

## Michael Chekhov: Directing an Actors' Theatre

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### A Director Displaced and Overlooked

Michael Chekhov is not usually considered to be one of the Russian theatre's great directors, and he is commonly omitted from lists that include his contemporaries Kurbas, Meyerhold, Tairov and Vakhtangov.<sup>1</sup> There are three principal reasons for this. First, Chekhov was known during his life mostly as an actor, rather than a director. Second, he left Russia in 1928 as a result of political differences with the Soviet regime, and, thereafter, almost all of his directing was conducted in a foreign language, limiting the range of plays he felt able to undertake. Third, Chekhov did not create a string of productions that transformed the understanding of theatre and its possibilities during his lifetime. Indeed, in contrast to his widely celebrated performances, much of Chekhov's work as a director did not even achieve critical acclaim.

My argument here, however, is that although these reasons not to consider Chekhov a 'great director' may seem logical and compelling, they also represent a limited and limiting conception of the practice of directing. There has been an understandable tendency in writing about directors to fetishize individual productions of which there are good historical records, and thus to depict directors as *auteur*-like creators of artistic products that are easily delineated, and easily commodified. Chekhov did create some such productions, which have already received scholarly attention, but they were not the primary focus of his directorial endeavours.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he was much more deeply engaged with the development of ensemble companies, and with the elaboration of the creative processes by which their work would be made. We are fortunate that, although there is very limited material available to Anglophone scholars about Chekhov's productions, there is a wealth of information relating to his directorial processes in the Michael Chekhov Theatre Studio Deirdre

Hurst Du Prey Archive.<sup>3</sup> This collection, which consists mainly of typed transcripts of Chekhov's classes and rehearsals, reminds us of a paradox of directing: the director's activity predates the performance texts it generates and can only be uncertainly assumed to be legible within them. By contrast, directors are usually clearly visible in rehearsal, shaping and organizing the activities by which a production is created. This is the work upon which the archival materials recorded and collected by Chekhov's assistant Deirdre Hurst du Prey primarily concentrate, and which will also be the primary focus of this essay.

### **Chekhov's Career in the Theatre**

Where Chekhov is remembered today, he is remembered principally as a theorist of actor-training, and he did indeed dedicate a great amount of his working life to the study and teaching of acting.<sup>4</sup> However, as this biographical sketch will demonstrate, Chekhov's work with actors and actors-in-training was always, until the very last period of his working life, enfolded within attempts to foster ensemble companies. Therefore, a more complete account of Chekhov's contribution to the theatre must see his work in actor training not as an end in itself, but as a means to the end of creating both companies and productions. These aims are, by definition, those of a director.

Chekhov studied acting first at the Suvorin Theatre School in St Petersburg, graduating into the Suvorin Theatre's Company. Soon afterwards, he was invited by Konstantin Stanislavsky to join the company of the Moscow Art Theatre. In 1912, he was one of the first among the company's actors to sign up for Stanislavsky's First Studio, where he began what he later called 'prying behind the curtain of the Creative Process'.<sup>5</sup> Only six years later, in 1918, Chekhov began a studio of his own in Moscow, where he taught a version of his teacher's System. By 1924, however, when Chekhov became the Director of the Second Moscow Art Theatre (as the First Studio had become), he was already developing approaches of his own: 'I was able to develop my methods of acting and

directing and formulate them into a definite technique', he wrote (note that this technique incorporated both acting and directing).<sup>6</sup> However, the ideas that formed the basis of Chekhov's technique at this time proved quickly to be unacceptable to the authorities. Whereas the Soviet government insisted upon the materialist doctrine of socialist realism, Chekhov was exploring the spiritual ideas of Rudolf Steiner and the Anthroposophists. He was therefore identified as part of the General Political Agency's campaign against exponents of religious ideology,<sup>7</sup> received a letter from Narkrompos (the Ministry governing education and culture) telling him to stop spreading his ideas, and was threatened with arrest.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, he left Russia speedily in 1928 and would never return.

There followed a period of self-imposed exile in Europe in which Chekhov worked initially, because of the pressing need to earn a living, as an actor. Writing to his former colleagues at the Second Moscow Art Theatre from Germany in 1928, however, he declared that '[i]t is impossible for me to stay in the theatre just as an actor who merely plays a number of roles [...] Only *the idea of a new theatre in general, a new theatre art* can fascinate me and stimulate my creative work'.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, in 1930 Chekhov was directing again, firstly creating a production of *Twelfth Night* with the Jewish Habima Theatre,<sup>10</sup> and then working on *Hamlet* with a group of Russian emigré actors. By the end of 1930, he was in Paris, where the following year he formed *Le Théâtre Tchekoff* and an associated school of acting with his friend and colleague Georgette Boner. The Paris initiative collapsed in 1932 due to a lack of funds, and Chekhov travelled to Riga, Latvia, and Kaunas, Lithuania, where he acted, directed and taught in leading theatres, until a military coup in Latvia in the spring of 1934 forced him to leave.

Chekhov's consistent attempts to capitalise upon his status as an actor to develop projects focused on the creation of 'a new theatre art' finally bore fruit in 1936, in the form of the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington Hall. Dartington had been established in 1925 by an American heiress,

Dorothy Whitney Elmhirst, and her husband, Leonard Elmhirst. It was conceived as an experiment in regenerating agriculture, rural industries and crafts, as well as education and the arts. In 1935, Dorothy Elmhirst's daughter, Beatrice Straight, who was intent upon a career in the theatre, travelled to New York with her friend Deirdre Hurst to seek out teachers of acting to come to Dartington. They saw Chekhov playing Khlestakov in *The Inspector General*, were astonished by his performance, and arranged classes with him. Soon afterwards, a contract was drawn up for Chekhov to run a theatre school at Dartington.<sup>11</sup>

Chekhov's plan for the Dartington Studio was to develop a company of actors who would go on to work professionally while continually training as an ensemble. After two years of training as a group in Devon, however, the spread of fascism in Europe and the isolation of their rural location caused Chekhov to decide to move the Studio to the United States. It took up residence in Ridgefield, Connecticut in December 1938. While in Connecticut, Chekhov and his colleagues decided to shift the Studio's emphasis from teaching and performances closed to the public to the creation of new productions. The first of these, an adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, scripted by Chekhov's colleague George Shdanoff, opened at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway in October 1939. It received mixed responses and closed soon afterwards. Chekhov and his company then spent 1940 and 1941 rehearsing and touring productions of plays Chekhov had worked on previously: *King Lear*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Cricket on the Hearth*, as well as a new play for children: *Troublemaker-Doublemaker* by Iris Tree. In 1942, Chekhov also staged an opera, Mussorgsky's *Sorochinsky Fair*, in New York, designed by his long-term collaborator Mstislav Dobuzhinsky.

There is a discernible pattern in Chekhov's career of being displaced, then settling and becoming established, before quickly being displaced again. America proved no exception. In 1942, when the Studio's male actors were drafted into military service following America's decision to join the war, it was forced to close. Chekhov moved to Hollywood with the support of his friend, the

composer Rakhmaninov. There, in 1946, he directed his last production, *The Government Inspector*, with actors from The Hollywood Theatre Laboratory at the Las Palmas Theatre.<sup>12</sup> He remained in Hollywood, working as an actor and teaching acting, until his death in 1955. After Chekhov's death, a few of his former colleagues and students tried to sustain the life of his artistic technique, and were most successful in doing so by teaching his approaches to acting. Taught in these contexts, Chekhov's technique inevitably became seen as a set of exercises for actors rather than the foundation of the 'new theatre art' that he had envisaged. It is therefore a central contention of this essay that Chekhov's period teaching acting in Hollywood is best considered as a post-script to his working life, and that to consider him primarily as a theorist of actor-training is to give that phase of his work a prominence that Chekhov would not have considered justified. If we are to develop a more complete understanding of his contribution to the theatre, and of his potential as a theorist of performance, we must see Michael Chekhov as both an actor and director.

### **The Actor is the Theatre**

To see Chekhov as a director does not, however, require us to diminish his contribution to the study of acting, since his conception of directing places the work of the actor at the heart of the theatre and all its creative processes. Accordingly, the class and rehearsal-notes transcribed by Deirdre Hurst du Prey during the period of The Chekhov Theatre Studio (1936-1942) were collected under the title 'The Actor is the Theatre', quoting Chekhov:

I think the theatre consists of the actor and that is all. Nobody else is important in the theatre, from my point of view. If the actor is not there, then there is no theatre. All that the director, the author, the designer will do will not make a theatre.<sup>13</sup>

This statement (which was not intended for publication) may be easily misconstrued as a deliberate devaluing of the work of non-actors in the creation of a production, but this would take it out of

context. Chekhov required that his students did not only act; he also asked them to write, design and direct performances. His own work was likewise deeply invested in all aspects of theatre. This statement should therefore be understood to mean that the actor is the only person who embodies the art of the theatre, and therefore theatre can only be made through her work. Chekhov does not deny that director, author and designer make vital contributions, but he warns that, without a deep understanding of the actor, their work will come to nothing.

Chekhov's approach to the actor's artistry is based upon some fundamental concepts that also underpin his notion of directing. I have chosen four that seem particularly relevant to his practice as a director: the idea of polarity, the dialogue between imagination and incorporation, the use of gesture as a means of exploring and communicating the content of a performance, and the vital importance of atmosphere to a performance's capacity to communicate with an audience. The principle of polarity, as we will see, governed much of Chekhov's directorial thinking. A polarity is any opposition of forces or ideas that are mutually antagonistic but also inseparably connected to each other. A spine, for example, is an embodiment of polarity, as it stretches in two directions simultaneously. Chekhov often spoke of the spine of a play, and insisted that 'the beginning and the end . . . should be, polar in principle'.<sup>14</sup> This approach was borrowed by Chekhov from Stanislavsky's co-director of the Moscow Art Theatre, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, whose thinking was responsible, according to Chekhov, for the capacity of the Art Theatre's productions to express 'oneness, wholeness, completeness' in their interpretation of a play.<sup>15</sup>

Chekhov believed that the root of all artistic practice was 'a deeply-rooted and often unconscious desire for transformation'.<sup>16</sup> His technique seeks to develop this desire into a skill by means of exercises which combine imagination and incorporation. One such exercise is known as the Imaginary Body. It asks actors to picture the body of their character, and then to 'step into this body [...] so that your actual body and your imaginary body will meet in the same space'.<sup>17</sup> I have

argued elsewhere that this is merely ‘one example of an archetypal pattern in Chekhov’s approach, in which an “invisible body” is created as a means of exploring and expressing the intangible’.<sup>18</sup>

Chekhov’s use of gesture is a further example of the dialogue between imagination and incorporation in his technique. He told his students at Dartington that the ‘spiritual content’ of the ‘desires . . . feelings . . . ideas’ found in a play ‘must be expressed by the motions or gestures of the human body’.<sup>19</sup> We will see throughout Chekhov’s directing that he uses gesture as a means of exploring and communicating all aspects of a play: not only the movements of its characters, but its ideas, its psychological action, and the atmospheres it conjurs.

#### *Exercise 1: Scoring Action with Gestures*

*Ask your actors to decide what they are trying to do to the other characters in a scene. Ask them to think about this in terms of direction in space. Are they raising the other character(s) up or crushing them? Dispersing them or gathering them? Making an offer to them or tricking them and taking things from them? Ask them to convert this spatial dynamic into a gesture. Then ask what quality this gesture might have. Is it rough or gentle? Sudden or gradual? Spontaneous or carefully planned? Ask them to create gestures with a clear direction and quality to express their sequence of actions in a scene.*

Of the ideas that sit at the heart of Chekhov’s technique, perhaps none is more significant for directing, however, than atmosphere. Chekhov believed that ‘the atmosphere is what we, as the audience, have to feel. If you attend a performance which does not touch your soul or feeling, that performance is dead’.<sup>20</sup> He gave the example of the first scene of Gogol’s *Inspector General* to explain this concept of a dead performance:

Blandly stated, the scene consists of the bribing officials absorbed in discussions of escape from punishment which they expect with the arrival of the Inspector from Petersburg. Endow it with

atmosphere and ... you will perceive the content of the same scene as one of impending catastrophe, conspiracy, depression and almost 'mystical' horror.<sup>21</sup>

For Chekhov, then, analyzing the action of a scene alone is not enough, we must also attend closely to the feeling of the space within which the action happens and how the two relate to each other.

Despite their apparently subjective and personal nature, however, Chekhov considered such atmospheres to be objective, calling them 'a feeling which does not belong to anybody [...] which lives in the space in the room'.<sup>22</sup> Because of this, and their capacity, in Chekhov's view, to transform the capacity of an audience to communicate directly and powerfully with its audience, they are definitively the preserve of the director. The following section will feature all of these techniques, charting their emergence and development in Chekhov's directorial practice.

### *Exercise 2: Scoring Atmosphere*

*Choose a whole play or an extract from it. Consider the opening atmosphere of your chosen section. Where and when does it take place? What kinds of things happen? What is the feeling of this place and time and of these events? Is it placid, violent, hysterical, threatening, joyous? How can you communicate that atmosphere? What colour might it be? What physical qualities would it have? What would it feel like to exist within it? Now think of a moment when the atmosphere definitively shifts. How does it change? How can you express this new atmosphere? Divide your space in some way and ask your actors to begin by exploring the first atmosphere in one part of the space, and then to move, when they feel it is right to do so, into the second atmosphere, paying particular attention to the transition. Ask them to practice this transition a number of times in both directions. Then begin to add a little action or text either side of the transition and ask them to explore different ways of achieving the transition using the text, for example taking it at different speeds or different characters moving into the new atmosphere at different times. Do not rehearse the whole scene or try to stage it in any way, just concentrate on the moments where the atmosphere changes.*



## Chekhov's Productions: Directing through Acting

Chekhov's directorial vision is best understood from the perspective of the actor, whose experience of performance he described thus:

When I am standing on the stage, the stage itself, the music, my partner's body, the lights, my partner's speech, my speech – are all parts of the large and very complicated rhythmical body of our theatre.<sup>23</sup>

Here, the actor's body becomes a metaphor for an entire performance. If 'the actor is the theatre', then, for Chekhov, the theatre is also an actor. This aspect of Chekhov's thinking dates back at least as far as his 1924 *Hamlet*, his first production as Director of the Second Moscow Art Theatre, in which he also played the leading role. Chekhov saw Hamlet as 'the visible embodiment of the victory of the spirit of light over the spirit of darkness' (which he considered to be the play's subject). He therefore chose to play the part himself, leading the production by embodying its central ideas, and handed the directing of rehearsals over to his colleagues Aleksandr Cheban, Valentin Smyshliaev and Vladimir Tatarinov, who worked under his artistic leadership. We can also see the principle of the actor functioning as a microcosm of the theatre in Chekhov's interpretation of *King Lear*, of which he considered the guiding idea to be that 'the value of things changes in the light of the spiritual or in the dark of the material'.<sup>24</sup> This fundamental opposition was also embodied, for Chekhov, by the play's central figure who was, for him, two Lears: 'one . . . an empty, spiritless body, the other . . . a bodiless spirit'.<sup>25</sup>

It is no accident that Chekhov interpreted *Hamlet* and *King Lear* so similarly. His reading of both plays was strongly influenced by his study of Anthroposophy, based on the teachings of the spiritual philosopher Rudolf Steiner. Steiner aimed to 'lift human beings beyond the sense-perceptible world into the spiritual realm', so that his followers would become able to see beyond physical appearances and 'move from the figure we perceive to the actual being'.<sup>26</sup> Chekhov's co-

director Valentin Smyshliaev described Hamlet's journey from darkness to light in similar terms to Steiner's, as 'protesting, heroic, . . . fighting for the affirmation of what makes up the essence of his life'.<sup>27</sup>

Chekhov had developed his understanding of the spine of a play and its organic relation to the action of its central character(s) with his close friend, the actor and director Evgeny Vakhtangov. Vakhtangov directed Chekhov in the title role of Strindberg's *Erik XIV* in 1921. Chekhov recalled asking 'many questions, trying to penetrate the very heart of the character', when Vakhtangov suddenly shouted, 'That is your Erik. Look! I am now within a magic circle and cannot break through it!', gesturing to show Chekhov these actions. Chekhov recalled that, at this moment 'the destiny, the endless suffering, the obstinacy, and the weakness of Erik XIV's character became clear to me'.<sup>28</sup> But the movement also expressed a wider pattern in Vakhtangov's production, which polarized the play's two worlds: the dead world of the courtiers and the living world of the ordinary people (to which Erik tries, in vain, to escape, hence the gesture of failing to break the 'magic circle'). Thus Vakhtangov's gesture for Chekhov's portrayal of Erik expressed both the essence of his character and the guiding idea of the whole production. In other words, it made no distinction between the actor imagining the character and the director interpreting the play: they were as two sides of the same coin.

Chekhov's 1924 *Hamlet* reiterated the pattern of his and Vakhtangov's *Erik XIV* by creating two worlds within the play to contextualize the central idea of the eponymous hero's spiritual triumph over the 'forces of darkness'. Those forces were represented, of course, by Claudius who was seen as 'conservative, obstructing all that is holy and heroic [...] trying to hold back everything that is striving forward'. Alma Law explains that the whole production was divided according to this polarity with 'the guards and soldiers . . . Horatio, the Players and Ophelia' with Hamlet, Claudius supported by 'the courtiers, headed by Polonius', and Laertes and Gertrude caught between the

two.<sup>29</sup> This separation of the characters into three groups represents a further compositional principle of Chekhov's work: triplicity. This idea, that everything has three phases: an opening, a development or transition, and a conclusion, is clearly related to the notion of polarity, since you cannot have two opposed states or positions without a transitional space between them. We can see this in the tripartite structure for *Hamlet's* 'tragedy of Humanity undergoing a cataclysm' described by Valentin Smyshlyaev: '(i) the presentiment and premonition of this cataclysm, (ii) the struggle with and the realisation of the mission received [...] at the moment of the encounter with the Spirit, and (iii) solace through death'.<sup>30</sup>

It is important to note that, although Chekhov tends to refer to his compositional principles in universalist terms, they also often underpinned selective interpretations. His treatment of Ophelia in this production of *Hamlet* is a case in point. Chekhov described her in rehearsals as 'the part of Hamlet's soul which is in the hands of the earth', which hinders him 'with earthly love' and must be rejected as 'the first step along Hamlet's thorny path', in an act of 'victorious wisdom' in which Hamlet takes 'an angel from Ophelia's soul and carries it away with him'.<sup>31</sup> This denial of Ophelia's subjectivity and the heroic presentation of Hamlet's abuse of her represents a deeply patriarchal reading of the play. However, we do not have to accept this decision to learn from Chekhov's approach. The lesson for directors, in other words, lies not in Chekhov's particular interpretation, but in the dramaturgical rigour of his technique, which commits to a clearly defined reading of the play and deliberately re-shapes its action and relationships accordingly.

Chekhov saw rehearsal as an authorial process. He argued that if the 'new theatre . . . is to have vitality, [it] must write its own plays,'<sup>32</sup> and he created his own plays in rehearsal predominantly through a process of adapting or appropriating classic works such as *Hamlet* and novels by Dickens and Dostoyevsky. He would have agreed with Julie Sanders that

we need to view . . . adaptation and appropriation from a vantage point that sees them as actively creating a new cultural and aesthetic product . . . that stands alongside the texts that have provided inspiration, and . . . enriches rather than ‘robs’ them.<sup>33</sup>

We can see this principle at work in Chekhov’s production of *The Possessed*, scripted during rehearsals by his colleague George Shdanoff.<sup>34</sup> The novel was written in an attempt to illuminate the crises that followed the collapse of the feudal system in Russia, but Chekhov and Shdanoff’s version uses it to explore the rise of fascism and communism in Europe through the polarity of the characters of Verkhovensky, a violent revolutionary, and Stavrogin, who rejects violence but refuses to commit to any other creed.

This adaptation clearly emerged from Chekhov’s belief that ‘for some of the social problems besetting the modern world the theatre can offer at least a means of study and possibly a solution’ and represents his commitment to ‘present personal problems, not as an end in themselves, but in their relation to the social background’.<sup>35</sup> Chekhov’s directorial engagement with the challenge and opportunity of using the theatre as a space for social and political debate would, however, go no further, and the ensemble that created *The Possessed* would never get beyond its infancy as a group, when their work failed to communicate successfully with its Broadway critics and audiences.<sup>36</sup> We are, however, left, as I have observed, with detailed records of the means by which they developed productions in rehearsal. Some of these are familiar as the acting exercises that have become achieved canonical status among teachers and students of Chekhov’s technique. Others are less well known, partly because they relate more obviously to directing. In the final section of this essay, then, I will focus on one such key technique: the Four Brothers.

### **Directing with Michael Chekhov’s Technique: The Four Brothers**

Chekhov believed that, as he put it, ‘In every true piece of art you will always find four qualities which the artist has put into his creation: Ease, Form, Beauty and Entirety’.<sup>37</sup> He called these qualities the Four Brothers. Ease refers to the flowing, natural feeling that Chekhov believed a work of art should have. Form refers to the necessity for a work of art to have a clear structure that expresses its main ideas. Chekhov also believed that, even when its content is horrifying, a work of art should have the quality of Beauty. Finally, Entirety refers to the feeling of wholeness or completeness that a work of art should have; it shouldn’t feel as though something is missing or that it is overloaded.

### The Feeling of Form

Chekhov believed that ‘Everything must have a form for us – inner or outer actions both must have form’.<sup>38</sup> This observation is essential to the work of the director, who is responsible for defining the form of a production, but Chekhov does not see that task as a simple, or even a singular activity. Instead, he offers multiple, simultaneous possibilities for articulating form. The most fundamental of these forms were production scores developed in rehearsal and following the principles of polarity and triplicity. Here is an example from Chekhov’s direction of Janis Rainis’ play *The Golden Steed*, based upon a Latvian folk tale:

The mission of the evil group is to push Antin down, pushing him gradually slowly, but surely, until he is defeated. That is the dynamic of the scene . . . The good group has three gestures: 1. Toward the mountain. 2. To protect the good people. 3. To gently push the evil forces away. The whole scene is a composition of these movements. This is the scaffolding.<sup>39</sup>

Chekhov uses gesture here, as Vakhtangov had in rehearsals for Erik XIV, as a means of embodying and articulating the dynamic of a play or scene or character’s action. Where another director might express these actions in more abstract, psychological terms (the evil group wants to defeat Antin, the

good group wants to create peace), Chekhov uses gesture as a means of physically experiencing the form of the play. He used the same technique to express the atmosphere of a scene, as in his class notes for a scene from a play called *The Deluge*, which simply list its atmospheres: 'Business', 'Thunderstorm', 'Fear (legato)', 'Panic (staccato)', 'Pause (legato)'. Such sequences of atmosphere, which Chekhov encouraged his students to explore physically, were blended with gestures for a play's action to generate an embodied score for its performance.

### The Feeling of Ease

Chekhov continually reminded his students that exercises should be performed with the feeling of ease. All art, Chekhov believed, must retain a quality of ease, especially when its content is painful or violent. He believed that ease enabled spectators to appreciate art as art, without being caught up in its content as though it were real life. Ease is also essential to the capacity for spontaneity and improvisation, in both rehearsals and performances, that Chekhov believed was essential. He argued that the actor must always be able to improvise, even within a highly structured production:

The given lines and the business are the firm bases upon which the actor must and can develop his improvisations. How he speaks the lines and how he fulfils the business are the open gates to a vast field of improvisation.<sup>40</sup>

It is important to note, however, that by 'improvisation' Chekhov does not simply mean doing whatever you want. The Feeling of Ease is closely associated, in Chekhov's technique, with the movement quality of flowing. Like a body in water, ease is supported by and cannot help but be responsive to the movements of its enfolding medium. Thus, Chekhov suggests that developing the capacity for improvisation requires the support of some 'firm bases' and the freedom to explore the

‘vast field’ of possibilities that lies between them. This polarity can be found with in both of the following exercises.

### *Exercise 3: Improvising Transitions*

*Begin by selecting a beginning and an ending. Choose the start of a scene and its end, or two other polarized pieces of action. Be very specific about what the actor(s) must do. Ask the actor to improvise a series of transitions to get from one to the other. Then ask her to repeat it and improvise a different journey with exactly the same beginning and ending. As the scene is repeated, begin to add in more fixed points of action or lines of text. Ask the actor to continue to improvise new journeys between the given pieces of business. Continue to add fixed moments within the action of the scene and continue to ask the actor to improvise new transitions between them. Thus, the exercise shifts from improvising between a fixed beginning and ending to a series of improvisations between fixed points within a scene, so that you are creating a staging that has both a clear form and the quality of ease as the actors continually find new ways of repeating the same sequence of actions.*

### The Feeling of Beauty

Chekhov is insistent that art, whatever its subject matter, must be created with the feeling of beauty. But this is not quite the same as saying that it must be beautiful, in the sense of complying with whatever current aesthetically-conservative taste dictates. Instead, Chekhov asked his students to work always ‘with the beauty which rises from *within* you’.<sup>41</sup> The simplest way to understand this is to think about an actor doing what Chekhov calls ‘radiating’ their performance. ‘Sincerely and convincingly imagine that you are sending out rays’, he instructs, and ‘a sense of the actual existence of your inner being will be the result’.<sup>42</sup>

### The Feeling of Entirety

Finally, Chekhov suggests that everything, from the smallest action to a full production, should be conceived as a whole, and retain the experience of this greater oneness. This idea of Entirety underpins Chekhov's compositional principles, which aim to enable artists to construct complex but self-consistent works, in which all of the elements inter-relate satisfyingly to generate one clearly articulated entirety. We have seen it, for example, in his ideas about the polarities governing Hamlet and King Lear.

#### *Exercise 4: Flying over the Play*

*At any stage in the production process, go and stand at one end of a large space, cleared of any furniture or other items. Imagine that the play is a landscape, stretching out from its beginning, where you are standing, to its end at the far side of the space. Picture yourself above it, looking down as though flying over it. Travel at any speed and in any direction over the landscape of the play, noticing important features: climaxes, changes in atmosphere, significant events, or the trajectories of particular characters. Notice what you picked up on and what was not clear to you, which parts of the landscape were rich and complex and which less detailed. Ask yourself what relationships you noticed between different areas of the play and how these could be made more clear for an audience. Ask yourself if the details are extraneous and distracting or if they contribute positively to the larger form of the play. Repeat in the opposite direction, from end to beginning and ask the same questions.*

#### **Conclusion: The Theatre of the Future**

Through all his acting and directing exercises, we can see Chekhov developing the practical means to develop what he called 'a new kind of conversation' between theatre-makers, enabling them to articulate and explore a performance's structure, its atmospheres, its characters' actions, and so on with a common vocabulary founded on, but not limited to, the art of the actor.<sup>43</sup> If anything, this approach is even more relevant to today's theatre than it was to that of Chekhov's time. With



the expansion of technological possibilities in the last half century, collaboration between substantial teams of creative artists from different disciplines has become the norm in today's theatre.

Furthermore, the practice of adapting existing texts for the stage or creating entirely new material through a collaborative process, often known as devising, has become increasingly common since the nineteen-sixties. Both of these changes have made Chekhov's ideal of a shared technique developed by collaborating artists both more possible and more significant than it must have seemed in the nineteen-thirties, when the collaborative creation of performances was extremely unusual. However, in the contemporary theatre, directors commonly have more power to establish the vocabulary of a production's working processes than they did in Chekhov's day when theatres were run solely as commercial enterprises (sometimes with philanthropic support), which meant short rehearsal periods and limited production budgets. Chekhov's technique shows us numerous ways in which the possibilities of our contemporary situation can be more fully exploited, and conversations between theatre-makers made more imaginative, more thorough and more challenging. Thus, in spite of his limited success in creating the 'Theatre of the Future' about which he thought and spoke so much during his life-time, Chekhov's approach to directing may yet enable subsequent generations to articulate and develop future theatres of their own.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, John E. Bowlt. (ed.), *Russian Avant-Garde Theatre: War, Revolution and Design* (London: Nick Hern, 2014), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> See Liisa Byckling, 'Michael Chekhov's work as a director' in Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 21-39, and Alma H. Law, 'Chekhov's Russian Hamlet (1924)', *TDR: The Drama Review* 27, no. 3 (1983), 34-45.

<sup>3</sup> This collection is held for the Dartington Hall Trust at The South West Heritage Centre in Exeter.

<sup>4</sup> For a clear and detailed introduction to his work, with a strong focus on acting, see Chekhov's own book *To The Actor* (London: Routledge, 2002) and Franc Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> *To the Actor*, li.

<sup>6</sup> *To the Actor*, li.

<sup>7</sup> The General Political Agency was a forerunner of the KGB.

<sup>8</sup> *The Path of the Actor*, 136.

- <sup>9</sup> *The Path of the Actor*, 219.
- <sup>10</sup> Emanuel Levy, *The Habima, Israel's National Theater 1917-1977: A Study of Cultural Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 107.
- <sup>11</sup> For more information on Chekhov's work at Dartington, see Tom Cornford, 'A new kind of conversation: Michael Chekhov's Turn to the Crafts', *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 4.2, 189-203 and Tom Cornford, 'The English Theatre Studios of Michael Chekhov and Michel Saint-Denis 1935-1965', PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2012 (<http://webcat.warwick.ac.uk/record=b2684505~S1> accessed on 12 September 2017), 33-123.
- <sup>12</sup> A script and production score can be found (under the title *Revisor*) in Charles Leonard (ed.), *Michael Chekhov's To The Director and Playwright* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 111-329.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Deirdre Hurst du Prey's Teaching Notes for classes at the Michael Chekhov Studio, New York; Michael Chekhov Theatre Studio Deirdre Hurst du Prey Archive, MC/S9/2.
- <sup>14</sup> *To the Actor*, 94.
- <sup>15</sup> Charles Leonard (ed.), *Michael Chekhov's To the Director and Playwright* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 45.
- <sup>16</sup> *Michael Chekhov on Theatre and the Art of Acting* (CD, The Working Arts Library, 2005), Disc 1.
- <sup>17</sup> *Michael Chekhov On Theatre*, Disc 1.
- <sup>18</sup> Tom Cornford, 'Michael Chekhov: The Spiritual Realm and Invisible Body' in Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin (eds.), *Theatre and Ghosts: Materiality, Performance and Modernity* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: 2014), 179.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Cornford, 'A new kind of conversation', 195.
- <sup>20</sup> Transcription of class dated 16 October 1936, Michael Chekhov Theatre Studio Deirdre Hurst du Prey Archive, MC/S1/A/1.
- <sup>21</sup> *To The Actor*, 48-9.
- <sup>22</sup> Quoted in Cornford, 'Michael Chekhov: The Spiritual Realm and the Invisible Body', 195.
- <sup>23</sup> Michael Chekhov, *Lessons for Teachers of his Acting Technique*, ed. Deirdre Hurst du Prey (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 2000), 71.
- <sup>24</sup> *To The Actor*, p. 99.
- <sup>25</sup> *To the Actor*, 104.
- <sup>26</sup> Rudolf Steiner, 'Understanding the Spiritual World (Part One)' (18 April 1914), in 'The Presence of the Dead on the Spiritual Path', <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA154/English/AP1990/19140418p01.html> (accessed 3 October 2017).
- <sup>27</sup> Alma H. Law, 'Chekhov's Russian Hamlet', 35.
- <sup>28</sup> Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 89.
- <sup>29</sup> Alma Law, 'Chekhov's Russian Hamlet', 35.
- <sup>30</sup> Andrei Kirillov and Franc Chamberlain (eds.), 'Rehearsal Protocols for *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare at the Second Moscow Art Theatre', *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 4.2, 243-279, 243.
- <sup>31</sup> 'Rehearsal Protocols', 247.
- <sup>32</sup> *The Chekhov Theatre Studio* (London: the Curwen Press, 1936), 18.
- <sup>33</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 53.
- <sup>34</sup> For more information, see Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, 83-104.
- <sup>35</sup> *Chekhov Theatre Studio*, 16.
- <sup>36</sup> Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, 91-103.
- <sup>37</sup> *To The Actor*, 13.
- <sup>38</sup> Transcription of class dated 22 October 1937, MC/S1/A/3.
- <sup>39</sup> Transcription of class dated 8 November 1936, MC/S1/A/1.

<sup>40</sup> *To the Actor*, 36.

<sup>41</sup> *To the Actor*, 16.

<sup>42</sup> *To The Actor*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Transcription of class dated 11 December 1936, MC/S1/A/1.