MICHAEL CHEKHOV, SPIRITUALITY AND SOVIET THEATRE

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Abstract

The present article discusses the work of Michael Chekhov, director of the Second Moscow Art Theatre from 1922 to 1928. After the October revolution Chekhov sought to withstand the threat from those ideological tendencies which led away from the ideals and spiritual values of his teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky. The reasons for Chekhov's emigration were connected both with his opposition to Soviet cultural policy and the repression of religious groups in Russia. Chekhov was the most famous follower in the Russian theatre of the anthroposophist, Rudolf Steiner. In his production of "Hamlet" Chekhov also followed the spiritual ideas of the Russian symbolists while applying new methods of acting.

Keywords: *Russian theatre, art of acting, spiritual philosophy, communism*.

In a recent assessment of the October revolution James Ryan wrote of Lenin: "His goal was not power for its own sake, but communism: a vision of a perfected society, whereby people would live in complete social harmony. Communism, he believed, would bring with it the comprehensive development and realisation of each individual [..] For communism to exist, humanity would need to be improved and transformed. The core of the October revolution, then, was a vision of cultural revolution, that is, the creation of a new type of person, the so-called "new Soviet person". The October revolution represented the most ambitious and sustained attempt at human transformation and liberation in modern European history. In failing to realise its ambitions, however, the Soviet regime became the most violent state in European history" [Ryan 2018: 46].

The way in which actors, directors and dramatists accepted or rejected the Bolshevik revolution varied widely [Worrall 1989: 7]. Apart from Vsevolod Meyerhold,

only Vladimir Mayakovsky and Aleksandr Blok, among major artistic figures of the day, pledged total support to the Bolsheviks. For the rest, they tended to co-exist as so-called "fellow-travellers", were won over gradually (as were the directors Evgeny Vakhtangov, Aleksandr Tairov and Konstantin Stanislavsky), or else they emigrated. One of the most significant émigré artists was Michael Chekhov, an outstanding actor and teacher of acting, who headed the Second Moscow Art Theatre. In 1928, Pavel Markov, the distinguished Moscow theatre critic, in an article devoted to the anniversary of the Second Moscow Art Theatre, described Chekhov as: "One of the most remarkable actors of our time who is ardently and passionately seeking new means of theatrical expression" [Chekhov 1986a: 429].

In the same year, Michael Chekhov emigrated from Russia for good. I will discuss the complex reasons for his departure, which are connected both with his search for new means of expression and the "taming of the arts" policy of the Stalin period, as well as the repression of religious groups in Soviet Russia. The basis of this searching was prompted in part by the ideas of the anthroposophist, Rudolf Steiner, whose most famous follower in Russian theatre Michael Chekhov became.

Michael (Mikhail) Alexandrovich Chekhov (b. St Petersburg 1891 – d. Los Angeles 1955) was a nephew of Anton Chekhov and the most brilliant student of Konstantin Stanislavsky. He acted at the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) from 1912 onwards, was its director from 1922 onwards and was the director of the Second Moscow Art Theatre from 1924 to 1928. In Russia, Chekhov is recalled as the most original actor of the last century. His major roles in the Moscow Art Theatre and its Studio included: Caleb in Dickens' "The Cricket on the Hearth", Malvolio in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night", the title role in Strindberg's "Erik XIV" (directed by Evgeny Vakhtangov), Khlestakov in Gogol's "The Government Inspector" (directed by Stanislavsky), the title role in "Hamlet", and Muromsky in Sukhovo-Kobylin's "The Process". After leaving Russia in 1928, Chekhov underwent three separate stages of development: a period of directing, acting and teaching in Berlin, Paris, Riga and Kaunas (1928–1934); a period in England and America of the Anglo-American Theatre Studio (1936–1942); and, finally, his Hollywood career, working in cinema and teaching film actors in Los Angeles (1943–1955). Chekhov developed his projects in European and American theatres and acting studios, with tremendous vigour [Byckling 2000].

At the time of his death in 1955, Chekhov's name in Soviet Russia had been erased from the history of Russian theatre. In the 1980s, with "glasnost" and the return of the émigré legacy, Chekhov was rehabilitated, his books republished, and he has, once again, become a legendary figure in his native country.

Chekhov the actor applied Stanislavsky's "system" of actor training, which was practised in the First Studio from 1912 onwards. In Stanislavsky's method of acting

the foundation for the future concept of Chekhov's method was laid and put into practice after the October revolution of 1917. In the First Studio, Chekhov's work in productions by the brilliant director Evgeny Vakhtangov shaped the actor's concept of the theatre. Vakhtangov believed that the theatre must create forms from its imagination which he called imaginative realism. In his productions and theoretical articles, Chekhov expressed the spirit of turn-of-the-century Russian culture, symbolist poetry and non-naturalistic theatre. His sources of inspiration derived from legends and fairy-tales, and above all, from religious philosophy.

From early on, Chekhov read extensively in the work of all Western philosophers as part of an effort to define the meaning of life and the purpose of artistic endeavour. Chekhov's interest in yoga began in the First Studio under the guidance of Stanislavsky, the philosophy of which seemed to offer him the creative possibilities of life itself. Those spheres of creativity began to extend from the theatre to the possibilities of creativity within the bounds of his own personality. Yoga led Chekhov to the teachings of theosophy, whilst he also became interested in other mystical currents and frequented the occult societies of revolutionary Moscow.

Chekhov searched everywhere for his ideal spiritual teacher until he found him in the person of the Austrian philosopher and occultist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). Steiner was the founder of the Anthroposophical Society, a Russian branch of which was founded in 1913. Anthroposophy represented a modern gnosis; it sought to overcome materialism, to restore a spiritual dimension to human life, and to heal the rift between religion and science. Many famous Russian intellectuals were interested in Anthroposophy, for example the writer Andrei Bely and the painter Vasily Kandinsky. J. D. Elsworth writes: "It is not hard to understand the appeal of anthroposophy to those who had responded to Vl. Solovyov's [the XIX century Russian philosopher's] idea of creating an integrated culture. It is a uniquely comprehensive doctrine that proposes to reconcile the spiritual and material, to answer all questions and resolve all contradictions. Without rejecting scientific thought, it overcomes materialism and re-asserts, on a rational footing, the spiritual nature of man and the universe" [Elsworth 1982: 37; see also: Fedjuschin 1988].

Chekhov came to Steiner during a period of nervous illness when he left the theatre for a whole year. He wrote that his soul was so weary of the hopeless severity of his own world view, a weariness caused by materialism. In his autobiography "The Path of the Actor" (*Put aktyora,* 1928), which Chekhov wrote in Moscow under conditions of Soviet censorship, Steiner could not be mentioned [Chekhov 1986a]. However, notes concerning his spiritual beliefs were published twenty years later in his autobiographical memoirs "Life and Encounters" *(Zhizn i vstrechi)* (*Novyi*

Zhurnal 1944–1945, New York).[1] Chekhov read Steiner's books in Russian translation and soon joined the Russian Anthroposophical Society, probably in 1919. Chekhov's meeting with Andrei Bely influenced his destiny in many respects. Bely, the famous Russian symbolist writer and one of Steiner's most gifted Russian followers, had been a member of the Anthroposophical Society from the very start. Chekhov regarded Bely as his "Teacher" and guide to the teachings of Steiner.

For Chekhov, anthroposophy was the revelation of a modern form of Christianity. In it he found the meaning and goal of a life which provided him with mental health and equilibrium. Chekhov's crisis and his overcoming of it confirm the words of the modern Russian philosopher Sergey Averintsev: "Genuine mental health for the human being, as a being superior to the animal, is impossible if a person's outlook on life and aims are not put in order. [..] only the patient can complete the work of the psychotherapist in that he acquires an orientation for his world outlook" [Averintsev 1981: 114]. Maria Knebel, Chekhov's pupil, and later a distinguished Russian director and teacher, wrote: "Chekhov strove towards harmony. As an actor, he sought after and aimed for harmony on stage and in his roles. He was constantly in torment in that he sensed the disharmony of affairs in the external world. Hence his fears and restlessness. He believed that the truth that would reunite art and life, which he sought after, was contained in these very anthroposophical theories" [Knebel 1986: 34]. The sought-after harmony between mystical and scientific knowledge was attained in anthroposophy.

Inevitably, Chekhov stood in opposition to the new Communist regime. According to Lenin, all religions and religious institutions were instruments of bourgeois reaction serving to defend exploitation and as an opiate for the working class. Nicolas Berdyaev described Communism as the new religion. "Because Communism itself is itself a religion it persecutes all religions and will have no religious toleration. [..] Communism creates a new morality which is neither Christian nor humanitarian." Regarding the untruth of Communism, Berdyaev wrote: "What is false and terrible is the very spirit of Communism. Its spirit is the negation of spirit, the negation of the spiritual principle in man. [..] Communism is inhuman, for denial of God leads to denial of man" [Berdyaev 1966: 77].

[1] Chekhov's memoirs (1928) were republished in Moscow: Chekhov (1986a). Chekhov's second book of memoirs: M. Chekhov, *Zhizn i vstrechi* ("Life and Encounters"), (*Novyi Zhurnal*, 1944–1945) was published in New York. Due to Soviet censorship the chapters on anthroposophy and Chekhov's religious searchings were omitted in the Moscow edition of *Literaturnoye nasledye* (Literary heritage) (1986). These chapters were first published in Russia by the present author in the appendix to her book in Russian [Bjukling (Byckling) 1994]. (The Letters of Michael Chekhov to Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (the émigré years, 1938–1951). 2nd, compl. ed. (St Petersburg: Vsemirnoye slovo, 1994). An abridged version of Chekhov's memoirs has been published in English [Chekhov 2005].

In 1922, after the death of Vakhtangov, Chekhov became director of the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre which, in 1924, was renamed the Second Moscow Art Theatre. As he commented twenty years later in his memoirs "Life and Encounters", after the October revolution Chekhov sought to withstand the threat of the "comprehensibility of popular materialism" and other tendencies that led away from the ideals and spiritual values established by the founders of the First Studio, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Leopold Sulerzhitsky. Of the revolutionary theatre, Chekhov wrote: "The quality of acting started to deteriorate, and the elements of creative imagination, theatrical invention and originality were relegated to a secondary role. The external influence was strong." As a theatre director, Chekhov wanted to preserve its artistic life. "First and foremost, I prohibited anti-religious tendencies and the theatre of the streets and decided to stage Hamlet as a counterbalance" [Chekhov 1944: 14–16].

No less important was the humanitarian reform of the Russian theatre. Under the heading of anthroposophy, Chekhov brought about the emergence of a spiritual component in Russian theatre based on his exploration of its inner workings. "Hamlet" produced by Chekhov in 1924 with a team of directors (he acted the role of the Danish Prince) had both experimental and spiritual objectives. Motifs inherent in Russian symbolism and German anthroposophy became interwoven in the course of rehearsals. Using the new methods, he announced the beginnings of a search which "led further away from Stanislavsky". "For the time being I can only say that if Stanislavsky's system is a grammar school, these exercises are a university in terms of their importance." Here the idea of "a path of initiation" was formulated. "We approach the play as if it were hieroglyphs, signs, and through them we ourselves must make the breakthrough upwards, into eternity [..] A new technique of acting has to be found. As actors, we have been trained through emotions in the animal sphere. Now what we need to achieve is not to act ourselves, but to let the forces that are on a higher level than we are act through us; we in turn must offer ourselves in sacrifice to those forces." During rehearsals there was talk of music in the play: "Hamlet is a myth in motion, a particular philosophy. That is why we talk about the musical element and music, because music more powerfully than anything else leads us into the sphere of the Spirit" [Chekhov 1975: 170–171]. The source of these arguments is clearly the language of the symbolists, as conveyed by Bely.

The few productions staged at the Second Moscow Art Theatre between 1924 and 1928, under Chekhov's management and in cooperation with assistant directors, were meant to be definite landmarks in the mastering of new methods of acting. In his earlier studio work (1918–1920) Chekhov had aimed at creating a feeling of truth and inspiring the actor's fantasy. Among the many resources utilized in the First Studio led by Stanislavsky and Leopold Sulerzhitsky were those of Asian derivation.

When Stanislavsky sought means to control an actor's moment of inspiration, he became interested in the possibilities of Yoga and exercises based on the spiritual disciplines of Hinduism and Buddhism directed towards a higher consciousness ("the superconscious"). Not surprisingly, Chekhov later found similar ideas in Steiner's teaching and incorporated his concept of the "Higher Self" into his acting method.

Anthroposophy was not only Chekhov's private creed, it also provided him with the art of movement and a mode speech called eurythmy or "visible speech", which gave new impetus to ways of refining non-verbal acting and developing the harmonious function of the actor's body. Chekhov adopted Steiner's method of eurythmy in his approach to speech and movement. This new art of movement envisaged that every sound possessed an inherent gesture which could be reproduced by movements of the human body. Eurythmy is interpreted, not as a means of communication, but as sound and rhythm that can be expressed using the language of the body. Chekhov wrote: "We studied the sound aspect of the word, as **movement transformed into sound**" [Chekhov 1986: 119]. Chekhov decided to introduce the experience he had gained through rhythmical exercises in his private Studio into the rehearsal process: "During our work on Hamlet, we endeavoured to experience the gestures of words in the way they sounded and to this end we selected the corresponding movements to fit the words and phrases. We imbued them with the force we required, added the particular emotional colouring and executed them until our inner feeling began to respond to them fully" [Ibid.]. A trend of the times, mistrust of the word, was manifest in Chekhov's exercises. Averintsev formulated it thus: "at the beginning of the century there was a diminishing of trust in the content of culture that is directly "articulated", in verbal formulations and consequently, literature with an ideological content" [Averintsev 1981: 80]. The results of the experiments in the studio left their mark on the production: in some scenes the pedagogical objectives of the development of the actors' movements and musicality were foregrounded.

Within the theatre, opinion about the production was sharply divided. At the premiere, Stanislavsky did not accept the performance of Hamlet by his brilliant pupil, whom he considered a tragi-comic, but not a tragic actor. A group of actors who were opposed to Chekhov condemned the fact that the role smacked of his enthusiasm for anthroposophy. However, audiences and certain objective critics, Pavel Markov in the lead, were deeply moved by the play and Chekhov's performance. The content of his portrayal of Hamlet turned out to be much richer in meaning than had been anticipated. Markov stated that the centre-point of the production had been Chekhov. "The feeling of a world undergoing destruction was the keynote of the performance. [..] Thus a character that is almost lyrical comes about, that stirs the audience totally and is penetrating and moving" [Markov 1976: 194].

The next stage in Chekhov's experimentation was work on the stage adaptation of Bely's novel "Petersburg" (1925), the independent interpretation of dramatic material written by Bely himself. The part of the old Senator Ableukhov was brilliantly acted by Chekhov, who concluded that circumstances were in his favour following three years of his direction at the Second Moscow Art Theatre.

Chekhov was able to pursue his own artistic line even in a changing ideological situation where mystical and occult groups had been officially liquidated in 1923. At the same time, the Russian Anthroposophical Society was closed and all connections with anthroposophy became potentially dangerous. However, anthroposophical ideas were not immediately extinguished by the changed cultural environment in Russia. This was largely due to the efforts and prestige of Bely and several Russian artists interested in Steiner's thought. The centre of Anthroposophical activity shifted briefly to the Second Moscow Art Theatre, where anthroposophical ideas managed to survive until 1928. Chekhov did not give up and his activities increased from 1923 onwards, during which period he applied Steiner's methods in practical theatre work, his aim being the spiritualization of culture and all professions and studies in the theatre. It became generally known, even outside theatrical circles, that Chekhov derived his spiritual knowledge and, in particular, his technique for applying it specifically to art, from the anthroposophy and eurythmy of Rudolf Steiner and the latter's teachings on artistic speech.

Later, Chekhov set out his method of acting in his two American books, one in Russian, "On the Technique of Acting" (*O tekhnike aktyora*, 1946), the other in English ("To the Actor", 1953). One of the main professional requirements is the actor's complete command of both body and psychology. In Chapter One, Chekhov laid the foundations for attaining the four basic requirements of acting technique. "By means of the suggested psychophysical exercises the actor can increase his inner strength, develop his abilities to radiate and receive, acquire a fine sense of form, enhance his feelings of freedom, ease, calm and beauty, experience the significance of his inner being, and learn to see things and processes in their entirety" [Chekhov 1953: 20].

Chekhov offers excellent exercises for awakening, opening and contracting dormant muscles aimed at achieving sensations of freedom and intensified life. There follow exercises with the imaginary centre as a source of power within the actor's body; exercises with different kinds of movements with the whole body directed at creating strong forms; exercises in ray emission into the surrounding space; exercises in four kinds of movement – moulding, floating, flying and radiating movements – reproduced in the actor's imagination only. Chekhov revealed clearly his emphasis on the harmony of the actor's body and psychology.

Chekhov writes about another rehearsal method, the working gesture or psychological gesture (PG): "we cannot directly command our feelings, but we can

provoke them by certain indirect means. The key to our will power will be found in the movement (action, gesture). [..] The strength of the movement stirs our will power in general; the kind of movement awakens in us a definite corresponding desire, and the quality of the same movement conjures up our feelings" [Chekhov 1953: 63, 66]. PG is used for creating the character, in the sense that it offers a condensed version of characterisation. Some principles of Chekhov's rehearsal methods anticipated Stanislavsky's "method of physical actions" in the 1930s. It was Chekhov's aim that the actors should acquire a practical grasp of the profound connection between movement and words on the one hand, and with the emotions on the other. This exercise served as an expression of Stanislavsky's demand that the author's words be not uttered until the inner stimulus to do so arises. Eugenio Barba, head of the Odin Theatre and a theorist of modern theatre has this to say about Chekhov's method: "Michael Chekhov attaches great importance to the performer's interior life. His "first days" [first exercises] show, however, that everything he calls "sensation", "feeling", or "psychological state" is innervated through precise physical attitudes. For Chekhov as well, the work on the body-in-life and the thought-in-life are two sides of the same coin" [Barba 1990: 78].

An important point of departure for Chekhov is the notion of "double consciousness" and being present simultaneously "inside" and "outside of" the character. Chekhov asserted the theory of imitation, the law of the three states of consciousness, objectivity *vis-à-vis* the character and self-observation during the performance, all of which became the foundation for the actors' work. Chekhov propounded an understanding of acting that differed from Stanislavsky's teaching in many respects. In attempting to solve the basic problem of the actor, that of the personality and the artist, whereby the actor is meant to be the creator of a certain ideal and liberated life, Chekhov's aim was to acquire a creative joy stripped of personal imperfection. In the Second Moscow Art Theatre Chekhov was at odds at one and the same time with Stanislavsky's notion of character embodiment involving complete transformation, and with those ideas promoted by Meyerhold and Vakhtangov of a more detached "relationship to the image". A subtext of Chekhov's tenet (of objectivity towards the image) is his dispute with what he regarded as the tendentiousness of modern theatre.

As already stated, Chekhov was able to conclude that circumstances were in his favour during the first three years of his direction at the Second MAT. He succeeded in implementing his ideas and a new approach to aesthetics during those first few years of his directorship: "spiritual insights were applied in a specific and practical way in the form that I had succeeded in manifesting them in my exercises and productions" [Chekhov 1986: 122]. Chekhov created his own theatre with its

new style of performing which gave the productions their distinct form. The style can be defined as the psychological grotesque or the character-mask that comes into being when the accentuation of the psychological portrayal of the character reaches its height. However, the term *Chekhov's Theatre* is ambiguous when applied to the Second MAT, since there were opposing tendencies within the company.

In 1925, radical political changes took place with the opening of the 14th Party Congress. Here a policy of rapid industrialization was first promulgated. The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), also came into existence at this time who strove for proletarian leadership in literature and who conducted a battle with theatrical innovators, the so-called formalists, such as Meyerhold and Tairov. Its methods were quite unprincipled and included political accusations against artists at every level. Among its stated purposes was "to scourge and chastise" in the name of the Party, i. e., effectively encouraging censorship of literature on ideological grounds, supported by the leadership of the Bolshevik Party. Among its targets were both pro- and anti-Bolshevik writers, including Mikhail Bulgakov, Maxim Gorky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Evgeny Zamyatin.

The opposition to Chekhov was intensified by the harshening of the regime. Simultaneously, conflicts arose within the theatre and the secret police stepped up its activity. The People's Commissariat of Education sent a letter to Chekhov informing him that his activity as theatre director was deemed "not entirely satisfactory" and that he should stop spreading the ideas of Steiner among the actors [Chekhov 1995a: 243]. As early as 1925, a serious conflict had arisen owing to the differing artistic and ideological aspirations. The following year, a group of actors under the leadership of the director Alexei Diky left the Second MAT, denouncing Chekhov as an idealist and mystic. Following the split in the theatre the Moscow newspapers condemned Chekhov as a "sick" artist and his productions were criticised as alien and reactionary and he was under serious threat of being arrested. In 1928, he resigned from his theatre and received official leave for one year to travel to Berlin with his wife Xenia. Chekhov left Russia in the wake of accusations that he was using the theatre to disseminate anthroposophical doctrines inconsistent with the Moscow Art Theatre's world view. His letter of conciliation to the Ministry of Culture in Moscow was left unanswered.

In Berlin from 1928 to 1930, Chekhov continued theatre work in parallel with his unceasing anthroposophical contemplations while combining work in Max Reinhardt's theatres and silent cinema with private studio work. Chekhov had not intended to leave Soviet Russia for good, but the situation changed dramatically with the implementation of the First Five-Year Plan in 1929. In that year the Bolsheviks, spurred on by Stalin, launched a new campaign against the "remnants of the bourgeois intelligentsia", actively hunting down and arresting members of occult

groups on a large scale. After 1929, those anthroposophists and other occultists who remained free went underground or ceased their activities altogether. In Paris, Chekhov learned of the arrests. His feelings of guilt towards friends who had been subjected to persecution is expressed in the Paris chapters of "Life and Encounters". Arrest for "occult propaganda" after 1933 inevitably meant exile and frequently execution. However, the destruction of the occult societies by decree, arrest, exile, and execution did not destroy the Russians' interest in occultism.

It was clear that, for Chekhov, there could be no return to Soviet Russia. The years of emigration in Europe and in the USA followed. Both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold tried to convince him to return. Officially, Chekhov never broke contacts with Soviet Russia and he remained a Soviet citizen until 1946 when he became an American citizen. Chekhov was finally able to give one of his spiritual mentors his due in "Life and Encounters", in "On the Technique of Acting" (in Russian 1946) and "To the Actor" (1953), all of them published in America. In "To the Actor" he wrote: "It was my work over many years in the sphere of the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner that gave me the guiding idea for my entire work as a whole" [Chekhov 1953: X]. These sentiments from the foreword were omitted from the 1986 Moscow edition of his book "To the Actor".

The American-English version has been republished and is widely used in Western theatre schools. Eugenio Barba describes Chekhov's book as *one of the best practical manuals for the training of the "realistic" actor* [Barba 1995: 72] [See also: Black 1987]. Other versions and new books of Chekhov's classes have been published in the United States [Chekhov 1963; Chekhov 1985]. New books of Chekhov's classes have been published by his American students and also the second-generation teachers [Chekhov Master Class 1992; Merlin 2001; Petit 2010]. The Finnish translation from the Russian original was completed by the present writer and published by the Finnish Theatre Academy in 2017 [Tšehov 2017].

Chekhov created and taught an acting system which has become increasingly influential in both the West and the East. Until his final years in California, he remained devoted to Rudolf Steiner's system of belief, as well as to those ideals of the Russian theatre expressed by Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov.

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