

THE “OTHER” CHEKHOV

Excerpts from *THE CRAFT* by Jean Schiffman
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Michael Chekhov’s underappreciated methods may offer the solution to actors struggling with sense memory.

If you’ve studied Meisner and Strasberg and other approaches to acting training, yet you feel you’re still not quite fulfilling your potential as an actor—Try Chekhov. Working with the Stanislavski-based meat-and-potatoes of acting, such as actions and objectives, Chekhov stressed integrating the physical with the psychological, and focused on the use of the imagination rather than a reliance upon personal memories to access feelings. His techniques are applicable to both film and stage.

We’re talking about the “other” Chekhov, of course—Michael Chekhov, the Russian-born nephew of the playwright Anton. Among the famous and influential acting teachers of the century, Michael Chekhov is also one of the most obscure, at least in America (where he lived and worked the latter part of his life, dying in 1955 on the same day as James Dean.)

Although many of Chekhov’s exercises are used widely in acting programs, there are only a handful of teachers in the United States who focus entirely on Chekhov’s approach. Why?

It’s probably because of the mystical element in his theories. Chekhov was a follower of Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian who formulated a belief system called Anthroposophy. However, I just read Chekhov’s book “On the Technique of Acting” (published in 1991 based on earlier writings), and whatever you think of his spiritual beliefs, Chekhov had plenty of down-to-earth advice for the actor. Chekhov wrote, “The desire and the ability to transform oneself are the very heart of the actor’s nature.”

I asked Los Angeles actress Lisa Dalton, one of the few who teach pure Chekhov, why she thinks his lessons are important. “Chekhov merges imagination and inner life with physical life,” she said. “Only Chekhov addressed the spirit of the actor.” Initially Dalton taught both Meisner and Chekhov but eventually focused just on Chekhov, believing his system encompasses all others. She explained it this way: “Actors remove themselves from the everyday environment and put themselves in the circumstances of the character. They use an image to do that—whether through the immediate, as in Meisner, through the memory, as in Strasberg, or through the power of observation, as in Adler or Hagen, Chekhov does all that, plus he uses what lives in our dream world, our fantasies.”

She further clarified the difference between Chekhov and Meisner: “Meisner gets you under the mask (the everyday face we present to the world) to respond as you. Chekhov says all our characters have (their own) masks, and we climb inside our character and find out how he feels, but the art is in finding the mask of that character.”

I asked Dalton why his teachings are a relevant for today’s film actors as for the classical stage actor in wig and false nose. “The character you’re playing may be 95 percent you, and that ‘ain’t broke’, so you don’t need to fix it,” said Dalton. “But you need to pay attention to that five percent that’s different from the everyday you.” Agreed.

Psychological Gesture

Chekhov is particularly well known for the psychological gesture, another physical rehearsal technique. Its purpose is to explore your character – her needs, desires, by creating a physical gesture using all of your body that represents the character. If you truly engage your body and mind, promises Chekhov, you can count on that gesture to internalize and affect your performance in imaginative and deeply truthful ways. He also developed the rehearsal technique of finding your character’s Center, the physical place from which impulses originate. Imagine a center in your chest, suggests Chekhov. “While moving onstage ever so slightly – perhaps only your finger moves – you will feel intense streams of power coming from your chest to your finger.” You can see where rehearsal techniques like this can work for you on screen as well, when your movements are limited but you must be full of inner life.