

AMINA ZHAMAN

STANISLAVSKY/CHEKHOV

A Comedy in One Act

inspired by a true story¹

¹ For the purpose of this original play, the author uses authentic remarks made by Stanislavsky and Chekhov.

STANISLAVSKY/CHEKHOV

CHARACTERS

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavsky

Mikhail Alexandrovich Chekhov

Güler, *waitress*

Time of action: September 1928.

Scene: A Turkish café in Berlin.

*That life may be good to look at, its play must be well acted;
but for that good actors are needed².
Friedrich Nietzsche*

SCENE ONE

Stanislavsky sits at a table waiting for Chekhov. Waitress named Güler comes up to their table and, in her usual familiar manner, takes order from the guest.

Güler – Good evening!

Stanislavsky – Good evening!

Güler – My name is Güler. I am your waitress.

Stanislavsky – Nice to meet you, Konstantin.

Güler – You were named after Constantinople, right?

Stanislavsky – Quite possible, given that my great-grandmother was Turkish.

Güler – Mine was too. What will you drink, Konstantin?

Stanislavsky – I'll have *Turkish apple*.

Güler – Your taste is as exquisite as the flavour of this tea.

Stanislavsky – As Oscar Wilde once put it, "I have the simplest tastes. I am always satisfied with the best." (*Güler laughs.*)

Güler – I'll go get your tea, otherwise the café owner will scold me again for having fun at work.

Stanislavsky – Not holding you up any longer. (*Güler leaves.*)

² A quote from Nietzsche's poem *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (part 2).
English translation by Walter Kaufmann.

SCENE TWO

Chekhov enters the café, looks around for his teacher, spots the majestic figure of Stanislavsky and heads towards him.

Chekhov – Dear Konstantin Sergeyevich! (*Stanislavsky stands up to greet Chekhov.*) I'm so glad to see you again!

Stanislavsky – Same here, Misha. (*They both sit down.*)

Chekhov – What time is it on your watch?

Stanislavsky – It's nine sharp.

Chekhov – It turns out that I arrived on time and still kept you waiting.

Stanislavsky – Nevermind.

Chekhov – I always tend to stay behind you, at a slight gap of time and distance.

Stanislavsky – Misha, the time has come to move forward one step, not only in words but in deeds.

Chekhov – It has been five years, and you still remember that line from my letter!

Stanislavsky – It's hard to forget... even with *my* memory.

Chekhov – Summer of 1923. I was undergoing treatment in Berlin, while you were on holidays in Freiburg...

Stanislavsky – Nowadays you enjoy treatment and leisure in Germany for both of us. (*Chekhov laughs.*) When are you planning to return to Moscow?

Chekhov – In one year. Hopefully, by that time the issue with the theatre will have been resolved. Until then, I mentally sort out the premises that they could offer me.

Stanislavsky – Misha, don't be naive. Issues like these are not to be resolved distantly.

Chekhov – And I thought it was only a matter of a single phone call.

Stanislavsky – It is not all that simple.

Chekhov – Yet this might be the case...

Stanislavsky – This case is different. Sorry for interrupting, but I'd rather dispel your illusions now before life will do the same to you one year after.

Chekhov – Well, then I have to work here with Professor Max Reinhardt.

Stanislavsky – May God send such “punishment” to every actor. Speaking of Max, inside of him lives an artist of the rarest talent that almost never appears before an adoring audience.

Chekhov – Much to the crowd’s regret! I shall confess to you that working for Reinhardt is just a question of existence. My soul does not contribute to that! Germany is not about the creativity process, but you can still make money in this country.

Stanislavsky – Basically, one shall only do business in America. Five thousand seven hundred dollars per evening. Continuously for several years. What kind of Europe can compete with America in this sense?!

Chekhov – None.

Stanislavsky – Like Germans, Americans diligently try to understand Chekhov’s plays. They crave for knowledge, look you in the eye and are willing to accept all things new and genuine.

Chekhov – Those are just dream viewers!

Stanislavsky – Absolutely! They have seen all the best that Europe can offer. Maybe that’s why America appreciates individuality so much. Benoîs believes that there’s nothing more valuable and supreme in art than the artist’s own individuality.

Chekhov – I completely agree with him, teacher. (*Güler brings fruit tea.*)

Güler – (*with surprise, to Stanislavsky*) Are you a teacher?? (*Stanislavsky nods his head affirmatively.*) The people you meet around here!

Stanislavsky – And this is my favorite student Mikhail.

Chekhov – You can call me Misha.

Güler – Güler.

Chekhov – What does your name mean?

Güler – Laughing one.

Chekhov – That’s what I thought. (*Güler laughs out loud.*) Güler, your laughter blew up our evening!

Stanislavsky – That laughter is beautiful.

Güler – Thank you.

Chekhov – Dostoieffski wrote in his novel *Adolescent*: “If a person laughs well – it means it’s a good person.” He would absolutely love how you laugh.

Güler – I have no doubt. (*Stanislavsky drinks tea.*)

Stanislavsky – M-m-m ... What a magnificent flavour!

Chekhov – Is there anything like this tea on your menu?

Güler – No. It's incomparable.

Chekhov – Then bring me a real Turkish coffee. (*Güler writes Chekhov's order down to her notebook.*) I will be anxiously waiting for it.

Güler – I'll be back before you finish your *lesson*. (*Leaves. Pause*)

Chekhov – Such a sincere and light-hearted laughter!

Stanislavsky – I would even say, the cry of a pure soul.

Chekhov – (*with sadness*) I never staged *Adolescent*...

Stanislavsky – Perhaps, you will – in the future.

Chekhov – Maybe. But where? In Russia? In Germany? Hardly anywhere, I suppose.

Stanislavsky – You should give up the idea of a possible non-achievement.

Chekhov – Someone has told me this before...

Stanislavsky – Nemirovich-Danchenko.

Chekhov – Right you are! And do *you* agree with him??

Stanislavsky – On this, I do. (*With suspicion*) Have you, by any chance, re-read the books of your favorite Schopenhauer while being here?

Chekhov – No, I haven't.

Stanislavsky – And you should not. Otherwise, you'll turn into a pessimist again. This role does not fit you. I am telling you this as an internationally acclaimed director.

Chekhov – And I thought, as a caring person... (*Laughs at his own joke.*) By the way, when in his old age Schopenhauer gained recognition for his pessimistic philosophy, he felt *happy* for the fact that a man could live to a hundred years!

Stanislavsky – So how long did he live?

Chekhov – For seventy two years. (*Pause*)

Stanislavsky – As soon as he looked at the world through the eyes of an optimist, his life came to an end. What an irony of fate!

Chekhov – Tell me about it!

Stanislavsky – There is one consolation – the recognition came during his lifetime.

Chekhov – His life *wasn't* all in vain!

Stanislavsky – Misha, theatre is your thing, and not philosophy.

Chekhov – “I am clever and brave and strong. If I had lived a normal life I might have become another Schopenhauer or Dostoieffski.”³

Stanislavsky – It's from *Uncle Vanya*!

³ English translation by Marian Fell.

Chekhov – Stolen from uncle Anton! (*They laugh like children.*)

Stanislavsky – He often made me laugh until I drop...

Chekhov – While he himself would, almost secretly, be glancing at you with his smiling eyes...

Stanislavsky – Indeed, he would do so.

Chekhov – “My uncle [with] most honest principles...”⁴ used to say: “Life is at odds with philosophy: there’s no happiness without joy, a person only enjoys what is not needed.”

Stanislavsky – Misha, you embody Anton Pavlovich’s dream of an intellectual actor.

Chekhov – Do you think so?

Stanislavsky – I know this. (*Chekhov blushes from embarrassment.*) As for the life of an artist, it flows not in everyday life but in beautiful memories of the past and dreams of the future.

Chekhov – I couldn’t agree more!

Stanislavsky – We don’t have much time, so let’s get to our current agenda. Remind me where we stopped last time...

Chekhov – At “affective memories”.

Stanislavsky – Oh, right. If an actor focuses on memories from his personal life, they will lead to the feelings of life and creativity so needed on stage.

Chekhov – In my opinion, the less the actor touches upon his personal experiences, the more he is able to create.

Stanislavsky – In what way?

Chekhov – As the actor uses creative feelings completely devoid of all things personal, his soul forgets own experiences, processes them through the depths of his subconscious mind and transforms them into artistic ones. Genuinely creative feelings are achieved through fantasy, whereas the actor retains own mental health.

Stanislavsky – In other words, you put the actor in the plane of acting.

Chekhov – Absolutely right.

Stanislavsky – I cut out the actor from this plane and place him in the plane of his human and life memories. That’s where he is strong. Where he’s got a lot of material.

Chekhov – Your method does not allow the soul to forget personal experiences.

Stanislavsky – At least, it always produces real feelings on stage.

Chekhov – And more than just that...

⁴ English translation by Vladimir Nabokov.

Stanislavsky – What do you mean?

Chekhov – It can also put actors into a nervous state, or lead actresses to hysteria. Something that I have often seen in theatres.

Stanislavsky – What can you do about it, Misha? Everyone's got individual memories.

Chekhov – Yet there is none for every occasion.

Stanislavsky – Here I agree with you.

Chekhov – Let's say that similar events relate both to the past of the actor and to the life of his character. He was in the same proposed circumstances as his hero. In this case, the actor can really use the technique of "affective memories" to achieve stage truth. But what if the role of a king is to be played by someone not from a blue-blood family?

Stanislavsky – He should imagine himself in the proposed circumstances of a king.

Chekhov – So he will actually play himself – a poor actor – just wearing a luxurious suit and expensive scenery. But the idea is to embody the king's image, and to not make it at the expense of the costume and production designers. *Your* actor will be "going from himself" to never attain the heights of a royal person. *My* actor will "walk away from his persona" and first create a king's picture in his own imagination, and then convincingly embody it on stage. (*Pause*) Konstantin Sergeyevich, I've wanted to ask you for a long time: how shall an actor who is a non-believer prepare for the role of a monk?

Stanislavsky – First he needs to come to God, and then, with the help of "affective memories", get into character.

Chekhov – Now everything is clear for me.

Stanislavsky – Misha, maybe after returning to Moscow you will still be able to find a common language with actors of the Moscow Art Theatre-2, won't you?

Chekhov – That is out of the question.

Stanislavsky – Why?

Chekhov – Because my memories of the past are brighter than what awaits them in the future.

SCENE THREE

Güler brings Turkish coffee, a glass of water and Turkish delight.

Güler – Here is your coffee...

Chekhov – Merci, Madame.

Güler – ... and a compliment from the house.

Stanislavsky and Chekhov – (*simultaneously*) Thank you!

Stanislavsky – (*to Chekhov*) I recall what Musset once wrote: “My glass is small, but...

Güler – ... I drink from *my* glass!” (*Stanislavsky and Chekhov look at Güler with bewilderment.*)

Chekhov – Where did you read this?

Güler – There, at the bar. (*Chekhov laughs out loud.*) I’m not joking.

Stanislavsky – I believe you. (*Chekhov starts laughing even louder.*) Pay no attention to him.

Güler – I can’t understand: is it me or what I’m saying that he is laughing at?

Stanislavsky – It’s what you’ve just said.

Güler – Perhaps, silence truly is gold, isn’t it?

Chekhov – In your case, it’s platinum. (*Chekhov laughs out loud. Stanislavsky doesn’t know how to react.*)

Güler – I think, I should go.

Chekhov – For the sake of everything funny – stay! So you said about the bar, and I remembered Manet’s painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. Yet, unlike you, the bartender woman on it looks very sad. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote: “Since the beginning of mankind, a man has rejoiced too little; only this... is our original sin!”

Güler – (*with irony*) It turns out that you and I are almost sinless.

Chekhov – Exactly! (*Güler leaves.*)

Stanislavsky – Nietzsche’s thought involuntarily reminded me of what Aristotle once said: “Of all living species, only a man is characterized by laughter.”

Chekhov – Sometimes it looks like no one, except for me and Reinhardt, makes use of this ability. Notably, I tend to laugh out loud, and he shows his laughter only with his eyes. (*Chekhov laughs.*)

Stanislavsky – Misha, you’re acting like your friend Andrei Bely when you’re laughing by yourself.

Chekhov – Better laugh alone than cry together. (*He bursts into laughter again.*)

Stanislavsky – What made you laugh so hard?

Chekhov – The phrase “I believe you”.

Stanislavsky – “Now do I see ’tis true. Look here, Iago...”⁵

Chekhov – Don’t trust anyone all April, Othello! (*They laugh like children.*) I’ve always wanted to say this to you, but it felt kind of awkward.

Stanislavsky – You shouldn’t have restrained yourself, Misha. Amazing how deeply you grasp the “grain” of the character, even when you’re fooling around!

Chekhov – It’s not difficult at all, because I’m equally as funny as Iago! (*Chekhov drinks coffee with pleasure.*)

Stanislavsky – Now try to drink coffee as if you’re about to get married in an hour. (*Chekhov drinks coffee with happily shining eyes.*) I believe you! And now, as if someone just told you about the death of your child.

Chekhov – God forbid!

Stanislavsky – It’s just an exercise. (*With sorrow on his face, Chekhov finishes his coffee.*) I don’t believe you!

Chekhov – (*laughing*) Konstantin Sergeyevich, you pronounced your catchphrase just like Vasily Vasilich⁶ from my uncle’s *Kalkhas*!

Stanislavsky – Svetlovidov... A comedian aged 68. *Old man*. You used to call me that way in the theatre, didn’t you? (*Awkward pause*) I was born for this role! (*They laugh.*) Let’s go back to Shakespeare’s hero. To play Othello convincingly, I imagined myself in his circumstances, and it triggered within me the feeling that was required to perform the role. I “was going from myself.”

Chekhov – Well, I think that the actor should forget himself and imagine in his fantasy an Othello surrounded by the appropriate circumstances. Watching Othello in his imagination, as if from the outside, the actor will feel exactly what Othello feels, and his feelings, thus, will be pure, translated, and they won’t drag him into his own personality. Capturing the image of Othello in his fantasy, the actor will become ignited with those mysterious, creative feelings that people usually call “inspiration”.

Stanislavsky – Are you trying to say that personal feelings of the actor shall be eliminated from the creative work?

⁵ Othello’s phrase (act 3, scene 3).

⁶ Hero of Anton Chekhov’s dramatic sketch *The Swan Song* (*Kalkhas*).

Chekhov – Yes! And better do it the way Chaliapin does. When he sings Don Quixote, he feels himself like Don Quixote. He's got Don Quixote performing, while Chaliapin chases him, and watches him play. When Feodor Ivanovich cries on stage, he cries not through his character but out of sympathy for the character. He does not lose self-control and always watches his own acting as if from the sidelines. By the way, Goethe, too, had the ability to constantly look at himself from the outside, with all his experiences – even in a moment of love!

Stanislavsky – What are you talking about! (*Güler puts on Chaliapin's record and keeps a close eye on reactions. "Mephistopheles's Serenade"*⁷ *plays on.*)

Chekhov – (*showing off to Güler*) Chaliapin! I know him.

Güler – (*with self-irony*) Even I know him.

Chekhov – You never cease to amaze me, Güler! Do you think it's worth kissing the groom before engagement?

Güler – Depends on the groom. Some don't deserve to be kissed even after engagement.

Chekhov – (*with curiosity*) Then what type of husband would you prefer?

Güler – Rich and faithful.

Chekhov – Your expectations are way too high. Let's be realistic: just rich. (*Laughs like Mephistopheles.*)

Stanislavsky – I don't find it funny at all. Judging from my experience, being able to combine rich and faithful is a real deal.

Güler – How nice to be hearing this!

Chekhov – Speaking seriously...

Güler – What do you know about being serious?

Chekhov – I know way more than that! (*After a short pause*) A purposeful man is capable of anything – even loyalty.

Güler – (*to Chekhov*) Naughty man... (*To Stanislavsky*) I certainly don't envy you.

Stanislavsky – There are times when I don't envy myself either. (*Chekhov laughs. Stanislavsky repeats after him. Güler leaves.*) I've been dreaming to play Mephistopheles in drama theatre, yet my several attempts to get the role have been all in vain.

Chekhov – It's only the beginning!

Stanislavsky – With my failing health, not so likely.

⁷ From Charles Gounod's opera *Faust*.

Chekhov – The actor is obliged to give it all during stage performances, but not at rehearsals.

Stanislavsky – (*to the side*) Rehearsal is my love.

Chekhov – In an energy-saving regime, my strength tends to grow and be concentrated. Recently, I re-read Diderot's treatise *The Paradox of the Actor*. He writes that the actor must be a calm observer. In this case, his playing does not get worse over time. After the first appearance on stage, a cold actor strictly copies himself or the image he has studied. His game is getting stronger, adding more flames and fire to his look!

Stanislavsky – Well, I think that everything that the actor does on stage with a cold soul – in a “cold way” – will ruin him, as it will instill in him the habit of acting automatically, without imagination – mechanically.

Chekhov – A rational actor will be equally perfect in all performances. Whereas, a sensitive actor won't pull off the same role twice in a row with equal ardor. Very hot at the first performance, during the third one he will run out of steam and be cold as marble.

Stanislavsky – And yet we will witness an experience-based reincarnation of the actor.

Chekhov – Without a doubt. The only question is how many performances the actor's nervous system can survive. (*After a pause*) It makes me sick thinking about how, in my youth, I used to spend my energy on performances.

Stanislavsky – During rehearsals, you wouldn't feel sorry for yourself either.

Chekhov – I engaged my undeveloped feelings in creativity, which then led to a nervous breakdown. (*With sincere gratitude.*) If it were not for your help and hypnosis sessions, I would not have returned to the stage.

Stanislavsky – What won't you do for the sake of art!

Chekhov – From now on, I am an attentive observer, or simply an actor who is *above* the role.

Stanislavsky – If only above the role... You are an actor that rises over the ensemble. That's where all your theatre conflicts come from...

SCENE FOUR

Chekhov – I dream to play Hamlet in German language, and I have already learned half of the monologue *To Be, or Not To Be*.

Stanislavsky – Go ahead and read it. (*Chekhov stands up, takes a few steps forward and immediately gets in the role of Hamlet. Powerful energy and brilliant acting make up for his poor pronunciation.*)

Chekhov – (*playing Hamlet*)

Sein oder Nichtsein; das ist hier die Frage:
Obs edler im Gemüt, die Pfeil und Schleudern
Des wütenden Geschicks erdulden oder,
Sich waffnend gegen eine See von Plagen,
Durch Widerstand sie enden? Sterben – schlafen –

Nichts weiter! Und zu wissen, daß ein Schlaf
Das Herzweh und die tausend Stöße endet,
Die unsers Fleisches Erbteil, 's ist ein Ziel,
Aufs innigste zu wünschen. Sterben – schlafen –
Schlafen! Vielleicht auch träumen! Ja, da liegts:

Was in dem Schlaf für Träume kommen mögen,
Wenn wir den Drang des Ird'schen abgeschüttelt,
Das zwingt uns stillzustehn. Das ist die Rücksicht,
Die Elend läßt zu hohen Jahren kommen⁸.

What do you think, Konstantin Sergeyevich?

Stanislavsky – Just like your uncle, I ask myself the same question: “Why would Hamlet bother about visions after death, when even more terrible visions visit life itself?!”

Chekhov – Any thoughts on my acting?

Stanislavsky – The same thing that I said four years ago in Moscow following a dress rehearsal of *Hamlet*. I like a lot about how you perform, but, in terms of theatrical character, being a tragedian is not quite your thing.

Chekhov – You are certainly right. In 1924, I slipped through *Hamlet* completely by accident.

Stanislavsky – You see, Misha, a spitting tragedian can make everything tremble, whilst spitting from you will result in nothing.

⁸ German translation by August Wilhelm von Schlegel.

Chekhov – Deep down in my heart, I am aware of that. I just can't get over it.

Stanislavsky – What should comfort you is that Barrymore, too, was far from perfect in Hamlet's role, although he played it quite charmingly. One could feel tension in his acting. He, certainly, mastered much of that role's spirituality, but he was abusing his nervous force. In my opinion, sometimes Barrymore should have been more reserved. A careful examination of an image can always highlight spots where beauty of the lines and calmness of the role will be sufficient to make a proper impression. In this way the actor is going to keep his nervous force for whenever it is needed.

Chekhov – Which scene was Barrymore's best performance? *To Be, or Not To Be* monologue?

Stanislavsky – No. Hamlet's dialogue with his mother. (*Pause*)

Chekhov – As Reinhardt says, now is not the time for classical things, but theatre is yet to see more Shakespeare and Schiller.

Stanislavsky – He knows what he's talking about.

Chekhov – I was thinking to myself: Alexander Moissi arrived in Moscow with Hamlet, and I came to Berlin. A kind of a return visit...

Stanislavsky – With only one difference: he is created for the role of the Prince of Denmark, and you are not. By the way, Moissi and his wife had dinner at my place the other day.

Chekhov – I wish I could have joined you! Konstantin Sergeyevich, tell me what he is like in real life.

Stanislavsky – Alexander is the sweetest person. Young artists have much to learn from him about acting skills and work ethics.

Chekhov – I think the same. The whole world admires him!

Stanislavsky – How can one not admire him?? Moissi is a genius! Tragic hot-tempered actor who has a velvety timbre of voice and a unique melody of speech...

Chekhov – I wanted to mention that, but you got ahead of me.

Stanislavsky – Again I did... (*They laugh.*)

Chekhov – (*with delight*) From Moissi's mouth German speech sounds like bel canto. Recently he said: "If God is quite disposed to the actor, then He sends him to Max Reinhardt". By the way, Reinhardt has offered me the role of Skid in *Artists*⁹. Vladimir Sokolov plays it here with big success.

⁹ *Artists* by G. Watters and A. Hopkins. Premiered in Vienna on November 11, 1928.

Stanislavsky – Having seen that production in Deutsches Theater, I can state with confidence – you are going to look very organic playing a clown.

Chekhov – Reinhardt wants me to play Skid in Vienna. The role is tragicomic. Suits me best.

Stanislavsky – (*with nostalgia*) In childhood I used to dream of becoming a circus manager.

Chekhov – What if you had become one, would you hire me?

Stanislavsky – I would do that, with no contest whatsoever.

Chekhov – That's so nice of you.

Stanislavsky – Misha, how should an actor dream of the character?

Chekhov – The same way I do with regard to the Don Quixote, King Lear and Ahasuerus characters. I want to penetrate into their secrets and pass them on to others from the stage. Quixote is half an angel, Lear is half God, yet Ahasuerus is a man. Having rejected Christ, he comes to this knowledge: not in the teachings of Christ, not in his words, is the essence of Christianity, but in himself, in the being, in the "I" of Christ. The Path of Ahasuerus is an imaginary agony of birth into the world of Christianity. But Ahasuerus also embodies the problem of entire Judaism. As a Jew, his connection with Christ is much stronger than that of an Aryan: his blood denies Christ, and, through the passion of rejection, he is chained to Christ with his whole being, he beholds him constantly. But, as a man, he loves Christ and strives for him. Rejection and acceptance, horror and love – such is the soul of Ahasuerus.

(*Darkness. Playing Ahasuerus*)

I'm going – a slave dragging his anguish...

Centuries, centuries... In each I recognize

one line of my love; each

feature has its age; and they all conceal my

grief... I am the spirit of desert thirst,

they call me Ahasuerus. It's in the stars or in the dust

I may be wandering. The whole history of Earth is

a dream about me. I was and always will be.

Let sounds pour in from everywhere!

I rise, yearn, get stronger... High above

My love will now fill the vaults!..

Oh, the music of my roaming, the waters

and the cries of centuries, over here... to me!..¹⁰

Stanislavsky – Is it from Vadim Shershenevich's play?

Chekhov – (*shaking his head negatively*) From Vladimir Nabokov's prologue *Ahasuerus*. However, he signs for himself as Sirin.

Stanislavsky – A talented young man. I knew his parents well, and they frequently had me as their guest in Moscow.

Chekhov – Nowadays, he is in Berlin.

Stanislavsky – Everyone sticks around... (*Pause*) Misha, if they allow you to fulfill the dream of a classical theatre, will you return to Moscow?

Chekhov – Immediately!

Stanislavsky – I see. (*After a short pause*) Now imagine: you do not get a theatre in Moscow...

Chekhov – It takes no imagination to see that happen.

Stanislavsky – What are you going to do?

Chekhov – (*with irony*) I will carve out chess pieces from wood and sell them. (*Stanislavsky looks at Chekhov in disbelief.*) Joking aside. (*Seriously*) I will try to organize a theatre of high tragedy and comedy in Prague to stage there the productions of *Don Quixote* and *King Lear*. Also, for my future theatre, I fantasize about sharp contemporary satire with a philosophical lining.

Stanislavsky – Is the lining that necessary?

Chekhov – Actually, it's not needed that much, although I truly wish it was...

Stanislavsky – Are you kidding me?

Chekhov – I would never dare!

Stanislavsky – (*coldly*) Mikhail Alexandrovich...

Chekhov – Why act so bad right away?

Stanislavsky – (*harshly*) You don't understand it the good way! I told you this before and will say it one more time: you are engaged in philosophy, but still you are not going to get the chair!

Chekhov – Well, I don't need it, after all I have got my own "faculty from where one can convey lots of good things to the world",¹¹ which is theatre. (*Pause. With inspiration*) Eugene O'Neill has it clear: when it comes to theatre, you have to dream...

Stanislavsky – I'm afraid that you have understood his words quite *literally*.

¹⁰ English translation by Amina Zhaman.

¹¹ Nikolay Gogol's famous phrase.

Chekhov – Even more, I have penetrated into the deep and rich content of each individual letter.

Stanislavsky – (*cautiously*) You’ve gone too far.

Chekhov – I can go even further and plastically express all the letters in a word and all the sounds in music.

Stanislavsky – There is no need for this. You will only gain a real harmony of soul upon reading the three Holy books – Torah, Bible and Qur’an. There you’ll find the answers to all your questions.

Chekhov – (*after a long pause*) What if...

Stanislavsky – (*strictly*) There is no “if”. Remember: the miraculous “if”, or, as the translator of my book puts it – the magic “if”, is nothing compared to a divine miracle.

SCENE FIVE

Güler clears the empty cups from the table.

Güler – (*looking at the bottom of Chekhov’s cup*) So... What do we have here?

Chekhov – (*with surprise*) Are you good at reading tea leaves??

Güler – I am not, but I have a rich imagination.

Chekhov – And what is there that you “see” at the bottom of my cup?

Güler – You have a bright past, an unclear present and a big future.

Chekhov – How do you know?!

Güler – Woman’s intuition.

Chekhov – Amazing! (*To Stanislavsky*) There it is – the power of imagination! (*To Güler*) Tell me, do you believe in prophecies?

Güler – I believe in God.

Stanislavsky – (*to Chekhov*) Did you hear that? (*Chekhov nods his head affirmatively.*)

Güler – The Qur’an says: “No soul knoweth what it will earn tomorrow, and no soul knoweth in what land it will die. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.”¹²

Stanislavsky – These words have so much wisdom...

Chekhov – It gave me goose bumps! “... no soul knoweth in what land it will die.” Like it’s about my uncle: he died in Badenweiler in 1904.

¹² The Glorious Qur’an (surah 31: Luqman, verse 34).

English translation by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall.

Güler – (*with curiosity*) And where would *you* choose to die?

Chekhov – In Petersburg.

Güler – I personally would prefer Istanbul. What about you, Konstantin?

Stanislavsky – I suppose, my contribution to art has already immortalized me.

Güler – (*to Chekhov*) Is this some kind of joke?

Chekhov – No! Konstantin Sergeyevich is a big actor.

Güler – Whereas you really are a naughty man. Would you like to repeat tea and coffee?

Chekhov and Stanislavsky – (*in unison*) Yes! (*Güler leaves.*)

Stanislavsky – Your comedic talent is obvious even for Güler. (*Chekhov starts to strangely move his lips. With bewilderment*) Misha, what are you doing?

Chekhov – I’m trying to fold my lips into a smile. (*Enthusiastically*) They should be teaching humor at drama schools.

Stanislavsky – Do you really think that humor can be taught?

Chekhov – I do! And there is great happiness about it! Humor makes your job easier. And easiness is the first indication of true creativity. An actor who can only take life and himself seriously won’t intrigue the audience.

Stanislavsky – No worries: that’s definitely not the case for you.

Chekhov – Hopefully so. Konstantin Sergeyevich, how’s the work on your new book going?

Stanislavsky – Slowly but surely.

Chekhov – Have you already come up with a title?

Stanislavsky – Certainly: *Actor’s Self Work*.

Chekhov – (*to the side*) The one that has no end.

Stanislavsky – The English version sounds like this – *An Actor Prepares*.

Chekhov – Wonderful!

Stanislavsky – Take my advice and learn English so that you won’t have to waste time and money on a translator.

Chekhov – I wish I could learn German first...

Stanislavsky – If you don’t mind, I will read a passage from the upcoming book.

Chekhov – I am all for it!

Stanislavsky – (*reading out loud*) “Every invention of the actor’s imagination must be thoroughly worked out and solidly built on a basis

of facts. It must be able to answer all the questions (when, where, why, how) that he asks himself when he is driving his inventive faculties on to make a more and more definite picture of a make-believe existence. Sometimes he will not need to make all this conscious, intellectual effort. His imagination may work intuitively. But you have seen for yourselves that it cannot be counted on. To imagine “in general”, without a well-defined and thoroughly founded theme is a sterile occupation.”¹³ (*To Chekhov*) Have I bored you?

Chekhov – Not at all!

Stanislavsky – I’ll continue then. (*Reading out loud*) “On the other hand, a conscious, reasoned approach to the imagination often produces a bloodless, counterfeit presentment of life. That will not do for the theatre. Our art demands that an actor’s whole nature be actively involved, that he give himself up, both mind and body, to his part. *He must feel the challenge to action physically as well as intellectually* because the imagination, which has no substance or body, can reflexively affect our physical nature and make it act. This faculty is of the greatest importance in our emotion-technique.”¹⁴

Chekhov – I am delighted, Konstantin Sergeyeovich! I will be looking forward to the release of your book with greatest impatience!

Stanislavsky – I am sure that the chapter about imagination will become your favorite one. (*As if concluding*) “Every movement you make on the stage, every word you speak, is the result of the right life of your imagination.”¹⁵

SCENE SIX

Two hours later.

Stanislavsky and Chekhov are enthusiastically playing chess.

Güler brings coffee.

Chekhov – Güler, do you know how to play chess?

Güler – I don’t, but it’s clear for me: Konstantin is a King, and you are a Knight.

Chekhov – Take it higher. I’m a chess composer.

¹³ English translation by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood.

¹⁴ English translation by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood.

¹⁵ English translation by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood.

Güler – You are a dreamer. (*Stanislavsky laughs.*)

Stanislavsky (to *Chekhov*) – She sees to the root! (*Güler laughs out loud. The voice of the café owner is heard: “Quit laughing so loudly at work!”*)

Chekhov – He treats you like a pawn.

Güler – It’s worse. I’m not even present on the chessboard. (*Leaves.*)

Chekhov – Owner of the café “looked blacker than Homer’s Apollo when he let his arrows rain down upon the Greek hosts.”¹⁶ (*Stanislavsky laughs out loud.*)

Stanislavsky – (*after a pause*) Misha, playing with you is a pleasure!

Chekhov – The feeling is mutual, Konstantin Sergeyevich! I had wonderful teachers – Savina, Glagolin, Dalmatov, Arbatov, Sladkopevtsev and you, of course.

Stanislavsky – I was talking about playing chess.

Chekhov – Ah, that’s what you meant... Lasker, Capablanca, Marshall, Réti, Torre and Bogoljubow also taught me a lot without even realizing it. I enjoyed their game at the 1925 chess tournament in Moscow! I’m certainly no Lasker.

Stanislavsky – And I’m not Alekhine either.

Chekhov – Nevertheless, without exaggeration – our game has been breathtaking. (*Chekhov wins the game.*)

Stanislavsky – Bravo, Misha! When it comes to acting – *purely chronologically* – you may be following my steps, but in terms of chess – I am definitely behind you.

Chekhov – You could “walk from yourself” though... (*They laugh.*)

¹⁶ A phrase from Denis Diderot’s story *The Nephew of Rameau*.
English translation by Jacques Barzun.

SCENE SEVEN

Three hours later.

Stanislavsky – I have always thought that actors are children.

Chekhov – Do not be offended, but I actually find Meyerhold's formulation – "sons of bitches" – to be more accurate.

Stanislavsky – (*in a whisper*) My touring abroad with the theatre has constantly been proving him to be right. (*They laugh.*)

Chekhov – Not only Vsevolod Emilyevich, but Jean-Jacques Rousseau would also agree with us! In the art of acting he saw a mixture of hypocrisy, arrogance, meanness and villainy. (*To the side*) You can't argue... (*To Stanislavsky*) According to Rousseau, this mixture makes an actor suitable for any role, except for the most noble one – the role of man.

Stanislavsky – As Diderot accurately noted, it is such a rare occurrence to find an actor who is a decent person and an actress who is an honest woman... To be fair, there are exceptions to the rule. Such as yourself for Meyerhold.

Chekhov – A magical director!

Stanislavsky – When will the two of you get to work together?

Chekhov – God only knows.

Stanislavsky – Anton Pavlovich often told me: "The more cultured you are, the more unhappy you become." It is amazing: the fewest cultured people that I have ever met are within the sphere of culture.

Chekhov – I have never heard so much swearing elsewhere – even at my parents' house! (*They laugh. With nostalgia*) My father always called a spade a spade. For many years I was failing to understand why people kept blushing as they heard me expressing something that they would view as unacceptable. Even after becoming an adult, I struggled a lot to quit using the illicit vocabulary. One cannot be a cultured actor without staying a cultured person. (*After a short pause*) I will not hide it: in the past I often cursed the theatre without justifying my words.

Stanislavsky – How vulgar of you!

Chekhov – (*mischievously*) I'll try to justify my words and actions in the future.

Stanislavsky – Misha!

Chekhov – Kidding! (*With self-irony*) I've never condescended to considering myself "clean", and I won't be able to walk on tiptoe

backstage the way you do. There are wolfhounds out on the theatre streets.

Stanislavsky – Everyone but the audience knows about it.

Chekhov – Surely. Theatrical business is the most inconvenient and clumsy of all things in the world.

Stanislavsky – However, we cannot live without it.

Chekhov – Though we both know it very well: just like perfection, human ingratitude has no limit.

Stanislavsky – My cousin Nikolay Alexandrovich Alexeyev would also stand by these words. (*With nostalgia*) A city governor who refused his salary in favor of his beloved Moscow. At his own expense, he built schools, colleges, hospitals, water towers. Many Muscovites were grateful to him, but not all of them.

Chekhov – Was it him who uncle Anton wrote about in the column *Fragments of Moscow Life*?

Stanislavsky – (*proudly*) Who else could it be?! (*They laugh.*)

SCENE EIGHT

Chekhov – Uncle Anton believed that such thing as happiness never existed and was nothing more than a desire. And what do *you* think, Konstantin Sergeyevich?

Stanislavsky – Happiness does exist. It's in knowledge, in art and in work. Rehearsing the *Inspector* with you was a happiness for me.

Chekhov – Same here! (*Güler brings the tea and pours it into glasses with her right hand, while holding the tray with the left one.*) Are you comfortable?

Güler – It's better this way than to spill it on a guest. (*They laugh.*)

Stanislavsky – Let's ask Güler what happiness is all about...

Güler – (*straightaway*) About certainty.

Chekhov – (*with surprise*) Not love?

Güler – (*confidently*) Correct.

Chekhov – And not even about money?

Güler – Partly so, but definitely not about love. The Turks say: "Beautiful people are always unhappy."

Stanislavsky – And what about you?

Güler – I still have everything ahead of me. (*Chekhov laughs. To Chekhov*) And you have every chance to become happy.

Chekhov – Snub-nosed characters like me have all the luck! I knew I was not cute, but I never thought of being that ugly. But you are a real beauty. (*Chekhov quickly starts drawing a caricature on Güler.*)

Güler – (*recognizing herself*) Oh, that's me! Misha, you are a humorist and a drawer – just like Wilhelm Busch¹⁷!

Chekhov – (*in amazement*) You know Busch??

Güler – I even know that Manet is more than just one painter. There are actually two¹⁸ of them.

Chekhov – I'll tell you a secret: I am eager to write a fairy tale and illustrate it in the spirit of *Plish and Plum*!

Güler – Of all the things I have heard from you today, this one is the most reasonable. (*Pointing at the caricature*) Can I take your drawing?

Chekhov – I urge you to do so. (*Güler takes the drawing and leaves.*) Did you hear that?

Stanislavsky – I have no words.

Chekhov – It says a lot. (*Stanislavsky and Chekhov drink tea.*) Once I was visiting Chaliapin's house and felt a little embarrassed. We were having tea. I took a sip from my glass and, before I had time to swallow, I realized that there was a moment of silence at the table. Afraid to swallow loudly, I held the tea in my mouth. Everyone kept being quiet. I felt I was blushing and that now they were going to ask me about something only to bring me out of my confusion. I decided to swallow the tea, but the swallowing movement failed, and – in a thin stream, slowly, as if from a syringe – the tea spilled onto the tablecloth. (*Stanislavsky laughs.*)

Stanislavsky – Misha!

Chekhov – (*mischievously*) What, Kostya?

Stanislavsky – Well, nothing. (*They laugh.*)

SCENE NINE

Chekhov – German actors, thanks to the peculiarity of their mother tongue, developed the ability to own the crowd but lost the capacity for self-control. With Russian actors it's the opposite: handling it well on the inner side, yet incapable of dominating the auditorium. Therefore, in Germany I'm a Russian, but for Russians I'm a German.

¹⁷ Wilhelm Busch (1832-1908) is a German poet-humorist and artist.

¹⁸ Güler means painters Édouard Manet and Claude Monet.

Stanislavsky – The whole drama of a Russian man is within that person.

Chekhov – At Moscow Art Theatre, they rehearse plays for months adding annually just two or three new productions to their repertoire. German theatres use a different method. They do not waste much time making preparations, and they, therefore, invest more in actually playing rather than rehearsing a production.

Stanislavsky – It's clear to me. (*After a pause*) Let's just agree on two points of our systems.

Chekhov – Sounds good to me. I'm always for compromise!

Stanislavsky – An actor is to be able to work using different techniques, to call for inspiration at the right moment, and to ensure that his work meets the deadline set by the director. As for theatre's administration, they are required to update the repertoire every year. Starting the season with old rubbish is as good as closing down the theatre!

Chekhov – The theatre is to be saved not simply by new productions but also by a brand new actor – ardent, passionate, intelligent and, most importantly, spiritually rich!

Stanislavsky – “If it spring not from the soul's source,
 'Tis vain to hunt for it elsewhere;
 It must burst forth with primeval force,
 Winning the hearts of all who hear.”¹⁹

SCENE TEN

Stanislavsky – How many hours have we talked?

Chekhov – Eight. And still we are not beating the record of your first conversation with Vladimir Ivanovich.

Stanislavsky – Eighteen hours is no joke at all. As you know, after our landmark meeting at *Slavyansky Bazaar* Nemirovich-Danchenko and I created Art Theatre – in our home country and with private money.

Chekhov – You both were so meant to need and help each other!

Stanislavsky – And you are hoping to get a theatre in a foreign land, not to mention funding from the state... (*Sighing*) Misha, as soon as it gets to money, the admirers of your talent in the Czechoslovakian government will disappear without a trace. (*Pause. Looking at his watch*) I hope that talking to you until five in the morning has not been a waste of my time...

¹⁹ A quote from *Faust* (part 1). English translation by Sir George Lefevre, M.D.

Chekhov – Everything you did in your life was worthwhile. Our talk has clarified so many things for me! I don't even know how to thank you. (*Güler brings the bill and leaves. Stanislavsky reaches for his wallet.*) For all my poverty, I'll be delighted to pay the bill. (*Stanislavsky smiles sweetly and puts one theatre ticket on the table. Chekhov pays.*)

Stanislavsky – What will you do in Berlin?

Chekhov – I'll be working with actors using Mikhail Chekhov's system.

Stanislavsky – Happy to hear that. Make them learn the most difficult part: to love art, not yourselves in art. (*After a pause*) To start off with studio work is a good decision.

Chekhov – Our destiny itself is forcing us to live the studio life and write books.

Stanislavsky – (*with irony*) If Güler writes down everything, then you and I simply *must* do it. (*They stand up and head to the exit.*)

Chekhov – I want to renew the perception of feelings and figure out all the secrets of acting.

Stanislavsky – Now you'll be able to do it, for you are no longer bothered with all the arrangements and directing. Misha, aspire to better yourself again and again. Look for something important rather than accidental, that is not just new for the sake of new, but the kind of new that is for the greater good.

Chekhov – Quoting the words of one of Shakespeare's comic characters, I "will be cocky."

Stanislavsky – So be. (*After*) And avoid purely tragic roles.

Chekhov – (*with pathos*) "I have something to cry about without the worries of Agamemnon."²⁰ (*Stanislavsky laughs out loud.*) Konstantin Sergeyevich, your system encourages a young actor to practically master the main powers of his creative soul, but mine is easier and more convenient.

Stanislavsky – That is yet to be seen in practice. (*Güler approaches the table. The ticket catches her attention.*)

Güler – (*reading aloud*) "Theatre on Schiffbauerdamm. *The Threepenny Opera*." (*Screaming*) You forgot your ticket!

Stanislavsky – This is for you!

Güler – For me??

Stanislavsky – Yes.

Güler – Thank you!

²⁰ A phrase said by the First Interlocutor from Denis Diderot's treatise *The Paradox of the Actor*. English translation by Amina Zhaman.

Stanislavsky – Of course, you can live without Bertolt Brecht and Erich Engel, but they surely won't survive without you.

Güler – Why?

Stanislavsky – Because in theatre the viewer is above everyone else.

Chekhov – (*to the side*) Well, I thought it was the actor...

Stanislavsky – Wishing you all the best, Güler!

Güler – Same to you, Konstantin!

Chekhov – Goodbye, Madame!

Güler – Goodbye, Misha! (*To Stanislavsky and Chekhov*) Come back soon!

(The Curtain Falls)

*One repays a teacher badly if one always
remains nothing but a pupil²¹.
Friedrich Nietzsche*

²¹ A quote from Nietzsche's poem *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (part 1).
English translation by Walter Kaufmann.