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SPIRITUAL SOURCES OF MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S METHOD

To act out the cosmic mind... (Michael Chekhov)¹

It is a well accepted fact that Michael Chekhov was one of the most influential innovators of theatre in the twentieth century. However, many researchers and even Chekhov's enthusiastic followers seem to neglect the importance of Chekhov-the-individual, or rather Chekhov-the-spiritual-seeker, to the emergence of his unique theatrical method. It appears that it is time to look for the source of this original master's inspiration within his self, not within his environment, and to begin this search from the corner stone of Chekhov's theory and practice, the concept of "spirit".

Michael Chekhov had an innate sense of the whole, a sense to which he testified himself and which he briefly lost during the years of his spiritual crisis (1917-1918): "The sense and even precognition of the whole—this was exactly what I lost in the period of my spiritual crisis. Due to this sense it had never occurred to me that I might fail at a role, or a story, or a simple imitation of somebody. In this respect I knew no doubt. Whenever I had to play some part or, as it often happened in childhood, come up with a more or less effective prank, a sense of the impending whole would forcefully overwhelm me, and trusting it completely, without any hesitation I would start performing that which at the moment occupied my attention. Details emerged from the whole by themselves and objectively appeared to me. I never thought up any details and was always a mere spectator to that which spontaneously unfolded from the sense of the whole. This pending whole from which all the particulars and details would be born was never depleted, never ran out regardless of how long the process of unfolding could take. I can not compare it with anything but a grain of a plant, a grain which miraculously contains in itself the whole future plant."²

Michael Chekhov's spiritual crisis was triggered by the Bolshevik revolution and the loss of many people who were dear to him. It became the peak of the destructive aspect in the young actor's inner life marked by the sign of inevitable chance: "Chance haunted me everywhere like an oppressive nightmare. <.....> In my mind, the wisdom of the universal order clashed with the senselessness of chance. And the more I became entrenched in my materialist views, the more vividly and painfully gaped before me the abyss wherein chance reigned."³

The prolonged crisis drained the actor's creative powers and became a threat to his very survival. However, Chekhov took a step toward overcoming it when he began his work with his first students at an acting studio he had

established in early 1918: “From the very start, my teaching activity was set in the right direction. I was overwhelmed by that wondrous premonition of the whole which I had all but lost lately. <....> I never had to prepare myself for the lessons: each time I arrived at the school I was newly overcome by the idea of the whole and could instantly read in that whole what particular things had to be unfolded on that day. I shall never allow myself to state that I was teaching the Stanislavski system. Such a statement would be far too brave. I taught that which I had personally experienced in the course of my communication with Stanislavski, that which was handed down to me by Sulerzhitsky and Vakhtangov. <....> It was all refracted in my individual perception and was all tinted by my personal attitude to the perceived.”⁴

Michael Chekhov became interested in the system which at the time was being created by Stanislavski and started practicing it as early as 1912, shortly after joining MAT (Moscow Art Theatre). It is well known that Stanislavski's associates neither understood nor supported his search for the universal laws governing actor's existence on stage, the quest which, in its initial phase, was largely inspired by his fascination with yoga.⁵ In 1912, K. Stanislavski founded a studio at the theatre attempting to continue his research and to inspire interest in it within young actors. By the way, on the first of September he personally brought Michael Chekhov⁶ to the opening lesson. In winter of 1913, Stanislavski, while describing his first lesson at the studio, among other things made the following remark: “We discussed hatha yoga.”⁷ Fifteen years later, a thirty-six-year-old M. Chekhov would write his “memoir” (quoted above) which actually was a passionate spiritual confession entitled “The Actor's Path”. There he would answer his own question as to wherein lies the unfading power of the Stanislavski system: “It gives a young actor hope that he can master the essential forces of his creative soul.”⁸ And although it was the student, not the teacher, who first published two articles about this system in 1919, even at this early stage a fundamental difference of views was quite evident. While Stanislavski limited the goals of his system to the criteria of everyday truth and the actor's professional needs, Michael Chekhov, at first unconsciously and later with full awareness and dedication, aspired “to view the art (of theatre) exclusively as meditation in all its details.”⁹

Maria Knebel, a student at the first Michael Chekhov's studio, testified to the fact that the youthful teacher had a total disregard for creating a finished product on stage: “I can't recall any more or less exciting work on an episode or a play—such work was not within the scope of Chekhov's interests. The issues of attention, imagination, improvisation, “the grain”, the atmosphere and so on interested him mainly in the aspect which Stanislavski had named “the actor's work on himself”. He was fascinated by the development of actor's mental techniques in preparation for roles. He

understood that this was exactly the realm within which we could become for him his little creative laboratory.”¹⁰

At the same time, the young teacher became well-versed in the popular literature on yoga and this changed the way he viewed creativity on the whole: “I have reached the understanding that the main point of yogism is the creativity of life. <....> Why did I until now consider as creation only that which took place on stage? <....> Eventually, one more thought, one more sensation started taking hold of me. It was the sensation of the possibility to create within oneself. Creation within the bounds of one’s own personality. I could only vaguely discern the distinction between the one who creates outside of oneself and the one who creates within. <....> An impulse of will naturally arose in me together with the thought of self-creation-- like some aspiration of will for mastering the creative energy so as to transfer it within, upon myself.”¹¹ According to Chekhov’s own testimony in his book “Life and Encounters” his first acquaintance with anthroposophy occurred when he read Rudolf Steiner’s “How Can One Attain Knowledge of Higher Worlds?” which did not make much of an impression.¹² Chekhov’s contacts with contemporary Russian anthroposophers, especially ladies, and representatives of different mystical creeds merely aroused his somewhat ironic interest; he felt like he was watching a gallery of motley characters passing by.

Chekhov’s spiritual development was considerably fostered by his contact with Russian Orthodox priests Aleksey and Sergey. However, the source of greatest inspiration for Chekhov was his long-term association with the last truly great Russian Orthodox hermit Father Nektariy who had originated from Optima Poustyn, a monastery central to the whole spiritual tradition of Greek Orthodoxy. A brief description of Father Nektariy can be found in Michael Chekhov’s memoirs¹³ and he is also mentioned in Chekhov’s main theoretical work: “A hermit was living his last days. He was the last of the true religious mystics. He had spent forty years in religious exercises and had attained great spiritual heights. <....> Never have I met even in ordinary social life a gayer person or one who was able to laugh so heartily, easily and fully! His small, bent figure, his old blue eyes, radiated contagious humor, which arose purely from his Higher Ego.”¹⁴ There is no doubt that Father Nektariy, who, by the way, is associated with Father Zosima in Dostoyevsky’s “Brothers Karamazov”, was one of Chekhov’s spiritual guides. But more importantly, it was Nektariy who influenced his young follower to choose the light aspect in his spiritual quest, the aspect devoid of torment and personal suffering.

Michael Chekhov, having passed through a semblance of an “initiation” by the Russian Orthodox priests, devoted himself to studies of anthroposophy. “I read quite a few of Steiner’s books and this attentive reading gave me answers to the questions that preoccupied me at the time. For instance, I found out that the spiritual world with its beings was subject to

development and change in the same way like the physical world with its beings.”¹⁵ Chekhov would write this looking back over the distance of time from the serene heights of his experience. However, at that particular period he was passionately searching for spiritual guidance and even met with the Doctor himself in 1922.¹⁶ He also associated and artistically cooperated with the original Russian poet and thinker Andrey Bely¹⁷ and came in contact with Steiner’s initial followers Michael Bauer and Margaret Morgenstern.¹⁸

Back in his childhood Michael Chekhov would sit quietly, day in and day out, in his writer uncle’s study like an exact embodiment of the characteristics of a future adept, as described by Rudolf Steiner: “There are children who regard certain eminent individuals with holy reverence. They experience awe in their presence which eliminates the very thought of criticism or objection. Such children grow up as youths and girls capable of experiencing joy just by looking up to something worthy of their worship. Many such children later become adepts of the secret lore.”¹⁹

Chekhov’s intense spiritual life and his quick progress made him search for wider possibilities of expression and to assume more responsibility by sharing his discoveries with his artist friends. In 1922 he took the lead of the first MAT studio²⁰ even though he was neither a good administrator nor a director. Chekhov was motivated by his desire to search for deeper meaning of acting: “There are issues that preoccupy, torment me. It seems to me that these issues are important for theatre. If you wish, we shall search together, we shall try, we shall think. The goal of our work is to develop in ourselves a more attentive view of the actor’s creative process. Our path—patient search. We shall solve various problems of the stage. There is never time left for this in the turmoil of theatric life.”²¹ The six-year period of leading the studio was marked not only by Chekhov’s and the whole theatre’s significant artistic achievements that made history of the Russian theatre but also by the widening rift between the young leader possessed by his desire for knowledge and the actors wishing to fit in nicely into the ever shallower framework of the realistic Soviet theatre. In the environment of hardening totalitarianism Chekhov soon became a stranger among his own folk and was accused of being a “mystic”. In 1928 he wrote to the group of the MAT II from Berlin: “The last years of our cooperation have been filled with complex and difficult experiences. <....> Lately the will of the MAT II group at last found its concrete shape, and I saw that this will did not correspond with my ideal and those artistic goals of the theatre which I as a leader had in mind. <....> Only by the idea of a new theatre, the idea of a new art of theatre can fascinate me and motivate me to create.”²²

Thus began Chekhov’s great odyssey as he attempted to forge the theatre of the future in Germany, France, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, England and, eventually, in the United States. However, for a number of subjective and objective reasons Chekhov was not able to realize his dream in

any of these particular locations, regardless of his colossal efforts. In various theatres of widely divergent caliber and artistic capabilities he was merely a guest performer, always playing the same few parts or directing, with rare exceptions, the same few plays. These facts gave Soviet theatre critics ample material for writing tomes about “the tragedy of the genius” and his creative failure after tearing himself away from his native soil.

It seems, however, that Chekhov’s conscious preference of the global spiritual context to the soullessness of the Soviet Russia not only formed the basis for his further observations and teaching experiments in different countries but also fostered his spiritual growth and even saved his life. Furthermore, Chekhov himself wrote at the very end of his years in his introduction to Yuri Elagin’s book “The Dark Genius”: “In the summer of 1930, in Berlin I had a conversation with Meyerhold. I did my best to convey to him my feelings or, should I say premonition, of his terrible end if he went back to the Soviet Union.”²³ As it turned out, Chekhov was right.

Anyway, Chekhov seems to have assumed the role of Agaspher which he feared he might never get to play: “Every soul needs the character of Wanderer, Agaspher the man: you, me, him, all of us...”²⁴ And he lived out the destiny of this perennial wanderer. Kazimiera Kymantaite, Chekhov’s last student from his Lithuanian period of 1932 to 1933, told the author of these lines that her mentor had once exclaimed: “Why am I dashing up and down Europe like this? I want to hand over the key to the miracle of theatre”. So perhaps these wanderings were not so random at all, and maybe their necessity was dictated not merely by the ban on free expression on the Russian stage?

In 1932, in the course of his first discussion with his new students in Kaunas, Lithuania, Michael Chekhov posed an important question: “Every time I have to teach the subject of theatre or have to talk to my fellow actors, I always ask myself: what is it? Will it happen? Will anything take place within these walls? Will it be this “something” which I have always expected looking at a multitude of my colleagues and some real masters as they performed, and this “something” never happened? Will this mysterious “something” be found here today? Will these hidden actors’ merits be uncovered here? Will a new theatre be opened in here? And a new theatre is dictated to us by history, by time...”²⁵

Later, in 1941, in New York, Chekhov would firmly assert to his students: “The actor in the future must not only find another attitude towards his physical body and voice, but to his whole existence on the stage in the sense that the actor, as an artist, must more than anyone else, enlarge his own being by the means of his profession. I mean the actor must enlarge himself in a very concrete way, even to having quite a different feeling in space. His kind of thinking must be different, his feelings must be of a different kind, his feeling of his body and voice, his attitude to the settings—all must be

enlarged. The air around the theatre must be air. <....> When I try to imagine what the theatre can be and will be in the future (I speak neither in the mystical or religious sense at the moment), it will be a spiritual business in which the spirit of the human being will be rediscovered by artists. <....> The spirit will be concretely studied. It will not be a spirit “in general”, but it will be a concrete tool, or means, which we will have to manage just as easily as any other means. The actor must know what it is, and how to take it and use it. <....> I believe in the spiritual theatre, in the sense of investigation of the spirit of the human being, but the investigation must be done by artists and actors, but not by scientists.”²⁶

In the course of the nine years separating the questions from the ever clearer answers the totality of which will be blended by the forty-year-old Chekhov into a complete method, the master’s fortune would offer him lessening opportunities for “creation on the stage” and steadily growing possibilities for “creation within himself”. “I read a lot, I studied whole courses of lectures and continued jotting down my thoughts about acting techniques. But then little by little my attention was attracted by the phenomena in which a rhythm could be observed. On clear summer days, lying down in the garden, I contemplated the harmonious shapes of plants, mentally followed the process of the rotation of the earth and the planets, searched for harmonious compositions in space and gradually came to experience the outwardly invisible movement that went on in all phenomena of the world. Even within rigid, fixed forms I seemed to detect such a movement. It was that which created and sustained every form. It was as if my observation of this movement allowed me to be present at the process of creation: anything I would glance at would be created right there before my very eyes. This invisible movement, this play of forces I named for myself “the gesture”. Eventually I began to notice that these were not mere movements, that they were not devoid of content: in them were will and feelings—diverse, profound, fascinating. Through them I appeared to penetrate the very essence of phenomena. <....> Shakespeare the Divine became to me the school wherein I could study grand, diverse “gestures” fraught with beauty and power. <....> I owe especially much to the theological works inspired by the spiritual-scientific research of Rudolf Steiner. Some theologians, while studying patterns of rhythm and composition contained in the Bible, had managed to discover new meanings encoded in those patterns. (Soon I was engrossed in these amazing works and forgot all about my initial purpose.) Now my “gestures” and their compositions were based on the firm foundation of regularity.”²⁷

One of the main elements of Chekhov’s method was the “psychological gesture” seen in nature, in works of art, even in the Bible. And when Chekhov wrote about this element he rather seemed to refer to the level of his own spiritual evolution in its transition from enlightenment to

sanctification. In the chapter devoted to the issues of concentration and imagination, Chekhov presented transformational exercises from the primer of spiritual knowledge; he had come across these exercises in Steiner's book "How Can One Attain the Knowledge of the Higher Worlds?". Also, Chekhov modified the stages of the adept's initiation turning them into phases of the actor's creative process²⁹—the issue which, alas, has never been mentioned in any Russian publication and remains virtually unknown to actors in Russia. Michael Chekhov based his method on the sense of the whole in such a way that by working on one element all other elements would become spontaneously involved. Needless to say, it helped him to accumulate the tremendous spiritual force for maintaining harmony within himself and in his immediate environment while facing the great calamities of the twentieth century.

Chekhov attempted to discover the spiritual code of creation and to master its secret workings by tapping into the universal source-field of the whole. There he hoped to find the underlying unity which would enable him to conjure up spontaneously or at will any combination of elements wherein harmonious coexistence all the elements would simultaneously take place.

Throughout the years Chekhov sustained the focus of spiritual concentration and the ability to see and describe archetypal images of the spiritual realm. Thus he was able to embrace within his method certain elements from acting traditions of non-European origin, even though he never studied those particular cultures. Eugenio Barba, in his book "The Paper Canoe" also points out these facts in the section entitled "The Return Home". Among other things the author writes: "The way in which Michael Chekhov insists on the "punctuation", on how to "pause from time to time", how to "think of the beginning and the end of each movement", how "to change tempos", stressing that "your movements must merge into each other without becoming shapeless", reveals the desire to safeguard the secret pulsation of scenic life, the impulses and counter impulses, the sats." ²⁹

American researchers of theatre mostly adhere to the tradition established by their fellow theatre critics and theatre practitioners coeval with Michael Chekhov and thus often depict his method as a product of the marriage between the Stanislavski system and Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. ³⁰ On the other hand, in the common interpretation by the Russian theatre experts, Michael Chekhov is at best only Stanislavski's genius "prodigal son". However, it appears that in actuality Chekhov's creative method is just as far removed from the first creative impulses which young Misha Chekhov had received from his great mentor as it is distant from Rudolf Steiner's theatre practice, or rather its certain traditions cultivated to this day by the adepts of anthroposophy in Dornach. Stanislavski's lessons, just like anthroposophy, were to Chekhov only points of departure, regardless of their crucial significance, and it was he alone who embarked on the independent spiritual

journey. Whether we like it or not, but Chekhov's method has denied Stanislavski's system in many of its essential aspects.

Even though it is true that anthroposophy remained a central spiritual teaching for Chekhov throughout his life, but his own innovations by far outgrew Rudolf Steiner's and his followers' views on theatre or, to be more exact, their practical results. "But the main and the most decisive discovery for me was that Christ stood at the core of everything that Rudolf Steiner said. Anthroposophy opened up to me as a contemporary form of Christianity." ³¹ Chekhov's letters written during the last two years of his life to a former actor of his Paris theatre Alfred Bergstrom exemplify the true originality of Chekhov's religious thinking worthy of serious consideration by modern theologians.

As we stand on the threshold of a new millennium it seems more than appropriate to note how poignant and significant was Chekhov's thought that "Christianity faces a long long development. Right now it is only a fetus, so to speak. Two thousand years went by and only now the humanity can begin (if it so desires) to assimilate the laws of reincarnation and karma in their Christian refraction!" In these letters Chekhov also presents a direct key to the understanding of the "Higher Ego", the term pivotal for his method: "The first gift (of Christ) can be defined (alas, by means of a rather overused concept) as the highest "I" within a human being. Let us say right away that this "I" is Christ in man. "Not I but Christ in me" (Apostle Paul). And it has to be understood literally." ³²

Chekhov's thinking was characterized by powerful imagery, religious content and unique sense of humour. A remarkable blend of these aspects has found its expression in Chekhov's delightful fable which especially comes to mind in the native country of William Shakespeare: "What would happen if Shakespeare had a wish and was granted the possibility to be reincarnated as an ant? Two things would occur: the ant, along with the whole realm of ants, would be "alchemically" transformed by taking in Shakespeare. Why? Because now Shakespeare is inside an ant; he no longer observes the anthill from outside, he acts within it. That's on the one hand. On the other—Shakespeare himself would get a chance to transfer to the ant at least a speck of his genius, at least in some miniscule way make the ant similar to himself. I admit, the allegory is not only fanciful but perhaps also silly, however what can be done now? And here is another allegory, a better one: Michelangelo sculpted a statue from marble and later entered it himself, became reincarnated in his own creation. And now let us try to imagine how much greater is the distance between God, the creator of man and the whole world, than is the distance between Shakespeare and an ant or Michelangelo and his statue!" ³³ Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci were Chekhov's constant companions on his spiritual quest, by the way, just like his contemporary, the famous Russian opera singer Fyodor Shalyapin. It is evident that Chekhov

“saw” them many times in the course of his creative process as he tried to attain “the experience of the immeasurable height and power <....> which the modern man needs so much as he strives for spiritual knowledge, for spiritual life.”³⁴

One phrase can be found in the referenced letters, repeated several times: “now the theatre does not interest me at all”. This only goes to show that Chekhov was neither the first nor the last creator of the theatre in the twentieth century whose spiritual search outgrew the theatre itself. (In this respect, we may recall such names as Jacques Copeau or Jerzy Grotowsky.) Only Michael Chekhov managed to transform his creative activity into a constant spiritual practice, as he expanded the actor’s artistic possibilities and proved that the actor could reach the top of his potential not just because he had a soul but rather because he relied on his spirit. He also managed to share this spiritual experience with a large number of students ranging from the members of his first studio in the hungry Russia of 1918 to Hollywood celebrities in the affluent America of the fifties.

To the twentieth-century actor/individual, torn apart by inner and outer contradictions, Chekhov offered the possibility of harmonious scenic existence—even more than that, he also fulfilled this promise and opened for him the doors into the world of endless images and showed him the effective means for embodying these images in artistic actualization. Though Chekhov himself had lost access to the stage in his native Russia while he was still at the peak of his creative powers, he, most likely, found new meaning and fulfillment in his ability to instill the longing for the theatre of the future in the hearts of many young people all over the world. And last but not least, he also managed to impel this young generation of theatre professionals to “create inside themselves”.

Michael Chekhov’s hypothetical theatre of the future resembles Thornton Wilder’s “celestial theatre”³⁵ both in its imperative demand for perfection and the practical impossibility of its attainment. The more so that Chekhov himself underscores this fact by concluding the Russian version of the book on his method by the following words of Leonardo da Vinci: “A thing should be loved for itself, not for anything else”. And these words, more than any other statement, seem to leave Chekhov’s method open to the never-ending search.

Back in 1932, in the course of his work at the studio which he had established in Kaunas State Theatre in Lithuania, Chekhov gave an exact diagnosis for the artist of our century: “Every one of us, as an artist, has a Golgotha in his head. Every one of us seems to torment himself with his own thoughts while his heart is dampened by his keen intelligence. Life forces us to think sharply, quickly, categorically, it forces us to jump over various events, to pass them by or, in any case, not to dwell on them for too long because of the lack of time. This lack of time is our affliction. When

mankind is struggling for its survival, when here and there war cries can be heard, when newspaper columns are filled with extra sensational announcements, with information about horrendous murders, earthquakes, etc., our thought can not stand still. Our heads are pierced by thousands of issues forcing us into hysterical thinking. <....> People of different professions raise the question of homeland and solve it to the best of their understanding. Newspapers confirm that people think about their homeland in a chaotic way. If they thought about it otherwise, there would be no need to raise such an issue. That which in life is called chaos, disharmony, ugliness, when we think about it, we may define as arrhythmic phenomena. Every work of art, just like an object of nature, has to be permeated by rhythm. Anything that loses rhythm is disease.”³⁶ However, Chekhov would not be a spiritual leader if he did not come up with an immediate prescription: “Doesn’t heaven possess a colossal rhythm? Can’t we call a miracle the path of the seven planets as they revolve in such an amazing way and interact over distance? And what about the path of the moon, or that of the sun as it passes through the signs of the zodiac?”³⁷

Chekhov gave his last cycle of lectures to Hollywood actors shortly before he expired, and it was recorded on tape. In this recording, Chekhov seems to announce his spiritual testament speaking about the same issues that have always interested him. It appears as though he is addressing us too: “We often speak about the sense of the whole—in reference to a certain role or a complete play. And again it must be noted that this sense of the whole emanates from nowhere else but our spirit. Not a single work of art would have appeared in our miserable world if it were not for this creative power of the spirit which unifies, remolds, brings to conclusions. Because the main principle of art is synthesis, not analysis. And the ability for synthesis is the ability of our spirit. <....> We should consider our spirit as the force which gives us the possibility to synthesize anything we wish, anything we might need as artists and actors. <....> This means that in reality our inner creative power is our spirit, not merely our soul. The creation of unity out of diversity—such is one of the most important purposes of our spirit, especially in the sphere of art and even more than that in actor’s profession.’

“There are thoughts and ideas absolutely devoid of any feelings. But the fruit of the true mind, which means truly bright ideas and thoughts, must and can be born in the depth of one’s heart. We should find within ourselves a thinking heart.”³⁸

And finally, here are some Chekhov’s words which seem to have acquired even more significance now that we have entered our third millennium: “The year was 1900. Mother woke me up in the morning and greeted me wishing “a happy new year, and a happy new century.” Her words evoked in me an incredible joy. Why I was I so happy, I did not know, but my joy was over something great, which, as it seemed, had taken place somewhere

inside me, in space, in time, in the world... And even at present I can still feel that joy but now I already know its reason. Now I know that this joy is over the creative forces in the world, over the harmony and rhythm of life, over the great truthfulness reigning in the world..."³⁹

Just like nine-year-old Misha Chekhov more than a hundred years ago, we have entered a new age and, hopefully, a new spiritual beginning. So let us try to discover that unique joy of creativity with which he greeted the dawn of the twentieth century. Michael Chekhov did not lose this joy to the end of his days, regardless of what catastrophes befell him or the whole world, and he owed this unique capacity to his thinking heart. Is it not high time for us to learn how to think with our hearts too?

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