

Michael Chekhov as Actor, Teacher and Director in the West

Liisa Byckling

The work of the Russian actor Michael Chekhov can be viewed from many different angles: firstly, as a topic for biography and theatre history in the first half of the twentieth century; secondly, as a problem of preserving Russian ideas in a new cultural context; thirdly, the transformation of an emigre's ideas on foreign soil. Let us concentrate on one aspect of Chekhov's work: the origins and development of his studio work. He tried to realize the theatre of the future in the West; in practice it was the idea of studio as a laboratory, theatre as a community and a home.

Michael Aleksandrovich Chekhov (1891, St.Petersburg — 1955, Los Angeles) was nephew of Anton Chekhov and one of the original members of the Moscow Art Theatre's First Studio where he was taught by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Evgeni Vakhtangov. He emigrated from Russia in 1928.

He died in his home in Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, at the age of 64. At the time his death in 1955 Chekhov's name in Soviet Russia was wiped out from the history of Russian theatre. With “glasnost” he was rehabilitated, his books have been republished in Russia and he has become the legendary figure in his native country once again. On the other hand, we know that Chekhov created and taught an acting system which has become increasingly influential in the West. Eugenio Barba, director of the Odin Teatret in Denmark, one of the leading contemporary theorists of theatre, writes about Chekhov's book *To the Actor* that it is “one of the best practical manuals for the training of the ‘realistic’ actor”.

It is time to evaluate the great artistic pilgrimage made by an emigre from Moscow to Los Angeles that lasted for 27 years. During this journey Chekhov was building a spiritual home for people from many different countries and nations. Chekhov underwent four separate developments in his lifetime:

1. a celebrated acting career in Moscow,
2. a period of “wandering” in Berlin, Paris, Riga and Kaunas (1928-35),
3. a period of the Anglo-American Theatre Studio (1936-42) and, finally,
4. a Hollywood career (1943-55).

No complete biography of M.C. has ever been assembled, despite a strong interest in his life. Chekhov's two autobiographies, *The Path of the Actor* and *Life and Encounters* are written in an impressionistic style and only cover his earliest career.

My book *Mikhail Chekhov v zapadnom teatre i kino* (Michael Chekhov in Western Theatre and Cinema) was published in St. Petersburg in 2000. It is a complete chronological history of Mikhail Chekhov's work as actor, director and teacher in emigration. The book starts with a long Introduction about Chekhov's work in Moscow. My research incorporates a wealth of new material from archives in many countries: the Dartington Hall (England) and Bakhmeteff (New York) archives, and the Georgette Boner collection (Zurich), and also archives in Moscow, Riga and Vilnius. My research is based on theatre histories in the countries he worked, reviews of his productions, memoirs. I was fortunate to interview Chekhov's students and his assistant directors, many of whom have now passed away.

The Moscow period

To understand Chekhov we have to know his roots. The Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre laid the foundation for Chekhov's future explorations. In his opinion, it was “the theatre-and-school which has made such a lasting impression on the world and has yet to be rivalled.”

In Russia in the twenties, Michael Chekhov was considered the most original actor of his generation. Now he is called the most brilliant actor of the last century in Russia. His major roles in the Moscow Art Theatre and its Studio include: Caleb in Dickens' *Cricket on the Hearth*, Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* by Shakespeare, the title role in *Erik XIV* by Strindberg, Khlestakov in *The Government Inspector* (directed by Stanislavsky in 1921). Chekhov's performance stunned with its unbelievable improvised ease and unrestrained imagination. In *Erik XIV* (directed by Vakhtangov) the terrible truth of life (between two worlds — the dead and the living) was translated into an easy, balletic idiom.

As a theoretician and actor Chekhov did not accept the dualism of Western thinking. He wrote: “the actor, who must consider his body as an instrument expressing creative ideas on the stage, must strive for the attainment of complete harmony between the two, body and psychology”. Chekhov the actor embodied the complete synthesis of inner feeling and outer form, which the American director Robert Lewis was called “total acting”. The Czech writer Karel Capek wrote about Chekhov as “the secret of a remarkable artistic achievement”. “Chekhov demonstrates that that the body (simply and enigmatically) is the soul itself. A despairing, perfervid, timorous, trembling soul.”

The foundation for what after the Revolution became Michael Chekhov's method was laid in the acting style of Moscow Art Theatre, in psychological realism of Anton Chekhov's plays. At the same time Chekhov expressed the spirit of the turn-of-the-century Russian culture, symbolist poetry and non-naturalistic theatre. His favourite writer was Dostoevsky, one of his spiritual fathers was the symbolist writer Andrei Bely, his sources of inspiration came from philosophy, legends and fairytales.

Stanislavsky founded the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, a kind of laboratory for theatrical experimentation, where he sought the means to control the actor's moment of inspiration. Chekhov, like his teacher, was interested in the deepest questions of his profession. The so-called Stanislavsky system for the actor balances theory and practice. It is at once an aesthetic model and a set of teachable techniques. The aim was to mobilize the potential of the actor's creative nature to guarantee him truth of feeling and authenticity of the stage experience. Stanislavsky said to the English director Gordon Craig in Moscow: “If you want to see my System working at its best go to see Michael Chekhov tonight. He is performing some one-act plays by his uncle.” Chekhov was also influenced by Lev Tolstoy's moral teachings. He assumed the general ethical spirit of the First Studio. He accepted Stanislavsky's religious devotion to acting and commitment to art.

Chekhov borrowed important aspects of his work from Stanislavsky that are only incompletely expressed in his books. This first hand knowledge Chekhov would impart to his American students, thus filling in important gaps in the knowledge of Russian theatre school in the United States.

Already in the private Chekhov Studio in Moscow (1918-1922) the actor devised various techniques to induce a mood that allowed for creative work. He aimed at creating a feeling of truth and arousing actor's fantasy by means of improvisation and atmosphere. Chekhov used exercises based on yoga: techniques of observation, concentration and communication, and applied these to awaken the “life energy” of the actor. He also used exercises of communication, in which actors send and receive energy rays, not words. He adapted meditation techniques such as visualization, meaning that the actor creates a “filmstrip” of mental images from the character's life. Chekhov warned that all devices must be imbued with inner content and meaning; they should not become mere technical exercises.

Polemics with Stanislavsky centered on the concept of “experiencing” (*perezhivanie*) the role. Chekhov

preferred alternating the consciousness of actor and character to a “fusion” of actor with character. Chekhov advocated the idea of dual consciousness of the actor when he becomes the observer of his own work. He made a distinction between our higher, creative ego and the everyday ego that is concentrated only on self.

His system evolved into an alternative of Stanislavsky's, emphasizing the more universal, spiritual resources of acting rather than the historical, emotional and psychological details of the actor's life.

The writings of Rudolf Steiner, the German moral philosopher, exerted a powerful influence on Chekhov during his last years in Russia. Steiner's Anthroposophy became his private religion; eurythmy gave new impulses on how to refine non-verbal acting and develop the harmony of the actor's body. For the Russian actor Anthroposophy was “a new movement the tendency of which is directed towards the unification of science, art and spiritual knowledge”. At the centre of Chekhov's method was an emphasis on the creative imagination, and it was in this area that many of his ideas related to Steiner's teachings. Chekhov believed that the actor should develop not only physically, but spiritually as well, acquiring an inner life, rich with images from which he would be able to draw when creating a character. He developed a method which he hoped would bring out the latent powers of his students.

After the Revolution a new orientation took place in Chekhov's philosophy of life and theatre. From Stanislavsky's realism, from Vakhtangov's “fantastic realism”, and from Steiner, Chekhov drew the material from which he created his own method. Chekhov's system is closer to that of his colleague, Vakhtangov, than to his master, Stanislavsky, for he was more interested in theatrical form than in psychological representation. Chekhov's interest in the grotesque, the comic and the tragic derives from Vakhtangov. Their principles contradicted an art which aspired to create the illusion of real life on the stage, a truthful copy of reality.

When the First Studio became the Second Moscow Art Theatre in 1923, Chekhov became its director and carried on the work for five years. He created an alternative theatre which used symbolic and formal means of expression. His interpretation of *Hamlet* shook the public and annoyed Stanislavski because of what appeared to be an excess of artificiality and the grotesque. He played the role of Senator Ableukhov in *Peterburg* by Andrej Bely. The reasons for Chekhov's emigration were both political and personal: his ideas were not compatible with Communist ideology, and after a conflict with a group of leftist actors and a press campaign against him Chekhov left Soviet Russia in 1928. Both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold tried to convince him to return to Russia. Officially he never broke off his contacts with Soviet Russia, and only in 1946 he became an American citizen.

The first years in Europe

It has been said that Chekhov lived a double exile, separated from his homeland and from his theatre. However, with amazing tenacity he worked to develop the theatre of future, which meant creating a new technique of acting in a theatre with a repertoire based on the classics and folklore. All other tasks — acting in classic roles and directing — were subservient to this aim. For the rest of his life he directed several studios through which he disseminated his ideas as actor-director-teacher. Chekhov's dislocations in geographical and social space were not painless. He displayed a remarkable lack of enthusiasm for Western theatre.

In Berlin Chekhov acted in three productions in Max Reinhardt's theatres and in silent cinema. Chekhov's directorial talents were apparent in the production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in the Habima Theatre. The company proved that world classics could be successfully presented in Hebrew. Chekhov, whose mother was Jewish, felt that he was participating in the creation of new Jewish culture. *Twelfth Night*, presented as a light psychological comedy, was a success on tours in many

countries. This approach to Shakespeare was repeated later in the Baltic countries and America.

In Paris the studio work continued with a group of Russian emigre actors. His new project, an experiment in International Theatre, tried to develop a model of spiritual and archetypal theatre. The production of a musical pantomime *The Castle Awakens* in 1931 was based on Russian folktales. It advocated a symbolist aesthetic that viewed a work of art as a system of signs. In 1970's Peter Brook, in his Centre for Theatre Research, tried out a similar experiment in "international theatre." He was interested in "the capacity to listen through the body to codes and impulses that are hidden all the time at the root of cultural forms." "I was convinced," he continues, "that if they were brought to the surface, they could be instantly understood." A Russian critic compared Chekhov to a sectarian who sacrifices himself (perhaps unnecessarily) on the altar of arts. The experiment in Paris showed that neither the ideological theatre of the East nor the commercial theatres in the West allowed Chekhov to realize his ideas.

Studio work continued in Riga, Latvia and Kaunas, Lithuania, where the artist acted, directed and taught acting for two years 1932-34. His performances in roles created by Gogol, Shakespeare, Aleksei Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were met with enthusiasm. At this point acting and directing plays was more of a financial necessity than a calling for Chekhov, whose main aim was the development of his method. He participated in the founding of national theatre schools in Latvia and Lithuania. Here he made the first systematic attempt to display his method. He started writing the first draft of his book using the elements of the Stanislavsky system — such as concentration, observation, imagination, atmosphere, active analysis — as parts of his own method and developed them further. "For the Lithuanian actors, participation in Chekhov's studio work meant discovering a treasure," wrote the critic Balys Sruoga. One of Chekhov's last surviving students, the Lithuanian actress and director Kasimiera Kymantaite, said that the most important lesson she learnt from Chekhov was this: to enter the character's life intuitively, "not from my own experience, but by penetrating his or her feelings and thoughts". Here we have a simple formulation of the main difference between Stanislavsky's and Chekhov's methods.

Under the Communist regime Chekhov's students, who had become leading actors in Baltic theatres, applied his lessons without referring to the source. At the same time, Chekhov's teaching assumed a similar "underground" existence in the Soviet theatre, where his lessons were disseminated by his students, and his books were reproduced in samizdat, by unofficial channels.

The beginning of the Anglo-American Studio

The first contact with America took place in 1935, when Chekhov and his Russian company arrived in America. They played in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. The myth of Russian theatre was firmly embedded in American minds, especially after the tours of the MAT in the twenties. During the thirties Stanislavsky's method of actor training was winning acceptance in the U.S. where the Group Theatre and various Russian emigres were expounding it.

Chekhov's appearance in Gogol's *The Government Inspector* evoked some criticism, but left little doubt that imaginative innovations were possible within the framework of the Stanislavsky system. The American director Harold Clurman wrote: "We all considered Chekhov a true acting genius, thought the NY press had been unable to recognize it. Our actors felt that they had achieved some measure of honesty and truth in their work, but Chekhov's gift for combining these with sharply expressive and yet very free color, rhythm and design was something in which they knew themselves to be deficient, and which they therefore envied."

In 1935 the Russian artist's destiny changed: he went to England at the invitation of Mrs. Dorothy Whitney Elmhirst (an American millionaire) and her husband. Chekhov's dreams were realized in the

foundation of the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington Hall. The Studio opened in October 1936 with Beatrice Straight, daughter of Mrs. Elmhirst, as manager. For two years (1936-1938) Chekhov conducted laboratory work, exploring the ways to creativity through imagination, atmosphere, psychological gesture etc.

Dartington Hall in Southern England is a fourteenth-century castle converted into a centre for rural enterprise, for education and for the arts. By the time of Chekhov's arrival in Dartington it had become a professional centre for the arts, at first in dance — the Kurt Jooss ballet was invited — but ultimately in drama, music and fine arts, and it gained an international reputation. The Indian dancer Uday Shankar performed with his troupe in the open-air theatre. Chekhov greatly admired their art for its combination of pure movement and music.

Chekhov felt that only with young non-professional actors he would be able to train a troupe capable of creating a new standard for the theatre. The chief aim of the Chekhov studio was “to struggle against the absence of the ideal in the contemporary naturalistic theatre”. In these wonderful rural surroundings he opened a laboratory where he started at the beginning of the technique of acting, and he took people through the whole of it in every aspect. Chekhov's exploration was founded on the Moscow Art Theatre studio organization, on its spirit and principles; these he tried to implant first on English, then on American soil.

After three years of study the students were to form a permanent touring company. Students were selected mostly from the United States, but also from England and other European countries. The best known among English students of the CTS was Paul Rogers, who was to become famous for his roles in Shakespeare and modern drama.

When Chekhov came to Dartington he knew no English, but within a year he was speaking the language fluently and with a fresh and unexpected use of words. Dorothy Elmhirst wrote: “He taught not only with words but with every nerve and muscle of his body — every gesture he made was significant and revealing. He moved quickly and easily and seemed to be everywhere at once. (...) Chekhov was not like other men of theatre in London and New York. He was not the least pretentious. A slight, light man, he was in ordinary social relationships almost retiring, and always ready to make fun of himself. He combined humility on stage with imagination of enormous power. It was very obvious that he was a foreigner. His English was bad even after he had spent a year concentrating on learning it. But this only made him the more lovable. Dorothy laughed along with the others when he said to his students, ‘Now we will play with our balls.’”

The first year of the studio laid the groundwork, with speech and movement classes, gymnastics, improvisations and exercises. The teaching staff numbered eight. The Studio schedule included eurythmy and speech classes in the morning, or in other weeks body training and singing; also painting and practical musicianship and every afternoon technique of acting, a class taught by Chekhov. The method of speech training was that perfected by Rudolf Steiner. Students were trained in every aspect of theatre work. Chekhov believed that actors must have some knowledge of scene designing, costume making, production, music, and even writing. His ambition is to form a group in which every member was expert in the theatre. This needed careful and long training. The finished work, therefore, is a collaboration in the fullest sense of the word. The ideals which Chekhov set for the group were high, and they worked long hours with him every day.

In the beginning the students did a lot of improvisations and self-written sketches which were built up into playlets. Then scenes from *Don Quixote*, *Balladina* by Slowacki, *Peer Gynt* by Ibsen, *Joan of Arc*, and Shakespeare were rehearsed. A fairy-tale rehearsed in the first semester was *The Golden Steed*, an adaptation of a play written by a Latvian poet Jan Rainis.

An American journalist Honore Morrow came to attend the exercises in the spring of 1937. She wrote:

“On the stage, on little irregular wooden terraces, the young actors were crouching to simulate unawakened souls at a mountain's foot. (...) And the illusion for all of us was complete because it was so in the brain and eye of the gentle-voiced Russian who could not speak our language but who could control and inspire our imaginations.”

In Chekhov's opinion, the instrument of the actor is his body, and an actor's training consists of schooling that body until it becomes a sensitive instrument to express ideas and emotions. Dorothy Elmhirst wrote: “The actor had to make the attempt to get beyond one's ordinary body. To Chekhov imagination was the greatest of man's gifts. He was elaborating a method of passing over the threshold of selfconsciousness — and into the essence of character.”

Chekhov declared that he was trying to develop a new type of actor with a technique that would allow him to radiate when he appeared on the stage: “Unless you feel on fire to act — don't try to become actors,” he would say. Continuously he would remind his students that acting was a high calling, demanding complete devotion, that there were no short cuts, only hard work and more hard work.

Whenever Chekhov was asked a question about Stanislavsky, he would say: “I cannot answer that fairly. I haven't been in contact with him for several years — and he was always changing.” The favorite pupil of the Russian master would not commit himself at all to the particulars of Stanislavsky's system because he knew how dynamic and ever-changing it was. Even if Chekhov used many exercises of the First Studio, he hardly mentioned Stanislavsky's name in his classes and did not ask his students to read his book. In Chekhov's opinion, Stanislavsky's method was covered only partly by his method and it was much more complicated than his own.

Memoirs of Chekhov's students in my interviews with them show how his pedagogy spoonfed a receptive but unsophisticated student body. Deirdre Hurst du Prey said: “I think quite frankly that we were very inhibited at times, both by the Method — some of which seemed strange at first — and because it was so demanding. We felt we would never achieve the standard that Chekhov wanted. We loved and believed in him. We wanted to create “the Theatre of Future” with him.”

Felicity Mason writes: “We were often completely transported outside our normal selves. We were expanded into new dimensions, where embarrassment did not exist. Because of our exercises in empathy and team spirit, there was singularly little sarcastic criticism, envious competition, or a negative approach to the work. We felt free to laugh at each other.”

Visitors came to classes almost every Saturday. Among them were American actors of the Group Theatre, Stella and Luther Adler, and the director Robert Lewis.

Events in Europe prevented Chekhov from fulfilling his plans for the Studio in England. After the Munich crisis of 1938, the lengthening shadow of tyranny became insupportable for Chekhov; and at his request, the theatre studio was transferred to America to continue the work in a more congenial atmosphere.

A farewell performance was given by the students in Dartington, Dec. 1938. It was considered a complete vindication of Chekhov's methods. One spectator wrote: “there was a kind of magic about it all, a wholeness about even the short sketches. But the actors were not good enough for him. Apart from a couple of them, there was no outstanding quality.” This was one of reasons for the move to America.

In England the CTS was one of the pioneering institutions in the thirties, but its distance from London did not allow it to participate in English cultural life. Two years was, of course, too short a time in which to demonstrate positive results, but there is every reason to suppose that had political events taken a different course, the Studio would have consolidated its position in England. Now it was not possible to do more than demonstrate “work in progress” to the public.

The Studio becomes the Chekhov Theatre Players

Chekhov believed that in America there would be more interest in Russian training and students would be more eager for the method. The Studio was reopened in January 1939 at Ridgefield, Connecticut. Until 1942 the large estate was the home of Chekhov, his studio, and the theatre. Substantial financial backing was secured by the Elmhurst Foundation and Beatrice Straight. Six of the original students received actor-teacher diplomas from Chekhov in 1939. New students were auditioned for the Studio; among the twenty-two members of the permanent company, seventeen were American-born; others were Canadian, Australian, English and Austrian.

In Ridgefield, Chekhov trained an acting company and dealt with specific problems that were part of the actor's experience. For the Russian actor this meant reconsidering his methods and facing the harsh commercial theatre in the U.S. "The method ... has been changed somewhat, dictated by the reality of our work." The main points of his new, simplified method were four; the first of them was to apply a method of training which would develop emotional flexibility and body technique. The second and third aims were to impart knowledge of the methods of the playwright and the director. The fourth aim was to form a professional company.

The Chekhov Theatre Players fulfilled the three-year goal by becoming a professional theatre with a permanent acting company prepared to present plays on Broadway in the 1939-40 season. The debut of the company was far from the main stream of American theatre. *The Possessed*, a play based on Dostoevsky's novel, was chosen for the repertory "because of Dostoevsky's prophetic handling of themes and motives at the basis of the world situation today". The experience of Soviet communism and German fascism provided the impulse for the performance. Chekhov brought events of Russian life described by Dostoevsky closer to political realities of the twentieth century. The text, written by his Russian assistant George Shdanoff, was used as a basis for improvisation at the rehearsals. The play was published in 1939.

The Possessed opened on Broadway at the Lyceum Theatre on October, 24, 1939, and ran for two weeks. It received mixed reviews. The company proved interesting as a unit, however. One American critic wrote: "Mr. Chekhov has worked wonders with the company, and evolved the sort of coherent team playing that is to be expected of a disciple of the Moscow Art Theatre. The system does lead, now and then, to over-acting in details (...) to self-conscious perfection, but the company has power and concentration with some excellent individual performances." After the premiere, Chekhov was depressed by the reception of the production. He experienced another crisis that accompanied his cultural transplantation.

In New York Chekhov was offered parts in plays by Elia Kazan and many other American directors, but he declined the offers because it was impossible for him to overcome the psychological difficulty concerning his accent.

Chekhov turned his attention to preparing a professional touring company, fulfilling one of his major aims for the studio. The following year (1940), the group's prospects began to improve. Under the direction of Beatrice Straight and Alan Harkness, they went on three long tours to American towns and colleges, playing to sell-out crowds and enthusiastic audiences everywhere. The Chekhov Theatre Players were able to demonstrate the possibility of playing the classics in a way that was relevant to contemporary audiences.

The first tour took place in 1940. For two months, the company travelled by truck, bus and motor-car and performed at universities and colleges in fifteen states. This tour included *Twelfth Night* by Shakespeare and *The Cricket on the Hearth* by Dickens. Directing them Chekhov brought to the American stage Russian and continental ideas and his own interpretations.

The Playbill stated: "This tour (...) which covered fifteen states, from Massachusetts and New Hampshire in the North to Texas and Oklahoma in the South, proved successful in every way. They went to territory seldom, and in some cases never before, traversed by professional players. (...) It was an exciting life, with many adventures, to say nothing of the handicaps in assembling the shows in auditoriums and buildings ill-equipped for professional stage productions. But the enthusiasm of their audiences and the realization that they were bringing theatre to thousands of Americans, some of whom had never seen a stage production before, prompted them to tour again..." (The Playbill, 1941)

A critic wrote in Albany after the performance of *The Cricket on the Hearth* at the Institute of History and Art (October 16, 1940): "An amazing aspect of these new acting troupe on the American scene is the maturity they have achieved in spite of their youth. There is real conviction in their work..."

In a letter Chekhov wrote to Dorothy that "The group had grown and developed; acting before the audience alone was for them a great stimulus to force open the buds which they already had." He was thrilled and encouraged: "The success which they have had they deserve completely and fully. Their maturity which begins to be seen is of such a kind which can never be compared with the clichéd maturity of so-called professionals. They remain fresh and young in their spirit in spite of the experience which is being so quickly accumulated. It gives me also the greatest joy and proves to me certain principles which I believe in and confirms certain points of the method."

The following year the troupe toured with *King Lear*, produced by Chekhov and his assistant Alan Harkness. The Russian actor was obsessed by the concept of philosophical staging. He wanted to express the idea of transforming material values into spiritual values. The action as designed was set in abstract space. The stage setting presented a geometrical system of planes reminiscent of Gordon Craig.

The following year the troupe toured the second time with *King Lear*, produced by Chekhov and his assistant Alan Harkness. There was also a play for children Iris Tree's *Troublemaker-Doublemaker*.

In December 1941, the company brought *Twelfth Night* to Broadway. Brooks Atkinson in the New York Times praised the production of Shakespeare's comedy as "a pleasant little holiday from the routine of hit-and-flop playgoing". The critical response was much better than it had been to *The Possessed*. In the winter and spring of 1942, the company toured the South and the Midwest as well as in the East, taking in new territory in Florida, Texas, Oklahoma and the Middle Western States.

It was hard to assign a place to the Chekhov Theatre Players in the American theatrical pattern. On one hand, it was an itinerant organization, which should perhaps have been grouped with the so-called 'Roadrunners'. On the other hand, because it continued to operate a school from which new talent was enlisted into the company, it could better be compared to the professional theatres on Broadway.

Chekhov integrated the American experience into his teaching. A branch of the Studio was opened on Broadway in the winter of 1941-42. Chekhov conducted drama courses for professional actors; among them were actors of the recently expanded Group Theatre.

It was the artist's destiny to have his fondest hopes regularly shattered by political upheavals, revolutions and wars. Again, it was the war that dogged their steps, and America's entry in the war caused most of the leading actors to be called up. The theatre was forced to close.

The farewell performance of the Chekhov Theatre Players took place on Broadway in September, 1942. Chekhov appeared in English in two one-act plays based on his uncle's short stories. He was considered an extraordinary performer, "this little man who has hitherto been known to New Yorkers only as an uncomfortably Slavic director," to quote John Mason Brown. "He is a player possessed of the virtues which distinguish Russian acting at its best. In him the Stanislavsky system blossoms on native soil. (...) he is a character actor of uncommon talents, and a comedian capable of astonishing depth no less than drollery." However, Chekhov's acting career on the stage did not continue.

Many young actors from Chekhov's school later worked in Hollywood and in the New York theatres. Hurd Hatfield became famous for his part in the film *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, and others; Ford Rainey had a substantial career in cinema and TV in Los Angeles. Chekhov's assistant George Shdanoff had a successful school in Los Angeles. Other students included Terence Morgan, Ronald Bennett and, the most famous of all, Yul Brynner, who was of Russian origin. Beatrice Straight made a career in the theatre; she formed Theatre Inc. in New York and won an Academy Award in Hollywood. The Chekhov method was revived when the old students opened a Michael Chekhov Studio in Manhattan, New York, in 1980. There the third generation of the Chekhov method teachers was trained. One of them, Leonard Petit, has been invited to Finland: he conducted a master class in Hanko Summer University in three summers.

Hollywood

The Second World War had made survival impossible for the small art theatres. Chekhov was obliged to put his knowledge at the disposal of Hollywood actors.

The last twelve years of the artist's life was spent in Hollywood, where he taught and acted in ten films, playing character parts. His first film was *Song of Russia* was directed by Gregory Ratoff. His next film gained him the most recognition. It was Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* with Ingrid Bergman and Gregory Peck. For his part as professor Brulov Chekhov received an Academy Award nomination for best supporting actor. One critic wrote that the film was “coldly factual” “until Chekhov brought it the warmth of his personality and the charm of his characterization”.

Chekhov's other Hollywood film appearances included: *Cross My Heart*, *Spectre of the Rose*, *Abie's Irish Rose*, *Texas*, *Brooklyn and Heaven*, *Invitation*, *Holiday for Sinners*, and *Rhapsody* (dir. Charles Vidor 1954, with Elizabeth Taylor.)

In his later years, Chekhov was interested in applying his teaching to the fast pace and fragmented nature of film and television. His technique is perfect for the needs of today's actors, who must pick up ideas quickly and use them instantly.

At first he was invited to teach and direct by The Actors' Laboratory. In 1946 he directed *The Inspector General*. It is interesting that eventually the teaching of Chekhov and other Russian emigre actors became a matter of coaching alone, separated from theatrical production.

At last, “Chekhov's American Studio” (even if it never was called that) emerged in Los Angeles. In 1948-1955 Chekhov worked with film actors. Distinction should be made between actors and directors who attended his lecture series, and actors who studied privately with him. He taught improvisation exercises and gave lectures on acting and the creative process at The Drama Society in Hollywood.

Chekhov taught also private lessons to film actors at his home in Beverly Hills. Numerous film actors went to him for help with their specific roles and for their general acting development. They included, among others: John Barrymore, Jr., Ingrid Bergman, Joan Caulfield, James Dean, John Dehner, Eddie Grove, Jennifer Jones, Jack Klugman, Sam Levine, Marilyn Monroe, Jack Palance, Gregory Peck, Mala Powers, and Anthony Quinn. In one of the books on Hollywood cinema Chekhov is mentioned as a teacher who imparted much knowledge to his students in Hollywood. Directors who studied under the Russian actor were Martin Ritt and Artur Penn. Carnovsky, a founding member of the Group Theatre writes: “... He was an immensely complicated man, an Ariel, a great teacher... Most of all he understood the harmony of Body and Psychology, as he put it. ‘Listen to your bodies,’ he would say, ‘And they will interpret the movement of your inner impulses.’ Although he himself was gifted with a great intellect, he scorned its usefulness for the actor, preferring to obey what one might call the “muscularity of imagination”. In a book *Actors Talk about Acting*, Carnovsky says: “Michael Chekhov

understood the actor's nature better than anyone else since — and perhaps including, Stanislavsky.”

Other famous directors such as Stella Adler and Robert Lewis admired Chekhov greatly as an acting genius and studied his methods in class. Lewis mentions Chekhov's quote which he used often afterwards: “The highest point of our art is reached when we are burning inside and command complete outer ease at the same time.”

“Michael Chekhov said that acting should be a joyful process,” said Jack Colvin, who studied with the Russian artist in the fifties in Los Angeles. “The joy of acting happens because of the audience and the partnership with other actors — union, communication, losing part of yourself, sometimes absolute bliss.”

The Russian actor attempted to use a vocabulary that spoke directly to the performer's mind. More than anything else, Chekhov's work became associated with the use of imagination. He schooled his students in finding imaginary stimuli to fire their emotions. Known for his powerful dramatic interpretations, Chekhov gave particular attention to the creation of character. Characterization was found through the person's imaginary center, imagining his body, discovering the psychological gesture, and other means.

In the United States Chekhov published his memoirs in *Russian Life and Encounters*, (*Novyi zhurnal* 1945-1946). Two important records of his method were written. In 1946 he published the book *O tekhnike aktyora* at his own expense in Russian. This is the authorized version of Chekhov's ideas and practice. It was also his legacy to Russia. “I wrote it for the Russian actor, in whom I believe,” Chekhov stated in a letter to the writer Mark Aldanov. The book was infiltrated into Soviet Russia and was read by actors.

In 1953 the book *To the Actor* was published in English in New York. Chekhov revealed clearly his emphasis on imagination, intuition and the archetypal psychological gesture. He also paid tribute to Stanislavski as the creator of the one method “expressly postulated for the actor”, who had urged him to write down his thoughts concerning the technique of acting. The book was not successful during his lifetime; it was not a period for acting books.

Paul Gray wrote in the *Drama Review* in 1964 that Chekhov's book revealed one of the great failures of the American theatre: “This extraordinary performer, the creator of highly charged and significant productions of Erik XIV and Hamlet, was never able to make his contribution to the actual practice of the Stanislavsky system in New York”. His book remained in print for almost 20 years and finally became successful. Eugenio Barba considers *To the Actor* “one of the best actor's manuals”. “It should be read and re-read, reflected upon, pried into.” Barba writes: “... with Michael Chekhov we find ourselves very close to home: the actor to whom he is speaking is the kind most commonly found in the theatre, cinema and television today.” (*The Paper Canoe*, 1995). Other books, compiled from Chekhov's lectures, have published in the last 30 years. They have been translated into many European languages and Japanese. Chekhov's secretary Deirdre Hurst du Prey published class notes in her book *Lessons for the Professional Actor* (New York 1985), and others.

Twelve tape recordings of lectures by Chekhov were made in the Drama Society in 1955. Some of the tapes have been edited and published by Mala Powers. (*Michael Chekhov: On Theatre and the Art of Acting. The Six Hour Master Class. A Guide to Discovery with Exercises* by Mala Powers. 1992.)

Even if Michael Chekhov did not entirely fit into the milieu of an alien culture he felt that his mission was to bring the Europeans and Americans the experience of Russian professional actors' training and the understanding of theatre work not as a job but as a calling.

Chekhov writes in his book *To the Actor*: “... the real task of the creative artist is not merely to copy the outer appearance of life, to interpret life in all its facets and profoundness, to show what is behind

the phenomena of life, to let the spectator look beyond life's surfaces and meanings.”

Chekhov answered to his Lithuanian student, Kasimiera Kymantaite: “Why is it that I am wandering around the world? I want to hand over a small key to the magic of the theatre.”

© Liisa Byckling