The Rhythm of Space and the Sound of Time
Michael Chekhov’s Acting Technique in the 21st Century
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For my father
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Preface

An Archetypal Journey

In the field of consciousness studies the study of archetypes is controversial but according to Derek Steinberg’s recent book right now there is a confirmation of an equivalent mechanism in neuroscience and linguistics which suggests that archetypes are an abstraction. They are partly ideas, partly cultural, partly neural yet non-existent in any of these areas. They are thus “neither entirely natural or super-natural” concludes Steinberg (106-107). An archetype is an awareness of what is yet unknown. Not an image in the mind but an innate capacity to form an image in the mind. As such archetype is a prerequisite for curiosity and exploration according to Steinberg who brings together fields as varied as mathematics, the arts, psychology, biology, psychotherapy, linguistics, genetics, religion and neurology in his study of human consciousness published in 2006.

In retrospect I see the journey which led to writing this book as an archetypal journey which started as an awareness of what was yet unknown to me on an intellectual level. Appropriately, my influences on this journey parallel the diverse group that I will describe in this book; namely the philosophical influences on Michael Chekhov himself. If I analyzed this in the archetypal sense I could say that my mind had a template that it had to follow. A kind of an invisible structure and a modus operandi which organized the outward events of my studies from within. A highly influential abstraction, which was neither entirely natural nor super-natural.
My father who was a cardiologist and a lecturer at the medical faculty of Zagreb University had also a side-profession. He was a Goetheologist who went so far as to lecture in Weimar on Goethe and around the world on matters of cardiology. His lectures on Goethe’s writing to medical students became legendary and the students knew that their oral exam in internal medicine might have a surprising question about Goethe. My father claimed that Goethe was his only real friend and would spend endless hours reading him in his study and occasionally would run out into the living room excited to read to us a bit of Goethe’s poetry he found beautiful always with the disclaimer: “If you could only read it in the original. This translation doesn’t do it justice”. He talked about Goethe being a polymath with utmost admiration and sometimes pulled out reproductions of Goethe’s paintings or spoke of his philosophy. Needless to say as a rebellious teenager I became annoyed by this Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who was raised to a Godlike position in our household and as I grew older I started pursuing my own interests in literature and art which deliberately did not include him. In fact, I would steer clear of anything that had to do with Goethe.
Little did I know in year 2000 when I started to study Michael Chekhov’s Acting technique, that five years later the first sub-chapter in Chapter One of my thesis would be titled: “The Influence of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe”. At first I found this amusing but more I thought about it I found it in a way a confirmation of Goethe’s “resistance to the absurdities of a reductionist philosophy of nature which explains phenomena by denying them independent existence and a logic of their own” (Steuer 176). The phenomenon in this case is my encounter with Chekhov’s technique and my subsequent studies.

So this was the logic: About fifteen years ago a friend of mine became interested in Buddhism and embarked on several years of intense study. When I asked her to define for me the goal of Buddhism she replied that the aspiration is to be present fully in every moment. Being able to achieve this, she said, equals enlightenment which we can come to through different meditation practices. “But this is the goal in acting” I thought, and thus started the inquiry into Buddhist practices and their connection to acting. I found out that this connection is at least as old as Noh theatre. I also found out that the key words in Buddhist training such as relaxation, concentration, will, openness, quality of effort, starting from where you are, inner and outer journeys, absorption, fearlessness, compassion (to name but a few) are identical to the key words in many forms of acting training. I wanted to learn more so I started to learn Buddhist meditation practices and soon I engaged in them daily and this continues to the present day. This all happened as I began teaching acting, first independently and then at Ryerson Theatre School where I continue to teach at the present time.

Then in the year two-thousand I entered the University of Toronto’s School of Graduate Studies at the Drama Center and coincidentally that same year I started to study Michael Chekhov’s acting technique within the Michael Chekhov International Association (MICHA). This meant that immediately upon learning the basic elements of the technique I could start to experiment with these in my acting classes. I could then seek out theory to analyze and write about those experiences as a part of my graduate studies. As well, I right away started to apply the technique in all of the projects which I undertook in the job of an actor. In short since 2000 Chekhov’s technique has really been a part of the all aspects of my professional
and artistic life where I was an investigator and an observer, and an object and a subject. In Goethean sense of the anthropomorphic character of knowledge this voyage has enabled me to do what Goethe insisted on: namely to continuously reflect and revise theoretical premises.

A Journey of Doubt

When my good friend, actor and teacher Suzana Nikolić of University of Zagreb initially recommended Chekhov’s technique in 2000 I decided to attend my first MICHA seminar with a great deal of resistance. Primarily I took the trip to Connecticut in order to prove to myself that the process that I was using at the time as an actor and teacher was better than the Chekhov technique. What I practiced could be described as a combination of elements of early Stanislavsky’s System and Strasberg’s Method. I found it very effective and thus believed that it was the most successful and valuable method in existence. Also at that time I did not have any doubt about the supremacy of the style of acting which came as a result of it, namely life-like naturalism.

In fact as I was on my way to Eugene O’Neill Theatre Centre I remembered having a discussion with a student who attended one of my classes which I taught at Equity Showcase Studio in Toronto in the early nineteen-nineties. He suggested that using imagination and not personal memory was perhaps a more interesting approach to acting and mentioned that Chekhov’s technique can provide the means and tools for such an approach. In a very long classroom discussion I tried to convince him that such an approach would without any doubt result in creating acting which would lack believability because it could not possibly touch the actor deeply, and by that meant on a personal level. At that time it was believability which meant the most to me as an actor and a teacher and the use of personal memory in acting was the way to it as far as I was concerned. The way I used the word believability was in fact interchangeable with the word verisimilitude. In other words “believable” in my world-view was only “believable” if it were life-like. It follows that I equated life-like with the Truth with a capital T. Yet after only a day of exploring with Chekhov’s technique, the Truth proved to be larger than life-like. A week later I couldn’t deny how profoundly this work affected my whole being –
my body, voice and mind and more than that – how joyful I felt. Little did I know that once I started to learn more about the theory, I would be “re-discovering” the connection between Buddhism and acting and then linking all of this to my father’s best friend’s Goethe’s perception of a whole (an organism) derived from the relation of its parts.

Subsequently my research combined with my practical explorations of Chekhov’s technique has completely changed the above described naturalistic aesthetics. I now approached teaching acting and my own performance primarily as a search for truthfulness but I did not equate this with the life-like performance any longer. I began to relish the complexities of the technique. I was thrilled by the fact that the technique was suitable both for the beginner actor who needs to discover the basic psycho-physical connection and for an accomplished artist who wants to reach far beyond the limit of his/her own personality and comfort zone.

However, this was not the only profound change. As the journey progressed I realized that as a teacher and an actor I will always deal with the multitude of situations. That in the end nothing can be pre-programmed completely and that one has to look at the nature of any project and any individual’s process and then use the method appropriate within the circumstances. I attribute this realization to the holistic nature of Chekhov’s technique and the five guiding principles. It owed much to Chekhov’s fifth guiding principle which advocates artistic freedom and encourages the artist not to be bound by dogmatic thinking of any sort. In my practice I’ve found out that in a many a classroom situation Chekhov’s technique was the only means to a student’s growth. However, the tools given to us by early Stanislavsky, or Strasberg could be most helpful in some cases where Chekhov’s technique became too demanding. I realized that although in theory these might be cast in opposition to each other in practice they are not mutually exclusive. So if my first shift was a one-hundred and eighty degree one, it was still a shift that replaced one teaching with the other, one set of rules with another new set of rules. The second shift took me another one-hundred and eighty degrees so that I made a full turn. At the end of it all I came to the place I started from but with a fundamentally different perspective. By this I mean that I am currently back at the point which can be termed as “a need to investigate” and to relate it back to Goethe this is a confirmation of his idea of the process of ongoing meditation:
Man may elevate his mode of apprehension as high above the common one as he wishes, he may purify it as much as he likes, still, as a rule, it remains nothing but a mode of apprehension; that is: an attempt to comprehend several objects in terms of some intelligible relation, which strictly speaking, they do not possess. Hence our inclination towards hypotheses, theories, terminologies, and systems, all of which we cannot disapprove of because they are necessary products of the way our own nature is organized”. (Steuer 162-63)

What is a natural need for Goethe is currently seen by some consciousness theorists as a function of archetypal structure of the mind, a “prerequisite for curiosity and exploration” (Steinberg 107).

My new starting point is a mode of apprehension characterized by a desire to continue to develop my knowledge of the actor’s process (more hypotheses, theories, terminologies, and systems). It is not based upon only an academic or a theoretical consideration or only an empirical reality but as an integration of both of these. Thus, the greatest personal benefit for me as a theatre practitioner and theorist is that throughout the process of writing this book I have outgrown specific belief systems and their variations. I now know that it is very useful to remember that in every category of a system, the face of empirical evidence will show that there are instances in which the comprehensive framework of reference is the most useful “system” so to speak. Most satisfyingly the journey of writing this book has been an acquisition of such a comprehensive framework and this is what I hope the reader will take away as well.

And although I prefer to use Chekhov’s technique, I can by no means lay a claim that this technique is better than others or more effective than other currently used techniques. Rather, the destination that my archetypal voyage has brought me to is one of tolerance towards apparently contradictory methods in theory and practice. It has in the end fostered my understanding of the fact that any acting training needs to experience and understand the most extreme aspects of an actor’s personality and then develop the process which will be most suitable to help a person grow, change, transform, learn and perform. That being said we come to the crux of the matter or my main finding which is philosophical: the growth is not a negotiable quantity. It is to get away from the actor’s ego into the universal, archetypal mind. It always assumes that stressing one aspect of ones personality over long periods of time impoverishes another aspect and