary character has become as familiar "as the back of one's hand" can the process of embodiment begin. This will be equally distinctive and involving, but this is a different matter.

The possibility of using the imagination to recognize and realize one's own creative individuality is most intriguing. It is instructive to watch, in one's imagination, some excerpt from a performance or an étude in which the observer is actually acting. Afterwards the same piece can be replayed in the imagination: this time, with some close colleague acting. Then famous masters of the stage can be imagined acting the same piece, one after another. These imaginary performances do not have to be compared, nor does any of them need to be awarded first prize. The objective is simply to feel the uniqueness of one's own performance, even if it is less sophisticated. Such are the basics of artistic individuality. They need to be recognized, critically judged, and further fostered.

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Chekhov considered work with imagination the primary means of rehearsal and believed it decisive in the creative process. Artists without imagination construct their work using only logical analysis so that their artistry usually becomes dry, mechanical, and speculative. Artistry that is tortured by rationality is akin to synthetic food: on the surface, it looks appetizing and appealing; however, it is essentially tasteless, odorless, and lacking excitement. Arts that engage the imagination penetrate to the most profound archetypes in human culture; they may be compared to organic foods, which are of unquestionable importance to human health. It is to be hoped that young artists who have realized the significance of imagery and learned to apply it will reveal and more fully develop their creative powers, thereby transfusing the theatrical process with fresh blood.

Notes

1 Since 1991 the school has changed its name to the Russian University of Theatre Arts (GITIS): www.gitis.net/index.shtml.

2 See Knebel's preface in Chekhov 1995: 2.6.

GYTIS PADEGIMAS

- 3 The Republic of Lithuania came into existence in 1918 – the same year Chekhov began his work as a teacher. Already on 31 July 1929, while he was in Berlin, Chekhov had discussed in a letter to Andrius Oleka-Žilinskas the reforms required in the State Theatre of Kaunas. He believed it was now or never for Lithuania to put its young creators to the test (Chekhov 1995: 1.362). Žilinskas (in Russian Zhilinsky) (1893–48), a former member of the MAT 2, left Soviet Russia in 1929.

- 4 Before Chekhov's arrival, productions had been directed essentially by Oleka-Žilinskas' former colleagues Kastantas Glinskis and Borisas Dauguvietis, who knew each other from their time at Suvorin's Maly Theatre in St Petersburg. These two directors drew their theatrical skills from Russian schools that predated Stanislavsky. In St Petersburg Che- khov had studied with Glinskis, and several times acted with Dauguvietis: in the 1910 production of The Cherry Orchard Chekhov interpreted Epikhodov, while Dauguvietis took the role of Trofimov. Dauguvietis also conducted several rehearsals of Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich in which Chekhov played the title role.

- 5 In a letter to Georgette Boner, Chekhov wrote: "I am working a lot; if the actors were better, I would have finished much earlier" (qtd in Byckling 2000: 162).

- 6 Algirdas Jakševic˘ius attended Oleka-Žilinskas' lectures in New York and underwent prac- tical training in Paris and New York; he subsequently directed one of the most poetic productions of pre-war Kaunas, Eugene O'Neill's Marco Millions.

- 7 For more details concerning Chekhov's stay in Kaunas, see my article (1995).

- 8 "He prefers the Lithuanian C˘iurlionis," wrote Xenia Chekhova to Georgette Boner (qtd in Byckling 2000: 261).

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