

Michael Chekhov: The Actor is the Theatre

New York Lectures 1942

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INTRODUCTION

The Actor is the Theatre is a collection of lectures to actors and actresses¹ held in 1942 in New York by the Russian theatre pioneer Michael Chekhov (1891–1955). These lectures are presented here for the first time in book form.

In public discussions in the wartime year of 1942, Chekhov outlines his method of acting, which he further systematized eleven years later in his book *To the Actor* as well as in other writings. These lectures are special because they are linked to contemporary social events and the resulting demand for a radically new "Theatre of the Future". The heart of this "Theatre of the Future" is a new art of acting.

»The actor of the future must be a person who will be able to act everything given to him. (...) [He] will, first of all, discover himself as a human being with a tremendous will, a very big heart, and an imagination which becomes almost real. Then such an actor will be able to answer the problems of today, of any time he lives.« Chekhov emphasizes how actors have always been connected to current socio-political events and how they must continue to do so today. They cannot evade the happiness and suffering of their environment. »Imagine we are so closed, so unprepared to meet people who will come from some occupied country, and they will buy a ticket and sit in our theatre. How do you think they will feel? (...) They have seen their parents, their brides, their friends, their children destroyed – they don't know where they are – they were bleeding, they are bleeding – they are crying inwardly for help which no one can give them.« The fate of these people must affect us, it must break our hearts, »and say if I am performing for you, I must play with my heart, with my whole will.« Actors go through a permanent school of life that equips them with "other ears", "other eyes", and "other questions".

On the Brink - The Theatre of the Future

So what are actors being asked to do? What is their task, their mission? What is theatre for? Twenty years after the beginning of the new millennium, the question has lost none of its relevance.

In a world of online meetings, streaming, social media and influencers, in a society that knows how to commercialise and market every innovation and rebellion, what can actors hope to achieve? Are they even being noticed? Or are they left to present themselves and their content as a commodity? In the last of the lectures printed here, Michael Chekhov says, »[We are] clowns, but not good ones. The modern actor in general is nothing.« This sounds surprisingly relevant. Theatre is regarded as "not systemically relevant" even in the pandemic years of 2020/21: not indispensable. And yet moaning or lapsing into cynicism does little good. Too much is at stake: globally, socially, but also for theatre itself.

Globally speaking, humanity is staring into the abyss today. The major challenges posed by the climate crisis, structural racism, military rearmament - all these issues are well known, but nowhere near being solved. We see the (re-)strengthening of autocratic systems, the repression of democratic values; we see millions of people forced to flee. We observe the restriction of freedom, the crushing of democracy movements, be it in Myanmar, Hong Kong, Thailand, Belarus or Turkey, and witness how the very concept of freedom is abused and disavowed.

In 1942, the year the New York lectures were written, the world also stood on the brink.² The Second World War was raging in Europe and was spreading to Asia and the Pacific. On 7 December 1941, Japanese bombers launched an attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor. The United States responded by entering into war with Japan. This was followed four days later by a declaration of war from Berlin. The United States was now involved in a global war on two fronts. Japan conquered most of Southeast Asia and expanded to the Indonesian archipelago. Even parts of Australia were bombed. The Japanese launched an even heavier attack on the Philippines, until then a US colony, just one day after the attack on Pearl Harbor.³

In his lectures, Chekhov repeatedly referred to these events, which evoked very personal stories and fears in his audience. The young actors were faced with the prospect of being drafted and sent to the front, and both women and men were directly affected by the war. In this situation, it was a Russian (!) emigrant who spoke to them about "The Theatre of the Future". A Russian emigrant who narrowly escaped the rising Stalinism in the USSR in 1928⁴, who experienced the approaching fascism and National Socialism in Western Europe, and who was forced to close his drama school in Britain in 1939⁵ because the British government now regarded him as a security risk.

In the lectures published here, Chekhov speaks of spiritual "Hitlerism", but also quite specifically about the events in East Asia and above all *about the people* there: »Let us (...) ask ourselves honestly and for a moment without fear, do we really feel what is going on there in the Philippines, in Java, and in Australia? I don't think we do. We know, yes, but whether we *feel* I doubt very much. Because if we were really able to imagine what is going on there, then I don't think we could go on living as we do. This is our *lack of Imagination*. (...) The actor who is not able to cry, imagining these mothers and girls and boys in the Philippines – to imagine them so concretely that it will change our life in an instant, inwardly at least – what can such an actor express on the stage? What feelings? The only thing left for us, if we are not able to imagine all these mothers, sisters, brides, and boys there, the only thing which is left for us on the stage today is to walk from one chair to another to say "hello" and "goodbye" and curtain.«

In Chekhov's appeal to empathy with the suffering people of his time, one must not forget the personal crisis in which he found himself in 1942. With his resettlement from Western Europe to the United States in 1939, Chekhov had lost all his cultural roots for the second time. It was initially difficult for him to gain a foothold in American exile. His English was still poor, and he relied on the help of others. To him, the star system on Broadway was toxic for his art. Theatre ensembles that drew their language and strength from the binding collaboration of the artist collective were unknown or even eyed with suspicion in the United States. And the "Chekhov Theatre Studio", which reopened in Ridgefield, Connecticut, was in a precarious financial situation from the start. This was compounded by failures with some of the studio's productions and the inexperience of its young ensemble. The productions touring New York and the East Coast of the USA, including an adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (also known as *Demons*), Dickens' *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night*, received positive reactions, especially for their excellent ensemble acting, but were less successful on the whole than Chekhov had hoped. By 1943, just one year after giving these lectures, Chekhov was forced to close the studio in Ridgefield and moved to Hollywood.

The selection of Chekhov's scenic material between 1939 and 1942 is particularly interesting: *The Possessed*⁶ already resonated strongly with the violence of the war years Chekhov was so familiar with. Millions of people were dying in Russia, and Hitler and the National Socialists were inflicting suffering and horror on all of Europe. Mussolini's grab for Africa and especially the Japanese expansion in the Pacific revealed how endangered the whole world was. However, the young American actors (still) lacked a personal experience of mass violence. Chekhov insisted that they should use their imagination and approach the characters by concentrating on their differences. He wanted them to transform into characters that were still alien to their own

experience. This approach was new and difficult for the young artists. However, it is a key element of the Chekhov Method.

It is essentially about the actor finding him/herself in the opposite, in the other.⁷ Through consistent training of the *Imagination* he/she can achieve a deeper understanding of this other: »When we get to the point where we see what she [hic: Lady Macbeth; but also fellow human beings in general; editor's note] does at this moment, when we see with our *inner eye* how she feels at the moment and what she shows at the moment when we are looking at her, then a miracle happens. Then we begin to feel like her and to see and to think, then we awaken ourselves [as actors].«

The character »will show you how she does strange mysteries, being in love. It is difficult to imagine, but it is possible that even Hitler loves, but how? Just the same with Lady Macbeth, if we ask you how she loves, she will show us, she will perform before us how she loves. That will be again a revelation which we can't understand. It is above any understanding. It is a creative process, for the awakened imagination show(s) us things which we would never be able to think of without this imagination. (...) Lady Macbeth (...) will reveal for you yourself, and you will reveal for yourself her psychology *because you will get new eyes, new ears, new heart, new will, new brain as an actor, as a creator.*« [highlighted by the editor.]

The living image of the character (or analogously that of the fellow human being) now accompanies the actor and appears whenever it wants to. »Suddenly you feel it is there, whether you want it or not. Rich, complete, much stronger than you yourself are. (...) You will watch what your image is going to reveal to you. (...) A pleasant state. (...) The heart is there and you know what it feels and you begin to feel the same (...). The image is you (...), it is *your creative ability, a higher ability, it is a gift.* (...) When you see this image coming to you, you will be terribly happy, but it is also a terribly painful experience at the same time...«

Today, perhaps more than ever, our art and our world desperately need these empathetic, compassionate actors and actresses. The term "Theatre of the Future" can therefore be understood as utopian, in the best sense of the word: as an ideal that is yet to be realised and that drives forward; a u-topos, a place where no one has ever been, where man becomes man and allows himself to be moved and transformed by the happiness and suffering of others. Exploring this utopian image in the art of acting is a longing that can empower many actors and actresses, on the stages and in front of the cameras, big and small, even in the 21st century.

About this book

The publication of these lectures⁸ is an invitation to bring the questions of our world today into dialogue with the artistic perspective of Michael Chekhov.

In 2013, the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) organised an international conference together with *Michael Chekhov Europe e. V. (MCE)*, the association of European Chekhov studios and initiatives⁹ that examined Chekhov's relevance for contemporary theatre on both a practical and theoretical level. At the same time, his New York *Lessons for the Professional Actor* was published as Volume 9 of the ZHdK's subTexte series by Alexander Verlag Berlin (*Lektionen für den professionellen Schauspieler*).

The Zurich research had begun in early summer 2008 with a donation of two cardboard boxes containing pictures, books and notes by the theatre artist, painter and illustrator Georgette Boner (1903-1998). Thanks to the support of the Boner Foundation, it was later possible to process this estate in a digital archival manner and to record it in a database¹⁰. It has been made accessible for further research and is used by internationally active scholars, most recently from New York, Moscow and Prague.

The extensive documentation on Michael Chekhov included in the estate seemed particularly valuable to us even then, as his basic exercises and instructions have retained their importance for theatre training and work in the 21st century. The archived texts, programmes, press reports and photos document Chekhov's and Boner's friendship and close collaboration, especially in the 1930s.

However, in the course of our study of Georgette Boner's work, another manuscript by Michael Chekhov, which has never been printed, emerged. We present it here in paperback form for a scholarly and artistic reception. It is therefore a sequel to the above-mentioned *Lessons for the Professional Actor*, which will be published at the same time in a second edition by Alexander Verlag Berlin.

The editing of the translation was difficult. For one thing, the manuscript has an abrupt ending and there are no notes regarding speaking time or footnotes and other comments that would be helpful for understanding the lectures. In addition, Chekhov's shaky English and the nimbly stenographed notes hampered the translation process and made the reconstruction of a meaningful sequence of thoughts quite difficult. Credit is due to the expertise of Michael Raab, a translator who is well versed in Chekhov, that the 1942 lectures are now also available in German, syntactically and contextually correct and easy to read in a fluent flow of thought.¹¹ Since the 2013 Zurich conference, numerous new publications on Michael Chekhov have appeared in the

English-speaking world. However, the lectures presented here were never published as a book. This is the premiere.

In the **first lecture**, Chekhov describes artistic concentration as an all-penetrating, quasi-erotic act. He explains different ways of transforming into the stage character, especially the techniques of the "imaginary body", the "imaginary centres" and the embodiment of inner images. He then moves on from atmosphere and individual feelings to simple exercises that keep the actor physically and emotionally permeable, e.g. the movement patterns "staccato - legato" and "molding - flowing - flying - radiating". »If one's body is flexible enough, it becomes an organ for understanding.«

The **second lecture** explores the question of what is meant by "life" on the stage. Chekhov makes some practical suggestions here about how to explore the inner life force of the stage character. The feeling for the "objective atmosphere" plays a decisive role here. For Chekhov, atmosphere is the heart-beat, the soul of every performance. A strong atmosphere connects the stage with the audience and empowers the actor »to open his own mind and soul and will and to listen to the audience, listen to what the audience desires and what its needs are«. The lecture proceeds to discuss four stages of the creative process that lead to artistic freedom: 1. Listening to the atmosphere, 2. Entering into dialogue with the inner images, 3. Embodiment, 4. Inspiration.

The **third lecture** is a talk about scenes presented by the participating actors. Here, Chekhov's feedback refers to questions of spatial and holistic speaking as well as to the lively use of text. It is about inner and outer play, physical as well as linguistic lightness (ease), avoiding monotony through contrasts, rhythm, inventiveness and the »activity of our imagination, which is our creative spirit«.

In the **fourth lecture** Chekhov sheds light on the social position of the theatre and the difficulties of the rehearsal process. He offers them his vision of a theatre of ensemble play and group spirit: »If this new life and spirit which must come from the pain on the one hand, and the inspiration of showing the theatre of the future on the other hand – if this will be done by a group of actors, *pioneers*, than I believe in everything.«

The **fifth lecture** reflects on the political function of the art of acting. Furthermore, Chekhov expands here on his remarks about the creation of roles. This includes exercises to develop imagination and »radiating« as well as experiencing the inner life of the character. Chekhov once again reveals the process of incorporating the character in concrete and trainable steps.

Interest in Chekhov's working methods has increased enormously in recent years. In *Michael Chekhov Europe* we have worked in many conflict regions of the world: in the countries of former Yugoslavia, in Israel and Lebanon, in Turkey and Armenia, in Southeast Asia, in the PR China, Japan and Taiwan. Today there are Chekhov studios and Chekhov ensembles all over the world¹². Chekhov might have been amazed at the extent to which his acting method has become a reference for artistic dialogue and reconciliation. And he would certainly have been pleased that his work is not carried on by Chekhov epigones, but by self-responsible artists who ask burning questions of our time, put themselves on the line, and in doing so strike out on new paths of their own.

We invite the reader to experience this freedom and wish him or her many vibrant moments of play.

Ulrich Meyer-Horsch and Anton Rey

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Ulrich Meyer-Horsch

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Anton Rey

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Notes

¹ The current use of the masculine and feminine forms of speech was not yet customary in the 1940s. The original texts therefore remain unchanged in the masculine form, which is meant to be inclusive.

² 1942: The Wannsee Conference was held in the same year as the Walt Disney film premiere of *Bambi*, the first mass transports to Auschwitz began, and Shostakovich's *7th Symphony*, composed during the Leningrad Blockade, was first performed. The German occupation of Stalingrad was pushed back, and the premiere of *Casablanca* was celebrated in Chekhov's new home, New York. The powers of the world are at

war, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Josef Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill – what can the stage perform in these times, how can an actor position himself between Hamlet and Hitler?

³ The attack on the Philippines in December 1941 marked the beginning of the Japanese-American Pacific War. Japan initially proved to be superior and within a short time it captured strategic targets throughout Southeast Asia, including Hong Kong, Singapore and the Malay Peninsula. Borneo, Sumatra, the north of New Guinea followed. In February 1942, Japanese fighter-bombers attacked the city of Darwin in northern Australia. However, with the occupation of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in August 1942, the United States succeeded in halting the Japanese advance.

⁴ Lee Strasberg's remark that Chekhov should be sent back to the Soviet Union can only be described as cynical in view of the fact that Chekhov faced imprisonment or even execution there. (Cf. Franc Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, Routledge: London, 2003/2018) In stark contrast to this is Stella Adler's deep admiration for Chekhov and his method. Like Chekhov, Adler placed the power of the imagination at the centre of her acting technique.

⁵ Chekhov had opened the "Chekhov Theatre Studio" in Dartington Hall near Exeter, UK, in 1936. Artists from all over the world gathered there, including Kurt Jooss, Rudolf Laban, Beatrice Straight and Uday Shankar. Forced to close in 1939, the studio moved to the United States.

⁶ *The Possessed* premiered on Broadway in October 1939, shortly after the outbreak of World War II in Europe; it played for nine months. The group then toured New York and East Coast university stages with further productions.

⁷ Chekhov was particularly interested in the spirit of ensemble: »There is nothing more touching in the world than ensemble playing. We are not able to work independently from one another. The whole group is one being. This is the secret of real social life.« (1937) »Don't think that when you are acting in New York you don't influence the whole world: you do. If you do something really significant, then you influence the whole world. If you act well today, you will see the result of your good acting in another part of the earth – the streams are coming and going around the whole world.« (1937)

⁸ The lectures were held in different places and on different occasions. Hunter College still exists today, while there are no longer any records of the other meeting places "Actors' Service", "Actors' Cue" and "Labor Stage".

⁹ See: www.michaelchekhoveurope.eu and www.sfsh.de/chekhov-international.

¹⁰ See ZHdK Archiv: <http://miz.zhdk.ch>.

¹¹ In some respects we have reason to believe that it makes more sense to read the speeches in German than in English, since the original typescript was never proofread and therefore never printed. The German version now modifies the many "*thing*"-repetitions that occur in the original and finds context-driven terms that have become familiar to Chekhov connoisseurs from other speeches and publications by the master, or dissolves a nested sentence without adding to or omitting anything from the original.

¹² Michael Chekhov Studios and Chekhov ensembles have established themselves not only in the USA and in almost every country in Europe, but also in Russia, Israel, Turkey, Canada, Brazil, Uruguay, Mexico, India, Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Australia.