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My Experience

The old proverb says that “Near is my shirt but nearer is my skin”. So, using my personal experience I will try to show how Chekhov’s teaching (which in Soviet times was forbidden and tried to be eliminated from theatrical field) has found its way to my heart and mind as well as determined my personal and professional way.

In 1970 at the age of 18, I entered the faculty of stage directing in Theatre Art Institute at Moscow (GITIS). Contrast between calm life in small country Lithuania where you still could feel close connection with nature and tense rhythm of life in megalopolis, where you could experience very strong pressure of ideology, put me off emotional stride. I was dogmatized by Stanislavsky system which (according Mejerchold),, was ready to occupy even central post office of Moscow”, and my studies were also confusing and constraining my creative powers. It seemed to me that theatre studies I had dreamed from childhood are just not for me. And here by surprise the copy of Chekhov book “On the Technique of acting” got into my hands. It was shabby, used for many times and sometimes hardly readable typewritten copy of book edited in USA and copied by SAMIZDAT which was so popular among students and intellectuals of that time. I’ve got it for one night and was shocked. Much to my great surprise I realized that social realism which was thrust so hardly and could reflect the grey reality just in the same boring grey way wasn’t essential and the only manner of creation! It happened that imagination (I was always accused for using it too much) is one of the most important elements in creative activity. I began to make an abstract of the main statements of the book and to write down the exercises. That tempting and secret teaching returned my self-confidence and became the guiding light for future studies and professional improvement. And what was the most important that teaching showed that inner life and spiritual reality is as much real as material and tangible reality. It also became motivation for deeper research of entity secrets and as the opposition to ruling

doctrine of communistic materialism. The imperative of Chekhov free and creative spiritual life made me actively to participate in “singing revolution” which set Lithuania free from totalitarianism; and nowadays living in consumer society this imperative makes us (according to the poet) “not to pray to the concreteness of commonness”. I try to convey these basic attitudes not only to my students, but reading lectures and offering workshops on this subject I also try to give such kind of the message to the various members of society.

Professional Improvement

When it got clear that some of my mates from studies were also interested in method of Chekhov, we started to use it in everyday’s work, directing and acting some fragments or sketches of performances. The venturesome rehearsal under demanding circumstances often not having elementary understanding or making a lot of mistakes “inventing bike” gave the results: we tried many elements of method by ourselves, making plenty of mistakes, but in spite of that those elements became our most valuable aesthetic and methodological peculiarity in all periods of creative research.

On my way back to Lithuania to spend my vacation much to my great surprise I found out the fact that Chekhov had worked in Lithuania for several years. I had some meetings with his student Kazimiera Kymantaite (he called her by nickname Kymochka) and wrote down the facts about his lessons, rehearsals and life in Kaunas. One of the most memorable facts could be named the words told by teacher to his student about his odyssey in many countries; he thought that “he had to transmit the key of acting secrets to actors from different countries”. In the funds of the Lithuanian Theatre and Music Museum in Vilnius I found materials of Chekhov’s lessons, those were the notes of 16 listeners of State Theatre school which I decoded and compared.

When I started my professional career in theatres of Lithuania, in the process of rehearsals I began to use the elements of Chekhov method step by step. I also encouraged both my students and actors to get deeper knowledge of this method for stimulating their

creativity. Insensibly I started to share my small experience in practical lessons and after the fall of Berlin wall when Lithuania again became an independent country the heady possibility to meet the students of Chekhov Mala Powers, Hurd Hutfield, Joan Merlin and others and get information from primary source appeared to me. I began to participate at the international conferences and laboratories devoted to the method as a student and later as a teacher. Currently I give lectures and offer workshops based on this method in three languages in Lithuania, Russia and Western Europe countries.

Premises of teaching

Before to start teaching I always remember the teacher's precept about this method; there are not pure physical, technical exercises, every of it has to be based at least on a small philosophical providence. That's why I try exercises which introduce method's elements consolidating their practical use. I also try to rotate them with little "Academies of Plato" i.e. provocative and sometimes not very fluent and deep, but passionate speeches of participants. These speeches are based on participants' senses, contemplation about what's going on "here and now". I appreciate "poetics of pedagogy" a lot and I try to make every lesson like jazz improvisation; I know what elements we are going to work with, but I don't know what exercises we are going to make at that moment. They emerge spontaneously and even without any fixation they disappear. Some of them can't be found in the canonical books of Chekhov, but I have no doubt that they keep his spirit. In the beginning of work I try to create the atmosphere of contingency, novelty and elation no matter what country or what age group students participate. I try to unsettle participants from daily balance state. Encouraged by Chekhov, I propose to accept teacher not as a real person, but as a certain image which participates in this situation for transmission of unexpected news. I ask everyone to believe that maybe a small self opening and change is possible in creative life because of the collective work at this workshop. Teacher's opened not familiar but creative attitude towards group and

every member, involvement of a delicate sense of humor (especially toward himself) from the beginning are the essential conditions to reach above mentioned self opening. Mutual opening and powerful field of creation could be reached easily in unexpected places, for example, the places outdoors when the elements of nature such as trees, flowers, birds, clouds, etc. are incorporated in the exercises. An organic energy of participants is stimulated this way. This particular energy is the main „fuel” of creation. Working inside I use a lot of various music, which is arranged for creation of one more active participant who makes desirable spiritual structure, but is not used as usual daily background. There are no possibilities to write down everything about my using this method even studying it element by element, but I will try to name several aspects which are connected with one of the most important element- imagination.

Significance of Imagination Teaching Nowadays

In the different periods of human evolution imagination was always one of the main instruments of innovation. An ability of single individual or their groups “to make invisible visible” is fundamental engine in various fields of human activity. Human imagination apparently gets weaker in our society which existence is based on the use of inorganic energy, in society which is in a permanent informational noise. Both West and East theatrical schools teachers have named the lack of imagination and its leveling among theatre youth as one of the biggest problem in teaching process. This lack doesn’t allow to the future creators of stage to open their creative nature widely using their own authentic experience. The method of Chekhov which is based on the imagination arousal, its purposeful development and ultimate adjustment in creative process becomes priceless solving this sort problem of theatrical pedagogy. This is the reason why this method becomes more and more popular in all over the world. It could be used not only for specific theatrical purposes, but also could be successfully integrated to various creativity encouragement programs and teachings even in spheres distant from theatre.

Teaching this method I pay a lot of attention and time to the development of imagination using complexes of exercises, conversations and improvisations created for this purpose.

Training of Imagination

The practice of imagination in process of students and actors education using Chekhov's method consists of two parts. At first starting the process of teaching and shaping the skills of organic existence on stage, exercises of imagination related to the childhood images and experience are invoked. Childhood of every person is a time of immediate world cognition and unrestrained fantasy. The retention of real childish naivety, impressions, evaluation primordiality and competence to use them in creative process is really big and encouraging value in our pragmatic world. Attention exercises represent direct entrance to the world of imagination. It's really hard to make yourself or other person to concentrate by order. This mistake often happens to teachers and they can't reach desirable result. According to the method of Chekhov, attention is an easy controlled psychophysical process which always gives desirable result if the process goes the right way. This process consists of four facts: 1. Chosen real object is observed and examined. 2. In imagination it approaches to the person who makes exercise. 3. The person also approaches to this object. 4. Finally person sort of enters the object and they merge together. When students become skilful in this exercise using real visible objects and accomplish it without any tension, they move to the level when they practice with the object which is left at home and later they work with non-existent things e.g. some toy from childhood for instance. Later it is possible to work with persons both existing in reality and those existing only in memory, e.g. classmate from the first grade. So, the object concentrating attention becomes more and more complex, evoking more associations and at the same time arousing emotional memory. When students fully masters this process then the complex exercise of imagination development, which is backed-up on the subject of childhood home, is proposed. Student has imagine he stands

in front of his childhood door and examines it paying attention what material they are made of, to texture, colour or special signs. Then the offer of holding the door by handle follows. Observer has to feel the material and size of a handle, afterwards he has to open the door, knowing exactly which side it opens to. Then he has to enter the hallway space, to scent its smell and to see the light. At the next stage it is proposed to remember the scents of favourite meals from the kitchen of childhood house, as well the voices of mother or grandmother. This voice urges to wash hands and sit at dinner table, because dishes are getting cool. Participants are offered to imagine the table in the dining-room or kitchen, table setting, dishes and, of course, childish diner table games like building tower of mashed potatoes in bowl of soup, etc. This way an approach to central image presented by mother's or grandmother's kitchen scent and cosiness of touch happens. It is also offered to imagine this closest person of the childhood dressed in festive clothes, later imagine walk with her arm in arm or having a first time walk to kindergarten or school. Incorporating exercises of change and transformation are also advisable, they contribute to so essential understanding and perception of the process skills for students. Mother or grandmother is imagined in different periods of their lives reaching childhood or even babyhood. The sequence of "childhood home" images varies and its suggestibility depends on the person who leads practice, on his personal ability to create, observe and transmit these images. The next step – student's personal space in childhood home, e.g. the image of a little streak of light under the door, time when you suppose to sleep, but there behind the door so tempting and interesting world of adults exists. It is also your room in the middle of the night when strange shadows play on the walls and ceiling. The images of yearly and family holidays at childhood home are also very interesting and valuable for this kind of training. The chain of images of childhood courtyard is also very useful: starting from the first practice from real existing season and climate and go through all four seasons with different conditions and incorporating games and game friends to all context games and come to the point where it was started. When the imagination practice is based on real experienced images and become common, then combinations of fantasy are possible. The exercise which is always very attractive, holds

the offer to imagine the house of childhood in different places, e.g. in Trafalgar square, in the dunes by sea, in jungles, on the drift-ice, in Elysian Fields, Paris etc. It's proposed to imagine this house at present and if it doesn't exist anymore then –to imagine its decline or demolishing. The exercise from childhood home cycle, when all participants sit in the circle and all try to remember images and then to convey them to others, is also significant. It's important to remember Stanislavsky's offer "to speak not to ear, but to eye", this way the parameters needed for stage speech training appear. When group had shared images the offer comes for every single student. They have to name the most impressive image and prolong it. So, by this exercise the ensemble has been formed and the base of collective theatrical creation has been set. Reaction to the exercises of childhood house especially with the closest people from childhood is always very lively; these exercises refresh emotional memory and evoke very personal feelings which are going to be transferred to others using artistic images. So, students experiencing with the images from childhood, drown themselves in primordial images. They acquire the skills of creating "film" of imagination and how to make it out of the material of heterogeneous reality, at the same time they make their imagination flexible and ready for the second stage of adaptation creating particular sketch or part of performance. But before all this students have to get specific examples about power of imagination in creation and live. There are noteworthy the creations inspired by imagination of famous artists of the Renaissance such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michaelangelo, Rafael. Stories of ordinary Lithuanian people banished to Siberia telling about survival under so complicated circumstances when images of homeland, close people, happy moments from past literally helped to save lives are also very useful in this practice. Students have to get into a habit to make the exercises by themselves of imagination training every day and to spend for them about half an hour. This personal "film" could be created not dedicating for this a special time, it is possible to create it doing any work at home e.g. cleaning your apartment, washing or waiting in line or traveling by public transportation. The exercise which is very important and it has to become daily is the one which is done before sleeping when the day events are observed in imagination like playback film. When

student understands the importance of imagination in the process of creation and upbringing skills, when he by practice masters the technique of image creation and fixation, then he is able to make another step of the use of imagination in process creation of role. According to the method of Chekhov, characters live their personal lives, and the most important purpose of director and actors to see the characters in imagination like real persons in their real environment, throwing away stage conventions. At first student is offered to imagine close person from his life here and now: where he is, what he is wearing on, what he is doing and what people surround him etc. Usually this task is an easy one, smile appears on the face of student, so the sympathetic connection with that person is affiliated. Step by step it is getting close to the observation of the play's character life and actions using the same technique. In the beginning the try to imagine character in his daily surrounding is used, later - in more complicated circumstances, getting closer to very specific surroundings of the play. It's very important to have developed skills of attention concentration, because it makes possible to observe arousing images as long as needed, paying attention to details and atmosphere. When the observance of character's live in imagination becomes common, the concrete questions about character's behavior and his motivations could be asked. This is not ordinary formulation of verbal questions, but strong-willed wish to see any action of character and realize both reasons causes and sequences. That's to say that beginning from the observance of character outer world we go deeper and deeper to his inner world, we realize the processes of his life for the reason later to make them our personal. Of course, success of the communication with created in imagination character belongs not only on student's receptivity, attention concentration or level of imagination development, but also on belief in the certainty and meaningfulness of processes in imagination. When the character in our imagination becomes so well known, then the process of his embodiment starts. And it is very distinctive and inviting, but this is the other subject.

The possibility to know and realize own creative individuality using imagination is very compulsive. It is offered to see any part of performance or sketch where observing person is also acts. Afterwards the same piece "is watched", but this time the close

colleague acts, and then one after another the famous masters of stage are asked to play it. All these performances of imagination have no need to be compared, giving the first place to any of them, but the purpose is to feel the peculiarity of personal and maybe even simplified performance. This above mentioned peculiarity is the principle of artistic individuality. This principle has to be acknowledged and critically evaluated, afterwards go for further nourishing.

Chekhov had named the work with imagination as the first way to rehearse and which significance is decisive. When creators don't have imagination, they construct their work exclusively on the base of logical evaluation; their creation becomes stiff, mechanical and speculative. Rationally exhausted creation could be compared to synthetic food, it looks nice, attractive, but in reality it's tasteless, scentless and not touching. Imagination causes that work which reaches the deepest archetypes of human culture may be compared to ecological food which importance to people is undoubted. It would be really nice to have a hope that young creators realizing the importance of imagination and becoming skilful in its use will be able to develop and open their creative powers to freshen up theatrical process.