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Performing in Mask: Michael Chekhov's Pedagogy, Commedia and Mime

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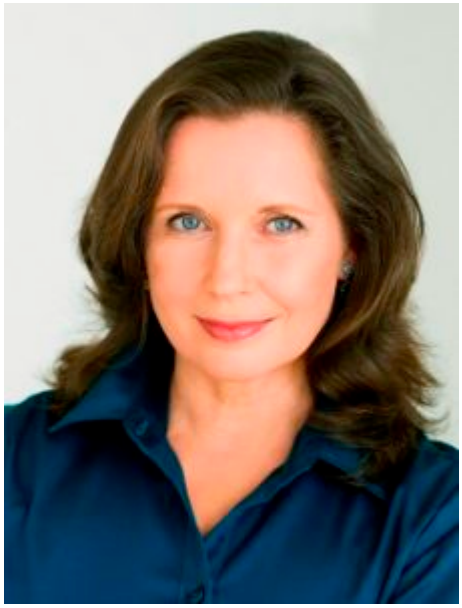
25-32 minutes

Lenka Pichlíková*



As a teacher of dramatic arts, professional actor and mime, who is also a theatre historian, I come to the study of Michael Chekhov's career and pedagogy "on the lookout" for aspects of his technique that I can put to use in class and onstage. I teach acting and mime for actors and dancers, corporeal pantomime and *Commedia dell'Arte*. While scholars have generally not found these to be a good fit with the Michael Chekhov system, there are many points of intersection,

specifically with Chekhov's pedagogy and emphasis on make-up, costume and stage properties as essential elements of the character's formation. I would like to share my own applications of his methods to teaching *Commedia*. I note interesting parallels between Chekhov's methods and those taught by the mime master, Marcel Marceau, with whom I have studied.

Commedia dell'Arte

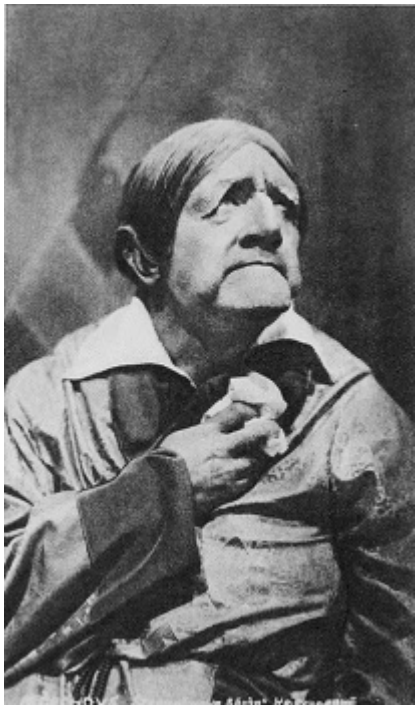
At the time Chekhov began his training in the early twentieth-century Russia, *Commedia* was experiencing a revival there, seen in the ballets of Igor Stravinsky and the experimentation of Alexander Tairov and Konstantin Miklashevsky. These experiments influenced Vsevolod Meyerhold's study of *Commedia* and the style of *Commedia* and mime practiced by Evgeny Vakhtangov. In the ninety-thirties, the ideas of Sergei Volkonsky on rhythmical pantomime, and of Chekhov's colleague, Georgette Boner, on *Commedia*, would affect Chekhov's artistic practice and teaching. Boner was a particular champion of *Commedia*. She later lectured on it for the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington Hall, Devon, England, where pantomime had been taught before Chekhov's arrival. His student and colleague, Deirdre Hurst du Prey, attended the Dartington School of Dance and Mime in 1934, the year before she met Chekhov. When Chekhov came to Paris in 1931, he also could have encountered *Commedia* in the works of Jacques Copeau's disciples, such as Suzanne Bing and Michel Saint-Denis, and their Compagnie des Quinze (Rudlin 177-84). One should add that, according to Boner, Chekhov's costume for the 1931 Paris production of *The Castle Awakening* "was cut to

resemble the shape of that of a Pierrot—something like the garment Gilles has on in Watteau's painting" (Boner 163).

While Chekhov's use of *Commedia* was often in opposition to Meyerhold's (Meerzon 23, 118-22, 286-87), Chekhov did develop a *metaphor* for character formation that involved the use of a "mask" created in the actor's imagination, but it was understood as an all-enveloping persona to which the actor has adapted his or her own personality and physicality. It is clear that this metaphorical "mask" is not the same as either the physical masks of the *Commedia* or the stock characters they emblemize.

At the same time, Chekhov, as an actor, repeatedly employed something analogous to *Commedia* masks. He used extensive make-up, false noses, eyebrows and wigs. Boner gives a description of how Chekhov used make-up for the role of Foma in Dostoyevsky's *The Village of Stepanchikovo*, staged in Riga, in 1932:

> Chekhov used great care of the mask with cotton wool, adhesive strips, paints and powder. The result was a furrowed, yellow, cheesy face, with a misshapen nose, a protruding lower lip and weary bags under the eyes. . . . Chekhov created this mask for every performance himself, which required over two hours preparation. Now how does Foma speak? How does his voice sound? . . . His voice was higher than Chekhov's normal voice, sometimes screwed up voice, sometimes even pressed. Now and then a shrill note was heard, a shriek, even a falsetto, then again a mysterious swaying, a murmur, the babble of a river flowing through the valley. (Boner 160-61)[1]



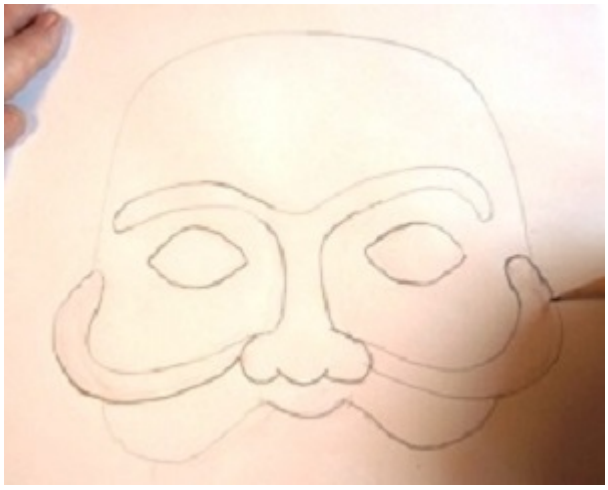
Chekhov as Foma Opiskin in Dostoyevsky's *The Village of Stepanchikovo*, staged in Riga, in 1932 (Meerzon photo)

Chekhov's drawings for his character of Foma, 1932 (photo from Georgette Boner private archive, Zűrich)

Michael Chekhov, ca. 1931-33 (Meerzon photo)

While each of Chekhov's characters was unique, as opposed to the *Commedia* stock characters, they also revealed his investigation of archetypes and his genius at transformation. One could even argue that Chekhov made himself a willing "prisoner" (Rudlin 35) of both the overall "mask" of the all-embracing persona and the physical masks of make-up that often covered his face. In my classes, students make their own masks along with their lazzi, scripts, and choosing or playing the music. First, they make a drawing in keeping with the specific *Commedia* stock character. For Arlecchino, for example, they can use raised eyebrows, large almond-shaped eyes, a bump on the forehead and a large mouth. Compare these sketches with Chekhov's detailed drawings

as he created his various characters, including those of Foma Opiskin, Ivan the Terrible and Ableukhov.



Student drawing of Arlecchino (Brian Bowyer, SUNY Purchase, 2016—photo author)

Video 1

SUNY Purchase student Brian Bowyer having his Arlecchino mask molded to his face, October 2016

With regard to the masks, I emphasize (as in Chekhov) that one not only puts a mask on the face but a mask on the whole body. One cannot "unmask" oneself in front of the audience. This means that you have to stay in the character physically for all the time when you are on stage. You should keep in the typical physical attitude of your character, such as a posture of the spine, gestures, the positions of knees, etc. My students work hard on various movements for each stock character, including two steps, three steps, pirouettes, changing direction and the "thinking" step for Il Dottore, as well as a variety of steps for the servants or Zanni. They discover great freedom *within* the characterization of stock characters. This allows for individual interpretation. For

example, a student playing Pierrot (nonspeaking) used dance and mime illusions learned in class to bring the quality of "airiness." She moved her hands as though they were suspended from strings, something that Chekhov would call a light, fragile and floating Imaginary Center (Fleming 123). Other students needed to find appropriate voices, such as a breathless voice for the Lovers (*legato*), an excited and laughing/screaming voice for Arlecchino (*staccato* movement) and a growling voice for Pantalone. Voice and gesture must be in harmony. For this exercise, I apply the following ideas of Chekhov:

> When sending out our speech, we are sending out something very full, very complete and with very definite shape. You must love the gesture in your speech, therefore, you must speak with your whole body. Your gesture, at the moment you make it, is your speech. You will enjoy the speech if you find you are able to make gesture in it. The gesture will be clearly felt through your speech apparatus. (Du Prey 1936-1941; 12 November 1936, Lesson 27)

In his 1955 lectures, Chekhov further observed, "discover the differences between the character and yourself; the similarities will take care of themselves" (2004: 25; Disk 1, Lecture 1). I follow the principle that a stock character is nevertheless a dramatic character like any other, and the actor must prepare accordingly. This applies to the characters, who do not typically wear a mask, such as the Lovers and Il Capitano—he does often sport an outlandish moustache. At the same time, I also find Chekhov's conceptions of character formation, especially the Psychological Gesture and the all-encompassing "mask"

metaphor, useful in allowing students to move beyond the physical mask. The all-encompassing understanding of character allows my students to achieve Rudlin's "crystallization" of the qualities (35) found in such characters as Pantalone (avarice) or Il Dottore (intellectual pretension), without the *Commedia* mask becoming a "prison."

Traditional *Commedia dell'Arte* stock characters, from left to right: Arlecchino (Truffaldino), Brighella, Columbina, Pantalone, Scaramuccia, Isabella (Lover), Il Capitano (A Levy-Paris, 1862)

With regard to movement, I use a warm-up *étude* (derived from Marcel Marceau's training). We start with a "neutral" walk and then add emotions, such as pride, humility, grief, fear, anger or melancholy. For pride, a step on the right foot causes the head and the torso to rotate diagonally in a sort of *contrapposto* to the left and upwards, with the hands responding to this movement. This "pride" step is precisely what is needed for the *Commedia* character of the Signora (see below, Centers). For humility, the hand and the leg go forward together, the head bowed on the opposite diagonal.

I have found that the masks themselves inspire some students to develop their vocal presence, while others have to be reminded that they have been deprived of facial expressions. There is nothing quiet about *Commedia*; it requires projection of the actor's voice. Interestingly, in working on their voices, the more shy students would open up

as though the masks had freed them by hiding their inhibitions. Their usually quiet voices become loud and expressive. A perceptive student noted: "when I found the mask, I have also found a friend" (Student Comments: Ciaramella). One of his classmates added the following:

> I also can't truly get into this character unless I'm wearing his mask; it is sort of like a blockade I have without it on. I think there is a type of freedom with the character that you can't have any fear to play with it. . . . That says something about Arlecchino, though—he takes over the person [playing him] and is more or less a demon inside them waiting to come out. As weird as it may sound, you sort of sign a contract when you portray the character and put on the mask that you will do it justice and develop the character to be historically true to *Commedia* while also making it true to the modern day and yourself. You fall in love with the character when creating him and don't want to take off the mask, because it lends itself to so much freedom with enough of a shell that you can just do. (Student Comments: Bowyer)

Video 2

Interview with SUNY Purchase student Brian Bowyer about preparing his Arlecchino character

Centers

Michael Chekhov's technique in finding an Imaginary Center for the character is an aspect of his stagecraft directly taken from his training with Stanislavsky (Gordon 178, 233; Fleming 119-28). It is specifically useful in creating *Commedia* characters. In my classes, I ask my students to seek

Imaginary Centers for such older characters as the Vecchi below the waist, where they keep the easily lost pouch of money, and for the servants, the Zanni, in the stomach. For Il Dottore, an Imaginary Center can be in his eyes and head, as he is always inquisitive but focused on refining his thoughts. For La Signora, the Center lies in the proud upper lip, chin or expanded chest. For Arlecchino, it is within his empty stomach.

In addition, we talk about the quality of the Centers. For example, the warm Center in the chest of a Lover, which sometimes moves out to the image of the absent Lover, who is missed and desired. Smeraldina's Center is her poking nose, as she always wants to know everything (is "nosy"); but it can be also her ears, as she hears everything. This work follows Chekhov's own instructions:

> "Artistically observe" people around you. Discover where his or her Center is located (i.e., in a raised eyebrow, tip of the nose, lips, buttocks, cheek, stomach, overhead, outside the body, etc.). Imagine the quality of this Center (e.g., static or movable, small, soft, hard, metallic, squishy, red, black, sunny, etc.). (Chekhov 2004: 26)

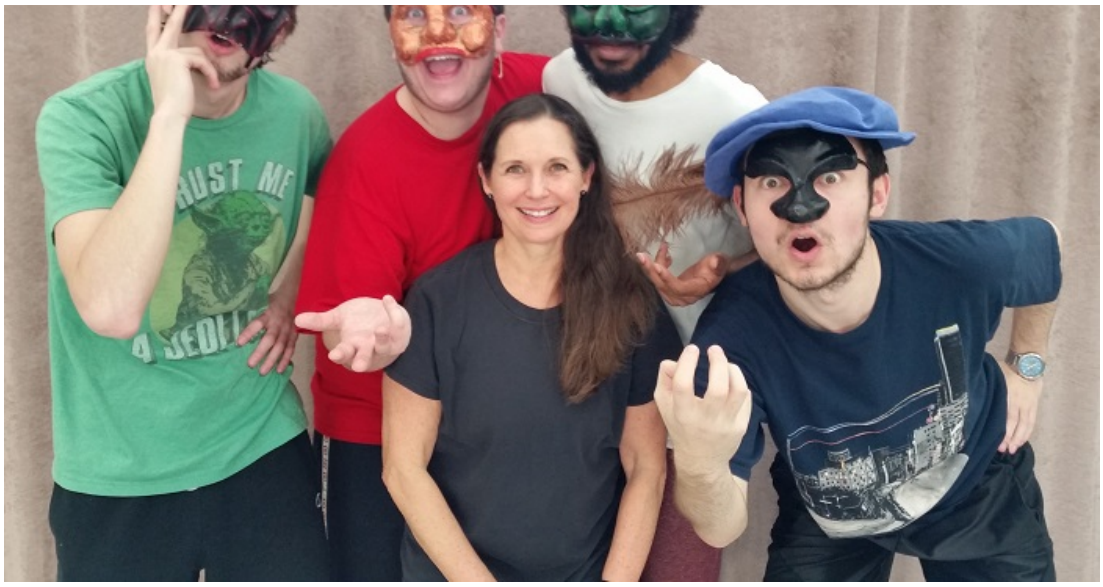
The Center technique helps improve the students' harmony of mask and movement, and also, just as Fleming points out in her analysis of Chekhov's work, allows them to use Imaginary Center to maintain the character through "different scenes and/or separate moments of performance" (122). Chekhov insisted, "you must be free from any restraint in imagining the center in many and different ways, so long as the variations are compatible with the part you are playing" (2002: 81). We apply this to our *Commedia* training. One student, working on

Pantalone's character, played with moving the Center from his greedy hands to his pouch on his belt, so that Pantalone would appear weighed down by greed. For Il Dottore, we used Chekhov's idea that a "Center located . . . in your forehead may invoke the sensation of a sharp, penetrating and even sagacious mind" (2002: 81). Compare the traditional "thinking step," elaborated by Antonio Fava (2005 disk 1 and 2004, 115-16 and 209-10), which one of my recent students performed by walking in a circle, spiraling inwardly, squatting lower and lower with each step, mumbling and gesturing until the idea (or a solution to a problem) would occur. He jumped up, ending the movement with a two-step on his heels. An interesting response to the Centers exercise came from a student who attends Live Acting Role-Play/LARP groups, in which each participant spends a weekend surviving in the woods while staying in character. "The Center exercise was very helpful. I found that I could better understand my characters once I found their Centers, and understand why their Center was there" (Student Comments: Correia).

I was happy to see the students applying their understanding of Centers to a production of Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters* in *Commedia* style. One student observed: "interestingly, the actor seemed to work both 'inside out' and 'outside in' to create the characters. I could see actors placing centers in their bodies: Pantalone low in the front of the hips, Florindo in the chest and Clarice in the air above her head" (Student Comments: Pinaparker). Another student found direct relationships between what he saw onstage and our exercises in class:

> I was able to observe the applications of Michael Chekhov's technique of Centers. . . . One of the Centers that were best executed was in the character of Pantalone. . . . Each time Pantalone walked on stage he had his toes angled outward and his back hunched. Pantalone walked as if he was carrying a bowling ball near his hips: a specific example that was covered in class. (Student Comments: Coffin)

All of our processes—in drawing and making masks, creating gestures and finding Centers—have resonance with Chekhov's approach to creating a character: to see an "image" and, based on the imagination, fill the character with the image using movement supported by breathing. Within the parameters of the traditions for each *Commedia* character, underpinning the physical comedy, we apply aspects of Psychological Gesture to character formation. My students also learn to juggle scarves and do acrobatics and basic circus arts, which corresponds to Chekhov's interest in "juggler psychology" enhancing control over the actor's body. This is to say, I explore the exercises and techniques related to different aspects of *Commedia dell'Arte* that Chekhov used during his time at the Dartington Hall (Du Prey 1992: 135; Meerzon 122, 286). As Meerzon has noted, these exercises were "rooted in aesthetics of pantomime based on the ideas of rhythmical movement and gesture conveying the psychology of a character or scene" (131). To this we add ensemble exercises, such as Chekhov's circle, when the actors lift an invisible golden hoop overhead and set it down in unison (Gordon 183).



Lenka Pichlíková with *Commedia* Students at SUNY Purchase, February 2017
(Brian Bowyer is second from left, in his Arlecchino mask)—photo author

Mime

Turning to mime, it is important to remember that Chekhov once staged a "pantomime" in collaboration with Boner and Victor Gromov (advised by Volkonsky) in Paris, in 1931: the already-mentioned *The Castle Awakening: An Essay in Rhythmical Drama*. In the program for the production, Chekhov spoke of his desire "to cross the boundaries of the mother tongue by restricting the use of the word and the language only for the high points of the drama" (Boner 162). Chekhov, while influenced by Rudolph Steiner, was also following Volkonsky's definition of pantomime as "a combination of music with visible movement" (including sounds and pseudo-words), in contrast to the "corporeal" and illusionistic mime of Étienne Decroux and Marcel Marceau (Meerzon 131). Nevertheless, the extraordinary parallels documented by Cassandra Fleming (2013: 235-93 and *passim*) between Chekhov and Suzanne Bing, as well as

Jacques Copeau, whose pupils Charles Dullin and Decroux taught Marceau, suggest a common point of view regarding gestural art.[2]

In 1985-87, Marcel Marceau conducted several residential teaching workshops in the U.S., which I attended and of which I took detailed notes. What I find in these notes offers astonishing parallels with Michael Chekhov's ideas. For example, both Chekhov and Marceau were talented visual artists who used drawings to develop their characters. Both wrote books for children, illustrating the books themselves. Both were concerned with the idea of visualizing an image as a beginning point of theatrical art—Marceau often told us to observe, draw and look for pictures.

Lenka Pichlíková working with Marcel Marceau, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1987 (photo author)

Both were concerned with rhythm. Marceau sought a sense of *staccato* and *legato*. He taught us that watching an imaginary car passing one's body has to take on the rhythm

of this car's movement, having your head rapidly turn from right to left. Observing a horse will result in bobbing your head. Watching a dog will make you follow an imaginary movement, nodding your head in *staccato* response. A butterfly also causes the head to move in a *staccato* way on a vertical zigzag. You watch, but you also have to become the thing observed. This compares to Chekhov's incorporation of images and his application of tempo (*staccato* and *legato* movement) to Psychological Gesture (Chekhov 1985: 134-35). My students become aware of tempo/rhythm and how these affect both *Commedia* dialogue and mime interactions, including Chekhov's idea of contrasting tempo between speaker and listener.

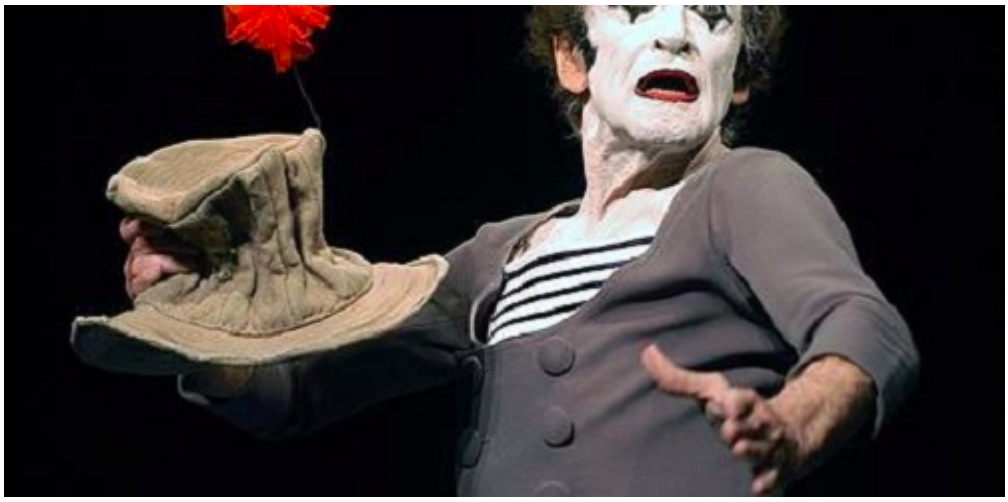
In one of his few published lectures, Marceau seems to express ideas close to Chekhov's concepts of Rhythm, Pause, Psychological Gesture and Radiating:

> A gesture, unless lyrically sustained, is but a drawing in space. Still, it is necessary to measure and situate it in time by giving it dramatic power. . . . A gesture is not sufficient; it needs to be clothed in a thought. And the drawing which expresses this thought must be accurate. . . . The actor-mime *vibrates* like the strings of a harp. He is *lyrical*: *his gestures seem to be invested with a poetic halo*. The gesture must inhale and exhale or it withers away like a plant deprived of water. . . . But the poetic halo surpasses the harmonic gesture: it is the music and in a sense the echo of the movement. Even the motionless attitude in space must emit this aura, this contact, which establishes itself between the actor and the public, and which we call magnetic exchange. (Marceau 103-05)

Two further parallels reveal more common ground. In mime, each movement or change of movement is preceded by an impulse (called "toc"): the moment of contact of the mime's hand with an imaginary object. Marceau used such metaphors as *energie intérieure* and sharpness of accent in describing this moment. It is of the utmost importance that each "toc" includes a full stop, allowing the audience to "lock in" the illusion. Turning to the white makeup used by Marceau and other *mimes corporels*, the master explained to us that the white face was created not to pay attention to the face and facial expressions of the actor, but to shift it to the whole body—emphasizing body movement. In a master class given in Vilnius, Lithuania, on the September 5, 1932, Chekhov put these two concepts together in a remarkable way:

> Every one of [your] simple movements should be unusually skillful. Not outwardly, not for others, but for yourself. Just do the movement and feel it. After every movement, put a "period" [full stop]. Do this without any facial expression! Facial expression steals everything from the body! (Adomajtite and Guobis 1989: 21)

In my mime training at the Theatre on the Balustrade in Prague, under Ladislav Fialka, in studying with Marceau and in my later career, I have also found that performing without words connects one with audience in a more direct way. It allows you to challenge their imagination and evoke the illusions that become real to them, so that—as Chekhov would have it—the invisible becomes visible in the spectator's mind's eye.



Marcel Marceau

The Center in Mime

Mime illusion uses movements which can either start from within the body (called the "Center") or from outside the body (that is, from the Periphery). Impulses from the core of the body belong to a confident, active, assertive character. Movements originating from the periphery make the mime actor seem passive, like a follower or a victim. Chekhov described the Center as a point "from which your activity emanates and radiates" (2002: 80). He recognized an Imaginary Center, which might be outside the body, as part of a larger visualization of character. In mime, we also have a sense of placement of the Center for each character. Is it in your shoulder as a beaten down person, in your bosom as the seductress, or in your heart as a person in love? The idea of a Center outside the body occurs in mime when we establish an external center of focus towards which impulses are directed. In creating an imaginary wall, I have to visualize it in my mind's eye and focus on it—make it real for myself, and then, using mime technique, make it real for the audience.

In both classical pantomime and mime segments in ballet, the

hands are particularly important. Marceau, in his first lesson, taught us how to transform hands: geometric, Renaissance, caressing, hands that give, hands that take, hands that are sewing and ironing a shirt; hands that create waves on the ocean, or butterflies. One can explore, as Chekhov would, different ideas of hands as aspects of character: gentle with long fingers or with dirt under the fingernails; short fingers; hands of a working person or an old person; crippled hands. Chekhov expressed this as follows: "the hands and arms are movable forms permeated with feelings. As the freest of our organs, they are predestined for creative work, and are capable of expressing outwardly the inner life of man" (1991: 53). Marceau urged us to try the hand movements of characters in different occupations too: a clerk (holding paper in one hand while putting on stamps with another—*staccato*), a laundress ironing (one hand on the ironing board, the other tense with the weight of the iron—*legato*), someone buttoning a coat. Each movement expresses the quality of the character's profession or social class. When Chekhov performed Gogol's character Khlestakov in New York, in 1935, Robert Lewis noted, "his Khlestakov in the Gogol play was a prime example of total acting. . . . In his hands he held gloves in such a way as to elongate his fingers" (214).

Conclusion

In commercial theatre, films and television today, actors are expected to be themselves—auditions are often about type-casting. The reaction of experimental theatre to this practice has merit but often leaves the rich traditions of the past behind. Chekhov's techniques offer a different path to dramatic art in harmony with *Commedia dell'Arte* and the

achievements of modern classical pantomime. This path embraces both tradition and modern acting training. Chekhov's imaginative techniques empower actors to transform themselves, playing various characters and adding richness to the characterizations. *Commedia*, in particular, trains stamina and requires students to recreate themselves as stock characters in larger than life expression. Michael Chekhov, Marcel Marceau and the *Commedia* masters of the past agree that the actor must really use the body. As Chekhov put it, "if my body is free, then I am forever free to act. Bodily development is essential" (2004: 41). Taken together, these elements enhance the actor's ability to play classical roles. Combining Chekhov techniques with *Commedia* and mime training gives actors tools to break the "fourth wall" and involve audiences "in the moment," whether through improvisation or mime illusion. Using Chekhov's techniques in *Commedia* and mime classes can yield powerful results.

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[1] Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from German and Russian are mine.
[2] The French translation of Chekhov's *To the Actor* appeared in 1953, simultaneously with the first English edition of the book.

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