

3. THE MICHAEL CHEKHOV SYSTEM AND THE ACTOR

Antonella Cornici¹⁸⁸

Abstract: *Russian actor, director, and educator Michael Chekhov is renowned for his significant contributions to the art of acting. The system he developed promotes a creative, expressive, and internal approach to acting, assisting actors in creating authentic and memorable characters. Photo credit: Antonella Cornici (images are from the workshop led by Natalie Yalon on the topic of the Michael Chekhov System in Nancy, France, Erasmus program, November 2022).*

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1. Michael Chekhov - short biography

Michael Chekhov was a Russian actor, director, and pedagogue, born on August 29, 1891, in St. Petersburg, Russia, and passed away on September 30, 1955, in Santa Monica, California, United States. The nephew of the renowned playwright A.P. Chekhov, he is known for his significant contributions to the art of acting. He studied acting under the guidance of the famous director Konstantin Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre, where he was classmates with other important actors like Vsevolod Meyerhold. Later, he collaborated with Stanislavski and became his assistant at the Moscow theater.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Michael Chekhov traveled and worked in Europe, then emigrated to the United States in 1928, where he continued his career in theater while also teaching the art of acting. He developed his own method for actors, now known as the Michael Chekhov Acting Technique, which became renowned for its innovative and holistic approach to acting. The Michael Chekhov Acting Technique focuses on using imagination, body, voice, and emotions to create authentic characters and develop acting skills. This system was influenced by Stanislavski's theory but also by expressionist theater and his studies in music and painting.

He traveled worldwide, teaching acting and working in theaters and drama schools in various countries. He also wrote about his method in the book *To the Actor*. His work as an educator and contributions to acting had a significant impact on the development of modern theater. Michael Chekhov remained an influential figure in the theater world until today, and the Michael Chekhov Acting Technique is still studied and practiced by actors and directors worldwide.

2. Principles of the Michael Chekhov System

The Michael Chekhov Technique is a psycho-physical approach to acting, aiming to build and find emotion through physical gestures, a process emphasized in the five basic principles of this system:

a) Psychology of Gesture

The psychological gesture, derived from the symbolist theories of writer

¹⁸⁸ Associate Professor PhD., "George Enescu" National University from Iași, România, email: antonellacornici@yahoo.com

Andrei Bely¹⁸⁹, is a vital aspect of the Michael Chekhov Technique. It involves the physical expression of a character's internal desire, need, or impulse as an external gesture. This aspect focuses on how actors can use gestures and physical movements to convey and reveal the psychology and state of the character. Here are some key aspects of the psychology of gesture in this system:

- *Organic Gestures* - actors learn to create gestures that are authentic and consistent with the psychology of their character. These organic gestures stem from within the actor and are generated by the emotional state and motivations of the character.

- *Awareness of Gestures* - actors learn to be aware of their natural gestures and adapt them to fit the psychology of the character. For example, a character feeling closed off and vulnerable may move and navigate space differently than a confident and powerful character.

- *Understanding the Meaning of Gestures* - actors are encouraged to understand the significance of gestures and movements in the context of the story and relationships between characters. Gestures can express emotions, intentions, moods, and interpersonal relationships.

- *Experimentation and Exploration* - actors experiment with different gestures and movements to find those that best fit the psychology of the character. This exploration allows them to develop a diverse repertoire of gestures that they can use to build their characters.

- *Using Gestures as a Tool* - gestures and movements become tools through which actors can express the emotions and thoughts of the character and communicate with the audience. Gestures can be used to highlight the traits and distinctive characteristics of the character.

The psychology of gesture in the Michael Chekhov System helps actors develop authentic and vibrant characters that can communicate with the audience not only through words but also through body language. Through this approach, actors can deepen their understanding and expression of characters, bringing them to life convincingly and expressively.



b) Imagination and Imagery

A central aspect of this method is the use of the power of imagination to create and explore characters and situations. Actors are encouraged to harness their

¹⁸⁹ Andrei Bely (born Boris Bugaev) was a Russian novelist, poet, theorist, communist, and literary critic. His novel "Petersburg" was considered by Vladimir Nabokov as one of the four greatest novels of the 20th century.

imagination to connect with their roles and access the necessary emotions. This includes sensory imagination, which is the ability to feel, hear, see, smell, and taste things that are not physically present on the stage. By using sensory imagination, actors can bring their characters to life and create strong connections with the audience. Here are a few exercises:

c) X-Ray Exercise

In the X-Ray Exercise, actors visualize their character as if it were an X-ray. They envision their character in detail, including physical appearance, posture, facial expression, and any other distinctive features. This exercise helps them create a clear and detailed image of their character, as if examining an X-ray of it. Steps for this exercise:

- *Relaxation*: The actor begins by relaxing and clearing their mind of daily thoughts and stress. Deep breathing and relaxation techniques can be helpful in this phase.
- *Visualization*: The actor starts to visualize their character in detail. Picture the character's appearance, how they are dressed, and their facial expression. It is crucial to be as specific and detailed as possible.
- *Internal Exploration*: While focusing on the character's image, the actor begins to explore internal aspects. They question how the character feels, what emotions and thoughts they have at that moment. Imagine what is happening inside your character.
- *Emotional Connection*: The actor tries to emotionally connect with the character by experiencing the character's emotions and states. How does the character feel? What experiences have influenced their current state?
- *Polarity and Change*: The actor can explore the character's emotional polarity changes. For example, from sadness to joy or from calmness to anger. This helps them better understand the character's psychology.
- *Mobilization in Play*: After thoroughly exploring the character, the actor can use this image to get into character and build their performance on stage.



d) Secret Room Exercise

In the *Secret Room Exercise*, actors imagine having access to a secret room within their character's mind. Through this room, they can observe the character's thoughts, emotions, and memories. This exercise helps them enter the character's inner world and understand its psychology.

The actor begins by imagining a secret room within themselves, an imagined space where no one has ever been. This room can have any appearance and size. They mentally enter this secret room and start exploring the space with all their senses. Additionally, the actor can interact with imagined objects or characters in this room. While in this secret room, the actor starts to bring traits or characteristics of the character they will portray in the upcoming performance. The actor can use this room to explore and develop specific ideas or actions for their character. This exercise provides an opportunity to connect with the inner and unseen aspects of their character before bringing them onstage.

After spending time in the secret room, the actor returns to the present and uses this experience to enhance their portrayal of the character on stage. *The Secret Room Exercise* encourages the actor's imagination, creativity, and awareness of inner space. It helps them create deeper and more authentic characters, grounding them in their inner experience and relationship with their mental space.

e) Imaginary Store Exercise

Actors visualize an imaginary store with objects that are significant to their character. They explore these objects and try to understand their meaning and connection to the character's psychology. The actor begins by imagining an imaginary store with shelves, displays, and various objects. This store can be any kind of store, from an antique shop to a toy store or a candy store. It is essential for the actor to imagine this space as detailed and realistic as possible.

The actor enters the imaginary store and starts exploring the shelves and imagined objects. They should focus on all possible details, including the texture, color, smell, and sound of the objects. While exploring the imaginary store, the actor should interact with the objects. They can take items off the shelves, inspect them, touch them, feel their weight, and explore them with all their senses.

Additionally, they can create the story or history of each object, imagining who bought or sold it, why it was created, and how it ended up in the imaginary store. During this exercise, the actor can experience different emotions and moods. They can choose to feel joy, sadness, amazement, or any other emotion based on their interaction with the imagined objects.

After exploring the imaginary store and having rich interactions with the objects, the actor returns to reality and uses this experience to develop their observational skills, awareness, and imagination in their stage performance. This exercise helps the actor develop a deeper connection with the inner world of characters and create a rich and authentic space in their imagination.

f) Image Archive Exercise

Actors create an “archive” of images representing experiences, places, or people that have influenced their character. These images can be used to access the character's emotions and memories during performances. The purpose of this exercise is to enable the actor to build a rich source of personal images and memories that can be used to breathe life into their portrayed characters. By connecting to these personal images, the actor can bring authenticity and depth to their interpretations, creating more complex and detailed characters.

g) Imaginary Scenario Exercise

Actors imagine and construct scenarios in which their character interacts with

other people or finds themselves in different situations. This exercise helps them explore the character's relationships and reactions to various circumstances. The actor begins by selecting or creating an imaginary scenario for the character they are about to portray. The scenario should involve a specific situation or event that engages the character.

They then vividly imagine this scene, considering all elements involved: time, relationships with other characters, stage props, and the circumstances leading to this situation. The actor can explore different variations of the imaginary scenario, altering circumstances or details to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the character.

h) The Character's Meditation Exercise

Actors meditate on their character, allowing themselves to delve deep into their character's world. During meditation, they focus on the character's psychology, emotions, and thoughts.



These exercises encourage actors to use their imagination to create a rich and authentic inner world for their characters. By developing this inner image of the character, actors can become more connected and authentic in their performances, bringing the characters to life convincingly.

3. Psychology of Space

The concept of the psychology of space involves exploring and becoming aware of the impact of space on actors and their characters. Michael Chekhov argued that space is not just a passive background but significantly influences the interpretation and mood of actors.

- Physical Space

Actors are encouraged to be aware of the physical space where the action takes place and use it creatively to develop their characters. This includes being conscious of the objects on stage, the relationships between characters in space, and how space can influence the movement and behavior of characters.

- Mental Space

In the Chekhov Method, mental space refers to the imaginary inner space that actors create in their minds to explore characters and situations.

- Energy of Space

Chekhov suggests that space has a certain energy or atmosphere that can influence

interpretation. Actors are encouraged to feel and react to the energy of space authentically and creatively.

- *Transforming Space*

Another essential aspect of the psychology of space in the Chekhov Method is the ability of actors to transform space to reflect the states of characters or events on stage. This involves using imagery and movement to change space significantly.

4. Conclusions - Actor's Body

The Chekhov System places a particular emphasis on the awareness of the actor's body, using movement and relaxation techniques to allow actors to better express their characters and emotions. Actors learn to use their bodies to create lively and expressive characters. Body movement and posture can be used to show character traits, express emotions, and communicate moods. Actors are encouraged to be aware of body movements and use them intentionally.

The Chekhov Method allows actors to physically transform their appearance and behavior to fit the characters they portray. This may involve changes in posture, voice, or gestures to reflect the characteristics of the character. Breath is an essential element in acting. Actors are taught to develop control and awareness of their breath to support their expressiveness. By altering the rhythm, depth, and direction of breathing, actors can influence the mood and expression of their characters.

The Michael Chekhov system for actors has become increasingly popular in theatrical education and the film industry. It provides actors with a powerful set of tools to develop their acting skills and create memorable and authentic performances.



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