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The theatrical System of Michael Chekhov

Andrei Kirillov

In the Russian theatrical tradition the term “system” has become firmly associated with the acting system or method of Konstantin Stanislavsky. It is but one of many schools of acting that emerged in twentieth-century theatre, each of them possessing its own technical and methodological principles, and based on its own philosophy of theatre and artistic ideology. Whether we are speaking of the theatre of Georg Fuchs, Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Aleksandr Tairov, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Bertolt Brecht, or Jerzy Grotowski, we find that these theatre visionaries tend towards radical self-determination regarding the principles of acting. The predominance of a director’s name in the designation of each school is not accidental. Acting technique was determined by the theatrical model in question. For this reason it is interesting to study a system developed in the twentieth century by an actor and for actors, because Michael Chekhov’s own acting, his theatrical theory, and his pedagogy, far from contradicting the aesthetics of the era of the director, once again confirm its predominance. The number of theatre roles performed by Michael Chekhov after he joined the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in 1912 is quite small. Excluding his early walk-on parts on the main stage of the MAT and concert performances, during the sixteen years of Chekhov’s Moscow period he played eleven roles. Curiously, during the twenty-seven years Chekhov spent abroad, apart from the previous roles of his Moscow repertoire and participation in random dramatizations of Anton Chekhov’s sketches, he performed in the theatre only five new major parts. Given this fact, I shall focus on the origins of his acting system in the Russian period, asking how his thinking changed over time.

Michael Chekhov as actor-analyst and teacher

As Chekhov matured as an artist and acquired greater creative independence, the intervals between new roles became proportionately longer. His sudden burst of fame after his legendary performance as Khlestakov in the 1921 MAT production of Nikolay Gogol’s The Government Inspector was brought to an abrupt end by his
emigration in 1928. In the seven years between these two key dates Chekhov played only three new roles (Hamlet, Ableukhov, and Muromsky), each of which, however, became an outstanding event in Russian theatre history. The number of his appearances on stage is even less impressive if we consider that during this period at the Second Moscow Art Theatre (MAT 2) and on tours he was often replaced in some of his earlier roles by understudies. There was an interval of three years between Khlestakov and his next role, Hamlet. Bearing in mind the extreme intensity of Chekhov’s creative inner life, one cannot help wondering what could have filled this strange gap in the work of a thirty-year-old artist at the peak of his career and recognition. Evidently, Chekhov’s analytic attitude to his own creative activity and to the art of acting in general emerged during this rather early period and developed organically into a kind of analytical and pedagogical “parallel” to his stage experiences.

Chekhov created his own acting studio in 1918. A year later, he began to publish his interpretation of Stanislavsky’s System in the journal Gorn. Throughout the last years of Vakhtangov’s life Chekhov collaborated with him in his directorial and pedagogical work in different studio collectives. In 1921 he met Andrey Bely and through him discovered Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy, which influenced significantly the development of Chekhov’s own views on theatre. The following year Chekhov assumed leadership of the First Studio of the MAT. During the 1923–24 rehearsals of Hamlet he systematically worked with actors to develop a “new technique of acting” (Chekhov 2013). By 1923, in his answers to a questionnaire on the psychology of creativity, Chekhov had formulated his own original principles of the

Figure 2.1 Michael Chekhov (1929). (Private Collection. Courtesy Andrei Kirillov.)
actor’s work on the role and the path to its embodiment on stage (1995: 2.65–75). While staging a dramatization of Andrey Bely’s novel Petersburg at the MAT 2 (1924–25), he conducted experimental pedagogical work with the actors, teaching them to master the expressive potential of stage rhythm. In 1926 he published an article titled “The Mystery of Creativity” about the problems of the craft of acting (2.80–82). The 1926–27 season saw Chekhov conducting exercises with the actors of the MAT 2, teaching them the principles of his pedagogical system (Chekhov 1926–27). Two more articles appeared in 1927: “On Character Types in the Theatre” and “The Production of The Government Inspector in the Meyerhold Theatre” (Chekhov 1995: 2.84–85, 86–90). In the first, which contained his response to the questionnaire, he reexamined the inner limitations and dominant aspects of the prevailing artistic philosophy in the actor’s profession, while in the second he affirmed the objective existence of an ideal and self-sufficient world of artistic images. Additionally, 1926 saw the publication of his essay on Don Quixote and in 1928 he kept a diary while rehearsing the title role (1995: 2.82–84, 99–111). Both these documents offer insight into the inner laboratory of Chekhov’s own acting work and are derived from his suggested method of “image imitation.”

In essence this Russian period marks a complete cycle in his formation as an artist and teacher, at least the first significant phase of this process. In 1918 Chekhov was simply a former pupil of Stanislavsky and Leopold Sulerzhitsky,3 a natural talent, but still an interpreter mediating his teachers’ views; by the time of his emigration, however, he had formed his own original System not only theoretically, but in his teaching practice, which obliged him to establish his own studio and theatre. Judging by his work on Hamlet and Petersburg, he seems to have used every new production and his artistic leadership of the MAT 2 primarily to conduct his pedagogical experiments and to move theatre out of what he considered the current artistic and philosophical impasse. Immediately after his emigration from Russia in 1928 he wrote from Berlin to the actors of the MAT 2: “It is impossible for me to stay in theatre just as an actor who merely acts some roles, because I have long ago outgrown the phase of being enthusiastic about particular roles. The only thing that can inspire and motivate me to do creative work is the idea of a whole new theatre, the idea of a new theatrical art” (1995: 1.336). As far as Chekhov was concerned, his possible return to his homeland depended directly on whether he would be able in practice to achieve this reformative mission.

**Stanislavsky’s favorite pupil**

Any discussion of the origin of Chekhov’s theatrical system naturally turns to his artistic biography, which reveals a large variety of sources and influences interacting and intersecting in his evolution. It was, however, his creative apprenticeship at the First Studio of the MAT that provided the necessary systematic theatrical training at the beginning stage of his professional evolution. Independently of how their further artistic paths developed, Chekhov and Vakhtangov were Stanislavsky’s pupils, his favorite pupils, in the fullest sense. Within a year Vakhtangov was entrusted with teaching Stanislavsky’s System, while Chekhov was recognized by the master as an
ideal actor who had mastered it completely. The apprenticeship of both pupils as well as their fellow students at the Studio was marked by fanatical loyalty and unlimited faith in their beloved teacher to whom they adhered not only in spirit but even to the letter. In 1915 Chekhov, speaking on behalf of his fellow students, described them and himself as a “gathering of believers in the Stanislavsky religion” (1995: 2.456). When Vakhtangov began his independent pedagogical activity in various Moscow studios, it was precisely Stanislavsky’s System that he followed. He adhered to the principles of the System in working with the actors as the director of his own early productions. Chekhov also taught Stanislavsky’s System in his own Studio and dedicated his first sizeable publication to its exposition, commentary, and defense (2.31–47, 47–58). However, at this point, certain paradoxes arise.

In his book An Actor Prepares and in the preliminary notes for it Stanislavsky devoted several paragraphs to a veiled but rather transparent polemic with Michael Chekhov (1988–99: 2.467–68; 3.496–97; 4.382). Accounts of Stanislavsky’s life and creative work show clearly his growing irritation and disagreement with the direction being taken by his brainchild the First Studio (later renamed the MAT 2) in general and Chekhov in particular. In the Studio first Vakhtangov led this tendency, and later Chekhov; it arose naturally out of the evolution of the Studio and from the demands of their art. It would be absurd to suspect that someone’s evil intent or bad influence was the motive. It would also be strange to look for fundamental mistakes and deliberate distortions in the work of Stanislavsky’s most faithful and sincere followers. It would be more logical to concede that precisely because they had mastered the System and made it theirs, the students of the First Studio became aware of the inner limitations of the method and began to search for possible solutions. Chekhov and Stanislavsky met for the last time in 1928 in Berlin and spent many hours clarifying their differences regarding the nature of creative acting (Chekhov 1995: 1.158–59, 337–39; Kirillov 2009).

Nature of what and to what purpose?

Stanislavsky asserted that his System was objective and universal, not invented but taken from nature itself. In his turn Chekhov was also certain about the objectivity of his theatrical method: “What I am suggesting to you is not my own theory […], what I have stated is not my personal invention. […] This is cast, harmonious, the only possible theatre way” (1926–27: L. 16). Clearly, Stanislavsky’s and Chekhov’s assertions that their methods originated in nature do not mean that they understood, interpreted, and, especially, used nature in the same way. Why the appeal to nature? What aspects of the totality of nature should be singled out? Is it at all possible for nature to guarantee the objectivity of a theatrical concept?

Nature is only one of the initial materials of the creative artist’s actions, although, unlike his fellow artists working in other disciplines, the actor combines in himself both artist and instrument. However, the actor is not only natural, but social as well. His attachment to history and culture, ethics and aesthetics is no less important. But most of all he is an artist. This is why physiology, anatomy, psychology, and other
natural (but not only natural) qualities are meaningful in an actor’s actions only insofar as they serve to achieve an artistic result. On stage the physiological and psychological aspects of human existence may or may not be artistic factors. In and of themselves they are profoundly neutral. And even the factor of Spirit or spirituality, which Stanislavsky proposes as the supreme criterion, does not guarantee their metamorphosis because spirituality is also not a prerogative of art in general and of theatre in particular.

Stanislavsky’s works on the System employ the artistic and aesthetic notions and criteria as adjectives rather than as values that define the goals and logic of development of his method. The emotional experience, which the System is designed to instill and control, appears to be not so much a means but the goal itself. It is provoked and adjusted through the given circumstances and directed by the “through action” and the “super objective.” The process of procuring the feeling – the most valuable element in the actor’s play according to Stanislavsky – as well as the feeling itself have to be internally substantiated, logical, successive, continuous, and ultimately verisimilar, made as natural as possible. Essentially Stanislavsky understands the nature of acting as the psychophysical nature of emotion, feeling, and experience, and he explores it pedantically in detail. At times the work seems not to be describing a system of actor training, but rather to be about describing technical aspects of psychological processes, analyzing their origin, and the particularities of their evolution for their own sake. As a result, the actor is required to struggle constantly against the primal falseness of public creativity (Stanislavsky 1988–99: 2.402) on stage, which defines the very nature of performing art. The very nature of theatre contradicts the nature of natural experience.

In his System Stanislavsky turned the bio-psychological nature of the material of the actor into an absolute principle. He unjustifiably approximated experience, feeling, and the emotional act on the one hand, and inspiration and spirituality on the other. According to Stanislavsky, the actor has to arouse, develop, and attune his or her psychological apparatus of experiencing and learn to control it in accordance with his or her intention. Body and speech are totally subordinated to experiencing and have meaning only as far as they manifest experience in movement and in sound. By making the psychophysical nature of the actor’s creative work an absolute requirement, Stanislavsky inadvertently created an unexpected contradiction.

When developing his System, Stanislavsky envisaged the actor as an artist who would truly experience the events on stage rather than being an imitator who would simply represent them. However a question arises: is it possible to call a performer who literally follows all the directives of the System an artist? The issue lies not only in the fact that in the System aesthetic criteria and reference points are ignored, but also because the actor is deprived of the right of authorship, which is immanent in the very notion of the artist.

In Stanislavsky’s System the actor is called upon to activate personal experiences. Is it possible to consider him or her an author on this basis and, if so, author of what? Yet according to Stanislavsky the actor’s personal feelings and experiences constitute the core content of the actor’s work, because they are not only the material but also the cherished goal of the stage performance. Of course, there are also the given
circumstances, the through action and super objective in Stanislavsky’s System, which have an active situational nature. However, in the System these objective categories of the actor’s performance are intended not to create an artistic image but to control the personal experiencing of the actor through their regulating and correcting functions. It is obvious that the truth of the experiencing itself ensures neither the authorship nor the artistic merit of the actor’s performance. Imitation, which is foreign for Stanislavsky, is at least objective, whereas personal experience is subjective by its very nature. By struggling against imitation in the name of genuine stage experiencing, Stanislavsky unconsciously limits the sphere of the actor’s creative activity. At the same time, in the System the emotional intensity of the actor practically replaces the creative inspiration of the artist as author, which explains their close conjunction.

The imaginary, the fantastic, and the real

The most likely main motive for Chekhov in writing the article “Stanislavsky’s System” was his work in his own studio, founded by the actor in a period of his psychological crisis, in 1918. Following the System in the new role of teacher of acting, he probably felt a need to organize the teaching material and define the main principles and formulations of his actor training. Not much is known about the work of the Chekhov studio. Former students reported that he taught them “using the Stanislavsky method.” The rare reviews of public performances of the Studio confirm this. An intense focus on psychology plus a lifelike manner were the dominant features of the students’ acting to the detriment of style, genre, and poetics (Lvov 1921). Chekhov remained equally faithful to his teacher when presenting Stanislavsky’s System in journal articles. His account of Stanislavsky’s teaching is laconic, exact, and logical. He mentions his own individual adaptation of the System, but it is just barely visible in some details. For example, Chekhov states that an actor more often invents the external forms first and only then finds inner justification for them; hence the birth of affective memory sometimes can be justified by the external features of the image (1995: 2.42–43).

There is in essence hardly anything to object to in Chekhov’s exposition of the System. In the typewritten copy of his article that is preserved in Stanislavsky’s papers there are no teacher’s remarks besides the note “my system as described by Michael Chekhov” and one isolated correction (Chekhov 1995: 2.47). It is very possible that Vakhtangov’s well-known critical response to this publication (Vendrovskaya and Kaptereva 1984: 300–303) was not a result of misrepresentation but on the contrary a consequence of the clarity and precision of Chekhov’s account of the System. Compiling the System and presenting it in the form of a published text for the first time unexpectedly brought to light the psycho-technological element as its dominant feature in the “concise description of the practical aspect of teaching” (Vakhtangov 1984: 301). It was precisely for this interpretation that Vakhtangov reproached Chekhov, sensing in it a threat to the reputation of the System. Significantly, it was none other than Vakhtangov who picked up on this characteristic accent in Chekhov’s interpretation. As an actor and director he had taken the System to its logical conclusion and
was prepared to subject his theatrical credo to a creative revision. It was, however, Chekhov who had discovered that psycho-technological bias in the System involuntarily and inadvertently, ending the first part of the publication with a maxim startling in its combination of perspicacity and naïve inconsistency: “Does this not resemble a ‘psychology textbook’? It is as dull as one. [...] Even though it is about the ‘soul’ [...]” (1995: 2.47). This conclusion concealed an explosive double perspective: the actor’s awareness of the inability of a psychology textbook to capture the soul and of the irreducibility of art to either psychological processes or matters of the soul.

Why did Chekhov, who had planned to continue his detailed exposition of the System, break off his publication when it had hardly begun? In the first part of the article he had given a general survey of the main divisions and principles of the System and in the second had examined only the questions of concentration and fantasy. It is very significant at what point in Chekhov’s narration he stopped. In Stanislavsky’s original version of his System the word “imagination” corresponds to “fantasy” in Chekhov’s. Stanislavsky, however, uses both terms but distinguishes their notional meanings. Fantasy is not limited by logic and reality and hence is subject only to the sphere of spontaneous natural creativity: “Fantasy is that which does not exist, which we really do not know, which never was and never will be. [...] Fantasy knows and is capable of everything” (1988-99: 2.114–15). In experiencing as a creative process the fantastic can only be implemented by bringing it closer to reality (127). The function of the controlled imagination consists precisely in “transforming the invented world of the play into an artistic stage narrative.” “Imagination creates what really exists, what happens, what we know” (113–14). The definition of fantasy suggested by Chekhov is the opposite of the imagination as it appears in the System: “Fantasy is the free linking and combination of different images in a way that does not correspond to reality” (1995: 2.54). The contradiction lies in the fact that Chekhov’s free fantasy corresponds to the sphere of feelings, which in Stanislavsky’s view is linked precisely with the imagination. Later on the term “imagination” will also become a part of the terminology of Chekhov’s technique of actor training. It will alternate with the term “fantasy,” but not differ from it in any meaningful way. By that time fantasy will also become free of any obligatory linkage with feelings and experiences – and even more so with personal experiences. Chekhov will begin to view fantasy and imagination in connection with the idea of image, which first appeared fleetingly in the fantasy formula of his early article and later became a central concept in his method.

Two months before the publication of Chekhov’s article about Stanislavsky’s System he carried out his first experiment in grotesque (“eccentric”) acting on the stage of the Letuchaya Mysh theatre, in his performance of Bozhaze in the vaudeville A Match Between Two Fires. In August 1919 he began working on his famous grotesque depiction of Khlestakov. Chekhov’s theoretical activity in analyzing and publishing his interpretation of the System is intimately bound to these two roles. The contradiction between stage practice and theory is too obvious and deeply felt by such an analytical mind and sensitive performer. In 1921, after finishing rehearsing the title role in Strindberg’s Erik XIV, and a day after the opening night of The Government Inspector, Chekhov gave up the leadership of his Studio, his decision
motivated by lack of time (Chekhov 1995: 2.473). The reason seems a purely formal one. More important is the fact that not long before Chekhov left the Studio a landmark public show of his students’ work took place, which revealed their exclusive adherence to the psychological method of experiencing. This was the end of Chekhov’s period of immature teaching. Never again would he return either to teaching, or an apologetic exposition of, Stanislavsky’s System. The Chekhov studio, which came into being at a crucial point in his creative career as an actor, was not fated to coalesce into an independent theatre group. On the other hand, the artistic outcome of Chekhov’s first experience of training actors was highly fruitful and promising, both for his own acting and for his theoretical research in actor training.

Imagination over experiencing

Chekhov’s book On the Technique of Acting, published in Russian in America in 1946, opens with a chapter devoted to the imagination. It is imagining, the world of the images and their artistic embodiment, that is central to Chekhov’s method of imitation. The actor’s first encounter with an image and his or her communication
with it takes place in his or her imagination. An image conceived in the imagination simply “plays itself.” For Chekhov the process of imagining is the first and most important mode of rehearsing. Concentration accompanies imagination. It is called upon to help the actor to grasp the elusive image using his or her inner vision. In Chekhov’s method, which is focused on the image, technique and procedure cannot substitute for the goal. The image encompasses the ideological, aesthetic, and ethical content necessary for the actor, as well as links with the world of the play and the future performance. This information is revealed to the actor not in the form of rational knowledge, nor as an emotional experience, but visibly and audibly, and indeed actively – in the motions and behavior of the image. By placing the image in the central position, Chekhov locks the actor’s work onto the very artistic result not envisaged in Stanislavsky’s procedural System. Moreover, in Chekhov’s method, the actor’s work on himself and on the role is fused with and subordinated to the image: “an actor can act everything he can contemplate” in the sphere of his imagination (Chekhov 2013: 269). Stanislavsky himself declared that an actor without an imagination was simply inconceivable. However, by restricting imagination through the alien function of the limiter and transformer of invention, he distorted its nature. The reason lies in the famous demand to concentrate on the experiencing. With this in view, Chekhov began building his own technique with a fundamental rejection of personal experiencing.

In an article written in 1928 for a British encyclopedia, Stanislavsky describes the functions and mechanisms of the imagination (not separated in his theory yet from fantasizing), which are called upon to penetrate the affective memory, extracting from it the actor’s basic personal feelings and experiences. He names this activity as the most important material and desired aim of the actor’s work (1988–99: 6.275–87). It is obvious that the very process of imagining in Stanislavsky’s and Chekhov’s interpretations is principally different: stimulating the development of experience in the first case and stimulating the development of an image in the second. The questions in the 1923 questionnaire regarding the psychology of the actor’s creativity were formulated, if not in terms of Stanislavsky’s System, then at least with its main principles in view. In Chekhov’s answers his newly developed technique often appears in the way it contradicts those principles. He rejects the idea that the actor’s performance should be conditioned by personal, emotional, affective memories, since they always belong to the sphere of the ego (Chekhov 1995: 2.65). Declaring such personal (or egoistic) experiences derived from life to be unsuitable on stage, he instead favors objective, creative, fantastic, impersonal, or supra-personal experiences and draws a strict line between these two kinds of experiencing (72–73).

During the rehearsals of Hamlet Chekhov convinced his fellow actors – who like him had studied with Stanislavsky – that “in terms of acting, we have been trained in emotions on the animal level” and therefore we ought to “be repelled by so-called subtle acting, since this sort of performance is wholly situated on the animal level and is unsuitable for Hamlet” (2013: 243; emphasis in original). He applied this assertion not just to Shakespeare’s tragedy: “We are moving towards the supra-emotional; emotional theatre should leave the stage” (255). Chekhov further advised his actors against injecting personal feelings into the content of the character...
they are embodying. He suggested they avoid experiencing and returning to their former customary manner of acting at all costs (258). Emotions and feelings, Chekhov declared, are only one element of the actor’s inner apparatus (257–58), and therefore even when they have been cleansed of personal subjectivity they should take their appropriate place among the range of expressive tools at the actor’s disposal.

It was while he was expounding his method for the first time “as a system” in his classes at the Pedagogical Council of the MAT 2 that Chekhov conclusively formulated the difference between personal stage experiences and artistic ones:

Do not experience on stage personally. Personal experiences should be suppressed. Instead there should be artistic experiences, which are simply experiences of the image of the fantasy world that we see and hear, but which is separate and independent of us. An image has the ability to experience in a special way [emphasis in original] […]. When an actor begins to act, the image experiences through the actor: he simply becomes a captive of the image, giving himself up to it.

(1926–27: L. 35–36)

Chekhov gives a polemical edge to his thesis about the intermediary function of the actor, insisting that “[t]he actor has to be the instrument: the image does the experiencing, not the actor” (2013: 36). As for the question of how an actor can free himself from the bonds of his previous performance techniques, and what he has to liberate himself from, Chekhov answered that “personal experiences and work with the affective memory should be set aside” (40), because the effort needed to envision the image is diametrically opposed to the effort required to experience it (81). He parried his friends’ apprehensions about the possible difficulties of achieving the new imitation approach: “The difficulty arises only when one wants to ‘experience.’ When one imitates an image everything is easy” (61). He blamed the triumph of the theatre of experiencing for the widespread replacement of inspiration in acting by temperament, with its corporal, animal nature, and the related effort to “experience the emotions of the role in a personal way.” “When experiencing one allows one’s petty personality to gush out through temperament,” Chekhov declared. The contagiousness of such acting is dangerous because it provokes an analogical animal reaction in the audience, enslaving them, and producing only a “hysterical irritation of the nervous system.” Ultimately, “the personality, when experiencing, simply excretes its own passions in the form of temperament” (89–93). For this reason Chekhov saw such acting as self-satisfied egoism.

Obviously, Chekhov’s campaign against experiencing and for imitation of the envisaged image was programmatic. By subordinating process to result and rejecting experiencing and reincarnation for the sake of incarnation, he emphatically rejected psychological verisimilitude in favor of invention, whether on stage as an actor or in his teaching activities. As Chekhov explained, “One must possess an imagination capable of penetrating into the world of images,” and “one must have the wherewithal necessary for the image to emerge” (2013: 31). Thus by setting the imagination free Chekhov gave back to the actor the status of artist.
The ideal world of images

Chekhov opened the key chapter “Imagination and concentration” of *To the Actor* by stating that “[t]he images of fantasy live their independent life” (1995: 2.168). Thus, by liberating an actor’s imagination he immediately isolates it, separating what is imagined from the performer’s personality. For Chekhov, the world of images is ideal, eternal, and independent in its essence from any will, including the artist’s. The actor, like any artist, is sometimes given the ability to penetrate this world. By rejecting his own personality, the actor is called to transmit images into the real world, thereby accomplishing a lofty spiritual and aesthetic mission. The artist is mediator, as instrument of God, reflecting the cosmic truth in a mystical sacrament of incarnation. Such a concept of creative work is not only not new, but, taken literally, resists analysis in professional or aesthetic terms. The mystical absolute of Truth is no clearer than the eternal absolute of Nature. The metaphor of the artistic image turns here into a category of faith. Though Chekhov based his doctrine on a mystical postulate, in his creative work he followed it in a realistic rather than an ideal way, and when teaching it to actors he was far from turning into the votary of some abstract cult. He insisted that what he was proposing was “not mysticism,” that in adopting his method “theatrical craftsmanship must surely become a hundred times greater” (2013: 244). The artistic essence of his method revealed itself in its initial orientation towards not “the role,” “character,” “type,” or “hero,” but the image, which comprises the indivisible unity of all of these and more. Even if these terms appear in his vocabulary, they appear more often in such combinations as image of the role and characterization. The self-sufficiency of the image in Chekhov’s teaching is the consequence of its extreme universalization. It is radically depersonalized, subsuming the potential of the interpersonal connections in the text and the performance. Moreover, his system assumes the immanent interpenetration, transformation, and coalescence of all the elements and features of the image whether on the level of the style, genre, idea, or other meaningful artistic elements (Chekhov 1995: 2.170). The circumstances, action, and other categories of text and production reveal themselves not in an abstract, situational form but through the image. Thus, speaking about the monism of Shakespeare’s tragedy Chekhov specifies: “Monism sounds for me first of all as through action. […] The through action is Hamlet” (2013: 245). Here image functions as a category of action. Hamlet’s destiny as embodied by Chekhov becomes the real through action of the performance.

It is indisputable for Chekhov that the artist’s vision, thought, fantasizing, and perception of the world should all be in terms of images. The ability to conceptualize in images is an objective quality granted to the artist, a quality underlying Chekhov’s concept of the eternal and self-sufficient world of images: “Ultimately the image is created out of unknown elements that emerge unexpectedly from nowhere and are new to me,” he wrote in 1923 (1995: 2.66). During the rehearsals of *Hamlet*, he traced the self-sufficient world of images leading the performance to the absolute realm of truth, the spirit, and eternity. Perhaps in the gallery of Chekhov’s characters, only Hamlet is indubitably derived from this source. Of course, his humanism did come through loud and clear in other characters, such as Frazer, Khlestakov, and Ableukhov. But the grotesque and eccentric nature of his talent
seen in these roles has no immediate reflection in his method. Chekhov the actor excels Chekhov the theorist and teacher in the scale of his world-view and in the brilliance of his artistic palette.

Still, when he declares the self-sufficiency of the ideal world of images, Chekhov sometimes clearly hesitates. In his formulation at the lessons at the Pedagogic Council of the MAT 2, one can sense the cautious movement of the actor towards the image, because it is created “by complicated extrasensory processes that are partly located outside the human being” (1926–27: L. 34). Obviously the individuality of the actor shows itself already in the first inkling of an image that strikes the actor at his or her initial acquaintance with the play. The qualities of the image depend on the questions the actor asks. Later the image is adjusted through the interaction with the images produced by the other performers (Chekhov 1995: 2.65), especially since the image by its nature is susceptible to alteration (1926–27: L. 29). Chekhov wants the actor to be “above the idea” (L. 69), capable of viewing the image “from above” (L. 32), while trying to embrace it as “a whole” in “the whole” of the production. He evokes a picture of involuntary possession by the image, describing how Don Quixote haunted him, demanding to be embodied regardless of the discrepancy between the image and the actor (Kirillov 2006: 230–31).

In the 1955 lecture on characterization (Chekhov 1992: cassette 1), Chekhov invited his actors to begin any work on the image by seeking differences between these images and the actor’s personality, never looking for shared qualities and features. The distance between the image and the actor’s personality should make the creative process an objective, liberated one. Many of Chekhov’s rehearsal techniques have the same objective, such as the imaginary center of the image, the imaginary body of the image, etc., which are always located outside the performer’s own centers: body, personal features, and qualities (ibid.). Vividly shaped, living and supple, this image, once ideally rehearsed in the imagination of the actor, will eventually demand its “unconditional” (1926–27: L. 27) embodiment: “The moment of embodiment of the image is a moment of inspiration, which comes inevitably if the actor has worked on the image in accordance with this method and thus made himself physically capable of incorporating it” (L. 88). At the same time, according to Chekhov, “inspiration is a momentary insight into truth” (2013: 244). Truth and inspiration are achieved when a certain ideal principle participates in the process of imagining, because “I perceive the image […] simultaneously as my own performance [in my imagination – A.K.], and as the performance of someone whose abilities exceed mine many times over” (1995: 2.68). Presumably this mysterious somebody represents the actor’s own imagination forming an ideal image, freed not only from the constraints of personality but also from the actor’s physical limitations. Hence, in Chekhov’s method the element of imitation could be called the “method of fantasizing and imitating the image.”

Personal and individual

As Chekhov’s theoretical views on acting and actor training developed, his rejection of the principle of the personal in art became more strident. In fact, the absolute
separation of the personal determines the religious and mystical aspects of his tech-
nique and is its sole absolute. In essence, this rejection of the personal originated in
Chekhov's interest in anthroposophy. Although it has its roots in Christianity,
strictly speaking anthroposophy is not a religion itself. The inmost aspiration of
anthroposophy is to uncover and actualize man's spiritual entity and his activity.
Its essence consists in recognizing how a live human being belongs to and is a part of
the absolute sphere of the cosmic. Here in the realm of anthroposophy and Che-
khov's espousal of its principles, we find the path linking human beings to the
highest realms of eternal, ideal values. According to anthroposophy, the human
being contains both a lower and higher ego in unity. Chekhov transferred the dia-
lectics of lower and higher egos onto the notions of personality and individuality,
respectively, and used them to interpret the phenomena of the artist and his or her
mission. He devoted a special lesson of the Pedagogical Council of the MAT 2 to the
dialectic opposition of personality and individuality. These are in permanent conflict
with each other, and although an ordinary person may not be conscious of this
inward process, an artist must make a conscious choice in favor of individuality:
"In the realm of art personality strives to emerge and live itself out, whereas
individuality on the contrary seeks to turn the personality into a tool, a means
of expression and development of the creative idea." In its desire to emerge, per-
sonality inevitably produces only naturalism. Individuality "manifests itself in art
by transcending the scope of ordinary." It aspires "to embody and to make real
not what already exists, but what will be, what ought to be." Individuality liberates
the spectator to participate in the creation and "serves humanity by bringing
the message art ought to convey at the given moment in time" (1926–27: L. 63–68,
76–78). It is not difficult to divine Chekhov's conclusion. If stimulation of the per-
sonality results only in the emergence of animalistic temperament, then individuality
produces its natural opposite: inspiration. "Inspiration is a gift that descends
upon an artist from those bright spheres of consciousness where his individuality is
activated" (L. 92).

When liberated from personality, an actor's individuality and the artistic image
that he embodies coalesce in inspired creativity. If the individuality is admitted into
the ideal world it actively shapes an image, turning the performer into an author.
Hence, individuality becomes the mediator and the filter that reacts or does not react
to the external impulses of the play. The creativity of the actor's imagination is
possible only when the artistic individuality is stimulated. Replying to the ques-
tionnaire as to what reveals itself first to the actor – the psychological, plastic, or
auditory image of the role, Chekhov stated: "this will depend on my (individual)
creative vision of a given role, my tendency (of which I may not be aware)." He went
on to specify that he did not mean an original idea aroused in him by the character,
but an "idea implanted in me from my birth, the idea that I (consciously or
unconsciously) express throughout my entire active life and in every role" (1995:
2.66). In other words, it is clear that for Chekhov his artistic individuality was
primal: "I forget myself in the role entirely" (73), "[t]he feeling of joy that I always
experience in a creative state is provoked by 1) being liberated from my own
personality, and 2) experiencing that creative idea [...] that is inaccessible to my usual
consciousness" (74). As we see, the individual idea reveals itself to Chekhov the
artist only in the creative process: in the form of an image, through the image. The intensification of the individual in Chekhov’s work and teaching is proportional to the diminution of the personal. During the rehearsals of Hamlet, Chekhov continually warned his fellow actors: “When imitating and portraying what your fantasy has produced, do not strive to locate yourself within this image, since by doing so an actor ceases to be an artist and turns into a madman” (2013: 255). In the same way Chekhov categorically objected to the actor “appropriating” the image: “Do not take the features of an image as referring to yourself” (1926–27: L. 27–28). In his view the actor not only has no right to weigh down the image with his own personality, but also should not weigh himself down with the image, but rather imitate it freely and light-heartedly and thus achieve a joyful state of mind in any role (1995: 2.71). Unsurprisingly, Chekhov told his colleagues at the MAT 2 that to master the new method “our whole psychology as actors has to be turned upside down” (1926–27: L. 29).

Chekhov’s method liberated the actor and broadened the possibilities of becoming a creator on stage by extending the range of accessible roles. He admitted that the fantastic image created by him is free from any consideration of his own specifics as an actor (1995: 2.67). Responding to a question on the problem of typecasting, Chekhov objected on principle to this limitation of the actor’s specialization in all its forms, declaring “we have to outgrow typecasting” (84). He wrote that personal limitations can be overcome through the maximum “degree of interest on the actor’s part in the human being in general” and by tireless improvement of performance technique (ibid.). The necessity of technique is obvious. No less important, however, in solving the problem of typecasting is the actor’s authorial, individualized approach to the role. The performer’s authorship, in turn, serves as the basis for free improvisation. Strictly speaking, the notions of improvisation and inspiration in the context of Chekhov’s acting and method are not a feature of the actor’s performance and state of mind at discrete, peak moments of creativity; an improvisational state of mind is characteristic for every moment of the actor’s creative work on stage. In the same way, inspiration invariably accompanies the actor’s embodiment of the image.

### Acting technique

In his work, Chekhov examines the archetypes of gesture and sound, trying to discover their autonomous aesthetic meanings. He reveals deep connections between different spheres of the actor’s expressiveness and devises corresponding means of production. Chekhov’s concepts of the Psychological Gesture (PG), singing gesture (2013: 254), gesture of the letter, and visible speech (1926–27: L. 49, 57) are born, as well as “sculpturing in air with the powers of speech” (L. 47) and his formulations of speech on stage as “gesture [that] contains the word,” or as “gesture [that] conditions the word” (L. 37). Gesture, which has a plastic, spatial nature, works as a sort of catalyst and is the basis of the actor’s expressive means. It determines psychological intention, sound, speech, and scenic space, organizing and transforming them along a vector through the force lines of the actor’s plasticity. Chekhov understands “gesture” as every movement of any intensity and amplitude including movement of the whole body.

The spatial characteristics of an image are of first priority for Chekhov. It is not by accident that he invites his actors to play their scenes first without words, only
using gestures (1926–27: L. 37). Recalling Chekhov’s Hamlet, Bely comments, “In the pause [of Chekhov —A.K.] – is a great power of the potential energy, which the next wink transforms into the kinetics of a gesture, where the whole body works like lightning; from the edge of this lightning, as from the discharge of energy – comes the word: the last of all expressions” (qtd in Chekhov 2005: 214). The dominant of “the whole” explains the primacy of the integral and integrating categories in Chekhov’s system, rhythm being the most important. Chekhov devoted a special class at the Pedagogic Council of the MAT 2 to rhythm as harmony, as the means and the result of the organization of the whole (1926–27: L. 23–27). Rhythm is also important because of its power to affect the audience: “It is impossible not to perceive rhythm. The thought might not reach the audience but rhythmical action definitely will. […] Rhythm is a universal language. Thought is a high-falutin curlicue […] But everybody understands rhythm” (L. 23–24). An alteration of the rhythm can fundamentally change the content of the material. This expressive possibility of rhythmical transformation is the primary characteristic of Chekhov’s own acting. Descriptions by Serafima Birman, an actress first in the First Studio and then in the MAT 2, of Chekhov as Frazer (1971: 103), and by critic Markov of Chekhov as Muromsky (1974–77: 3.392), indicate how by a simple change of rhythm he was able to shift the tone and genre of his acting.

By switching into another rhythm, he was able to achieve the synthesis of tragedy and comedy, turning his performance into tragicomedy. A sense of the scene, the role, and the production will be clear from its rhythm (Chekhov 1926–27: L. 24). As he says, rhythm is the “source of any inspiration” because rhythm is the whole. Any

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Figure 2.3 Michael Chekhov as Muromsky in Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin’s The Case (1927) at MAT 2, directed by Boris Sushkevich. (Private Collection. Courtesy Andrei Kirillow.)
harmony is “the result of the impact of rhythm upon something” (L. 25). Hence, if space and time are the organizing principles in Chekhov’s theatre, rhythm constitutes the pivot of the architectonics in the spatial–temporal organization of role and performance.

Chekhov’s student has to compose fantastic combinations of sounds, generating in himself a feeling for the multicolored expressiveness of speech (1926–27: L. 20). Chekhov calls upon him to “spread all the colors onto the palette” (ibid.) and start listening to the role “from the sonic-musical side,” “like music” (L. 37). He asks his partners in Hamlet to “draw” with voice, words, and rhythms (2013: 273). “Fall in love with movement per se,” he conjures his colleagues, telling them that an actor has to obtain aesthetic joy from making movements (244–45, 256). The actor must cultivate the aesthetic feeling of gesture and sound in himself: “As artists, we ought to receive images from the world of aesthetics” (257).

Atmosphere in Chekhov’s system also belongs to the expressive means available to each individual performer. In Chekhov’s technique atmosphere is one more way for the actor to rehearse and exist on stage — it too is a process. When creating the image, the actor has to respect the atmospherics of the role as an objective reality like a musical score. The atmosphere of the character contains, like destiny, the objective and subjective, the common and individual. After the dress rehearsal of Hamlet Andrey Bely wrote to Chekhov: “What you did in Hamlet is exquisite: you seemed to be on two planes — your own particular one and that of the others. You were in the entire ‘atmosphere’” (1982: 227). Chekhov’s images live through atmospheres and their transformations, and collisions, which ensure the “extra-personal,” “non-egoistic,” and “objective” acting of the performer. However, Chekhov warned his actors not to query the “what” of their image, only the “how”: “You should not use the ‘what’ to hypnotize [the audience — A.K.], but charm it using the ‘how.’” The “what” is contained in the “how” and will emerge from it by itself, because artistic form always has a profound content and the content reveals itself above all in the image. The “what” tires the spectator, while the “how” leaves him free (1926–27: L. 60–61). Hence, Chekhov’s technique is “an organ of individuality and the path to inspiration” (L. 96). Mastering this technique means the complete “regeneration of the actor’s organism” (L. 19). This process is inherent in both the ethical and spiritual aspects of Chekhov’s system.

Conclusion

Chekhov’s method stemmed from Stanislavsky’s System but moved further and further from it. By breaking out from within, Chekhov exposed the weakest links and most questionable elements in that teaching. As far as the followers of his method are concerned, Chekhov expects a very high level of technical mastery on the part of the performer, who must be able to imitate adequately and embody free, fantastic images. Imitating fantastic images that do not obey the laws of the physical world demands the whole of the actor. As material for the study of theatre theory his system is extremely valuable. Even if Chekhov’s individual experience and technique are not always accessible in the form of an actor’s manual, they provide an interesting perspective, an ideal reference point, and guidelines for further experiments, which is not a trivial matter. In his search for new perspectives, Chekhov enriched and broadened
not only our understanding of this or that model of theatre but our knowledge of theatrical nature and achieved a great shift from the actor’s personality as a human being to his or her individuality as an artist. As we have seen, he discovered all the main principles of his system or new acting technique while still in Russia. He spent the rest of his life checking, formulating, developing, and teaching those principles all over the world.

Notes

1 This article is based on a lengthier and more complete work in Russian (Kirillov 2004).
2 Bely’s grotesque novel Petersburg about the events of the Russian revolution of 1905–07 is an example of his experimental “rhythmic prose” with its very specific punctuation.
3 Sulerzhitsky, Stanislavsky’s collaborator, headed the First Studio from its foundation in 1912 till his death in 1916.
4 One should mention that this article proposes an interpretation of Stanislavsky’s views on actor pedagogy only, and does not seek to address other aspects of his theatrical heritage.
5 It is important not to confuse the entity of the actor with his or her psychology.
6 A characteristic example is when Chekhov, in the process of thinking and fantasizing about the image of Don Quixote, among other physically disembodiesing features imagines him “crumbling” in the finale of the performance (Chekhov 1995: 2.106).

Works cited

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