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## The Michael Chekhov Technique: In The Classroom and On Stage

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## Introduction

*We are trying to find the technique for those gifted actors who want to consciously develop their talents, who want to master their abilities and not flounder aimlessly, relying upon vague inspiration...(a technique which) will teach you to economize on time in preparing your part, but without succumbing to haste and deadening cliches.*

-Michael Chekhov

David Mamet, in his book *True and False*, argues against the need for acting technique, especially those created by or derived from Constantin Stanislavski. "The organic demands made on the actors," he states, "are much more compelling...than anything prescribed or forseen by this or any other 'method' of acting. (Mamet 6)" Stella Adler, arguably one of the most important acting teachers of the 20th Century, agreeing with Mamet, stating "The classroom is not ideal...I learned acting by acting.(Adler 11)" These sentiments are echoed and argued in academia as well as in the professional theater world begging the questions: do actors require a technique? Is it necessary? Is it important? My answer to these questions is an immediate and unabashed YES.

Edwin White and Marguerite Battye describe the need for acting technique beautifully in their book *Acting & Stage Movement*:

There must be complete understanding between the actor and the audience, which must be made to enter into the innermost thoughts and motives of the character on stage. The actor must communicate his whole being; his emotions, his desires, his purpose, his background, his thoughts, his words and deeds. Technique, then, is as essential for the actor as it is for any other artist. Mere virtuosity or reliance upon chance tricks will not suffice. (14)

Acting is technical; one must speak specific, scripted text. One must move to pre-determined locations on the stage. One must angle your body to be seen by an audience. One must speak at an audible volume. One must answer phones, hold plates, close doors, and smoke cigarettes as dictated by the playwright or director. Upon this, actors must express, emote, deliver, connect, listen, and discover, all while making it look organic and impulsive. An untrained actor without technique may be able to fumble their way into a decent performance including all of the above with sheer adrenaline and beginner's luck, but does not necessarily have the ability to understand or duplicate the experience. Of this Uta Hagen writes:

I find this akin to the sink-or-swim method of introducing a child to water. Children do drown and not all actors develop by their mere physical presence on stage. A talented young pianist, skillful at improvisation, or playing by ear, might be a temporary sensation in a night club or on television, but he knows better than to attempt a Beethoven piano concerto. (Hagen 3)

The ability to duplicate a consistent, high level of performance also becomes an integral factor for any professional actor who desires a viable career. The average Broadway actor will perform eight times per week for production runs that could last upwards of two to three years; some shows run for thousands of performances. In 2009, Jack O'Brien's production of *The Coast of Utopia*, a trilogy written by Tom Stoppard, premiered in Tokyo as a 10 day marathon which included full performances of the 9 hour text each day. Clearly, the sheer number of performances coupled with the consistent physical and emotional journey required by acting professionals requires a specific kind of acting technique.

Beyond the mere demands on the actor in performance, the necessity of a technique is vital in the mental health and general well-being of actors in contemporary theatrical training. As stated by International Michael Chekhov Association Co-founder, Lisa Dalton in F. Emmanuelle Chaulet's book *A Balancing Act*:

It is increasingly evident that actors' greatest challenges have more to do with invisible, energy-based imbalances than the actual acting process. To continue to write about more acting techniques with no training for the life of the artist is like writing a prescription for the symptom and not the underlying cause. It is time for a change. (xv)

Clearly, as actors progress through the stages of his or her acting training, it is important that they are exposed to and well versed in a creative, positive, and effective technique that leads to consistent peak performances and a balanced, healthy mental and physical life. Michael Chekhov has created this very technique.

After describing Chekhov's unique and dynamic technique, I will present it in action: in the classroom at Virginia Commonwealth University, and on stage in

productions of Jennifer Broislard's *And Sometimes We Just Listen to Each Other Breathe* and David Hirson's *La Bête*, both performed at Virginia Commonwealth University's Shafer Street Playhouse.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Michael Chekhov Technique

*I need your help. The abstruse nature of the subject requires not only concentrated reading, not alone clear understanding, but co-operation with the author. For that which could easily be made comprehensible by personal contact and demonstration, must of necessity depend on mere words and intellectual concepts.*

-Michael Chekhov, A Memo to the Reader, *To The Actor*

In 1921, Michael Chekhov starred in a production of Strindberg's *Erik XIV*, directed with a dark, expressionistic edge by Eugene Vakhtangov. Chekhov discovered the internal and emotional nature of the young and powerless king by working off of a single image: Erik being trapped inside a circle. The character reaches outside the circle, grabbing, searching for something, only to find nothing. Mel Gordon explains in his introduction to Chekhov's *On The Technique of Acting*, Chekhov's physical approach to character:

Chekhov "found" his role by playing with the shape and quality of the character's movement and by rearranging his physical stature and shape. Only when he "saw" the character's gestures did Chekhov begin his embodiment, or incorporation, of the role. Using a purely external image, rather than

an Affective Memory, Chekhov created the character of Erik in a non-Stanislavski and striking manner.(xix)

Jean Shiffman writes in her article "The Evolution of Theory" that, "the ephemeral art of acting is constantly in flux...it's safe to say that everyone who experiments with the craft has the same goal, the one promoted by the Russian master himself: to present the truth of human experience on stage or screen.(A2)" Both Chekhov and Stanislavski believed that actors must develop ways of moving beyond acting clichés and perfunctory performance styles inherited from older generations of actors and actresses. "For Stanislavski, this meant that the actor had to look for 'truth' in real human behavior or in the *logic* of human psychology.(Chekhov xviii)" For Chekhov, he knew the secret lay outside of logic and life, somewhere deep in the performer's fertile and limitless imagination. This belief would be the foundation for Michael Chekhov's imaginative and physical approach to actor training. Where Stanislavski would instruct actors "to relax" (a command often uttered by directors and teachers to actors and students), Chekhov would instruct the actor to walk or move with a *Feeling of Ease*. Mala Powers further clarifies the



differences in approach in her preface to Chekhov's *On The Technique of Acting*:

Chekhov invented a vocabulary that spoke more directly to the performer's thought process and imagination. Stanislavski and Vahktangov normally told actors what they wanted from them in abstract terminology, e.g., "to concentrate," "to act naively," "to feel heat." This caused the performer to reinterpret each command according to the workings of his mind and body.

Chekhov's Technique dealt primarily with images, especially visceral ones, that short-circuited complicated and secondary mental processes. Rather than demand that a slouching performer who was playing a proud aristocrat "sit up straight," Chekhov told him to let his body "think 'up'." While to the non-actor the differences between Chekhov's linguistic approach and that of his teacher's may seem slight, for Chekhov they were crucial cues, showing a profound understanding of how the actor thinks and responds. (xvii)

Chekhov continued to create and develop his acting system usually finding techniques and exercises that worked as powerful substitutes for those created by Stanislavski. To be fair, though best known for his personalized, inside-out approach to acting, Stanislavski changed his approach to acting training to incorporate movement and gesture - "psycho-physical actions"-by the late 1920's. One has to believe Chekhov's success both as an actor and teacher with his unique approach "inspired" Stanislavski's change of thinking.

The two men shared a belief in the development in the actor's source for inspiration, feeling, and expressiveness; Chekhov believed "that stimulus should always begin outside the private and internalized world of the performer.(Gordon/Chekhov xxviii)" Chekhov's creative and effective substitutions for Stanislavski's Sense Memory and Emotional Recall are some of his most radical and profound:

Sensory stimulation came from the creation of Atmospheres and Qualities, or external expressions, which, when added to movement, provoked the feelings they mimed. To create, say, anger in a character, a student would be instructed only to "add

the Quality of anger" to his gesture or movement rather than search for a past or internal motivation. In this way, Chekhov felt his performers could produce more powerful and individualized emotional expressions without having to consciously evoke difficult-to-control memories of personal experiences. (Gordon/Chekhov xxviii)

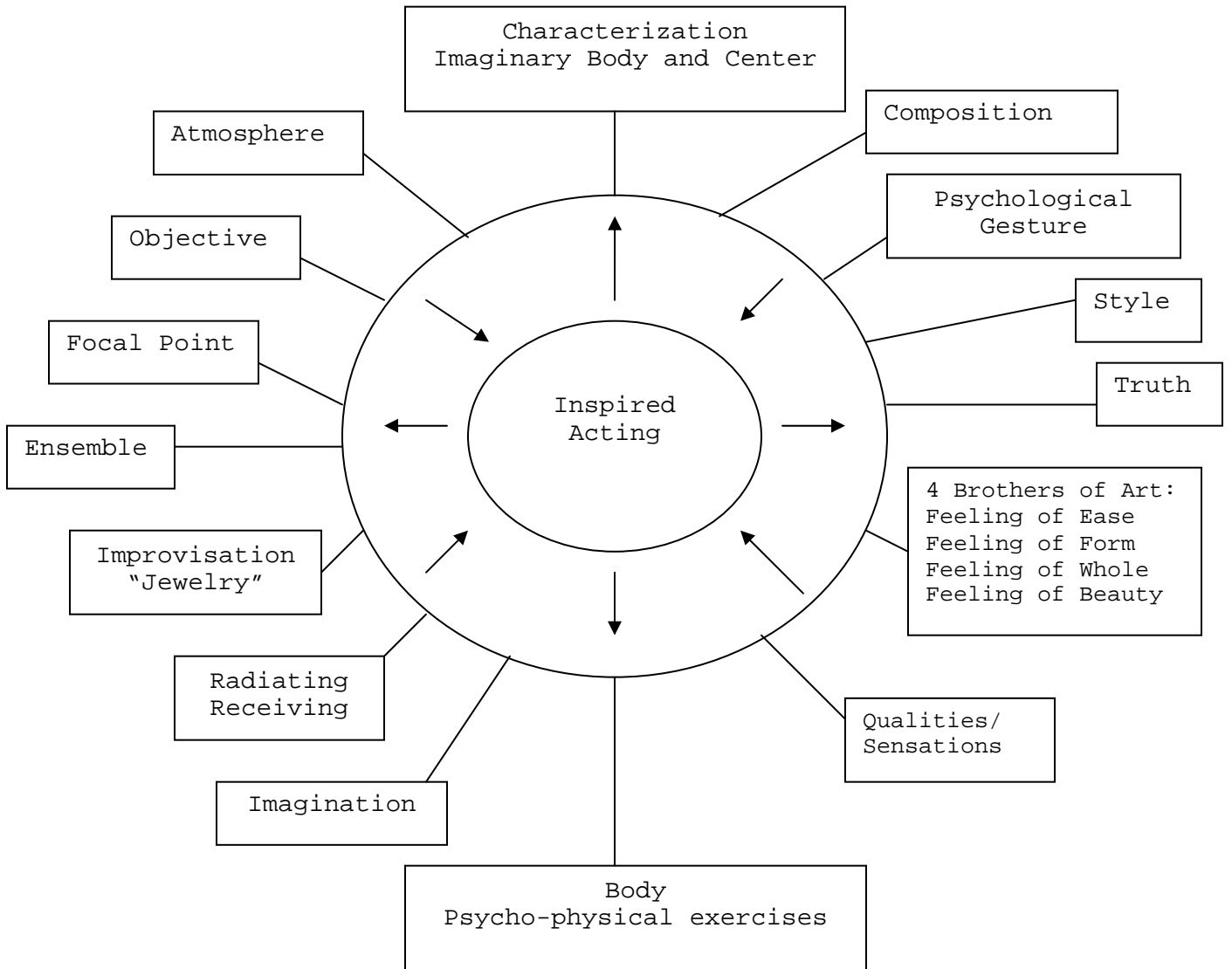
To provide a brief, yet concise description of Michael Chekhov's Technique, one only has to look at his *Chart for Inspired Acting*. In 1949, Mala Powers, later becoming acknowledged world-wide as the foremost authority on Chekhov's technique as well as the Executrix of his literary estate, attended master classes with Chekhov in Beverly Hills, California. Powers also studied privately with Chekhov, and recalls in *On The Technique of Acting*, one of the lessons:

"Mischa, as I had come to call him, gave me his hand-drawn "Chart for Inspired Acting." He told me that it was a kind of summary of his technique. As Mischa stood in the center of his living room, he drew an imaginary circle around himself, explaining

that the chart represented such a circle drawn around the actor. He asked me to imagine that all the various techniques mentioned on the chart—Atmospheres, Characterization, Qualities, etc.—were like light bulbs on the circle's circumference. He said that when Inspiration "strikes," all the light bulbs are instantly turned on, illuminated. "However, Inspiration cannot be commanded," Mischa insisted, "it is capricious. That is why the actor must always have a strong technique to fall back on." (xxxv)

A copy of Chekhov's *Chart for Inspired Acting* appears on the following page, with a brief summary of each element from the chart on the pages behind it.

# Michael Chekhov's Chart For Inspired Acting



## CHARACTERIZATION (IMAGINARY BODY and CENTER)

Oftentimes, actors focus on how they and the character are alike. Chekhov insists actors focus on the *differences* between themselves and the character. One way to do this is with *Imaginary Body*: "building" the body of the character for the actor to step into and inhabit. With practice, an actor can appear to change the length and shape of the body, to physically transform themselves into the character. Equally, every character has a center. "Finding a character's center can lead to understanding his or her entire personality and physical makeup. (Powers/Chekhov xxxviii)"

## COMPOSITION

"In nature and art, there are mathematical laws and principles that structure and balance form. This feeling for *Composition* creates contours and prevents the expression of ideas, dialogues, movements, colors, shapes, and sounds from being nothing more than a flattened-out accumulation of impressions and events. The sense of Composition guides the artist and the spectator into the sphere of creativity and understanding. (Powers/Chekhov xxxviii)"

## PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE

"This is a movement that embodies the psychology and Objective of a character. Using the actor's entire body, and executed with the utmost intensity, it gives the actor the basic structure of the character and at the same time can put the actor into the various moods required by the script. (Powers/Chekhov xxxviii)" A powerful tool that instantaneously and effectively aligns the thinking and feelings of the actor with those of the character, *Psychological Gesture* is often referred to as the "cherry on the cake" of the Michael Chekhov technique.

## FEELING OF EASE

One of Michael Chekhov's *Four Brothers of Art*, moving with a feeling of ease or the sensation of ease serves as an effective alternative to Stanislavski's relaxation technique. "As a directive, it produces immediate sensations and visceral imagery in the actor and avoids the intellectual, conscious process of interpreting a command. (Powers/Chekhov xxxix)" *Feeling of Ease* also serves as a clear example of a Chekhov technique element that benefits the life of the artist; the ability to manufacture ease effectively and consistently aids an individual artistically, socially, professionally, physically and psychologically.

## FEELING OF FORM

Another of Chekhov's *Four Brothers of Art*, an actor working with a *Feeling of Form* is sensitive to shape, space, rhythm, levels, and tempo. "When the actor awakens this feeling for his body's form and sculptural movement, it enhances his ability to influence in the most expressive ways. (Powers/Chekhov xl)"

## FEELING OF WHOLE

The third brother of Chekhov's *Four Brothers of Art* reminds the artist that each creation must have a finished form; a beginning, middle, and end. "Everything on stage or on screen should convey this sense of aesthetic wholeness. (Powers/Chekhov xl)"

## FEELING OF BEAUTY

"Within each artist, often deeply hidden, is a wellspring of living beauty and harmony of creation. Becoming aware of this inner beauty of being is a first step for the actor who can then allow this beauty to permeate all his or her expressions, movements, and characterizations - even the "ugly" ones. (Powers/Chekhov xl)"

## QUALITIES (SENSATIONS and FEELINGS)

Often fickle and unpredictable, feelings and emotions are difficult to command; they can be coaxed and guided,



however. In order to stir feelings or sensations, one simply needs to move with a *Quality*, which are immediately accessible to you. Though you may not feel it immediately, one can move their arms and hands with a *Quality* of sorrow, anger, tenderness, etc. After moving with these qualities, one discovers that the *Quality* inspires the *Sensations* and you indeed begin to feel the emotion proving that function follows form.

#### IMAGINATION

"Nearly all acting is the result of the performer's ability to Imagine and reproduce the reality of the play's fiction on stage or screen. The more an actor can stimulate and train his Imagination and fantasy life, the greater will be his or her power to communicate the depth and meaning of the character. (Powers/Chekhov xli)"

#### RADIATING/RECEIVING

Ability to send out, as well as pull in the invisible essence of whatever quality, emotion, or thought you wish, whether it be as the artist or the character. An energy transference that needs to be developed, Chekhov spoke of Radiating and Receiving both in terms of actor charisma, and character energy. He would often ask actors if their characters were Radiating or Receiving characters, or at what points in a performance are they doing either.

## IMPROVISATION (JEWELRY)

Chekhov felt improvisation to be a particularly useful tool during the final stages of your character development. After lines have been memorized, characterization established, emotional sequences created, etc, one can begin to paraphrase lines, invent pieces of business that determine "how" your character is fulfilling business, and other activities that provide unique, shining moments (*Jewelry*) to be added to performance.

## ATMOSPHERES

Best described as a sensory medium, *Atmospheres* are created and radiated by actors as visceral energy that permeates the playing space affecting both the performer and the spectator. "Although they cannot be seen, Atmospheres can be felt strongly and are a primary means of theatrical communication. The Atmosphere of a Gothic cathedral, a hospital, or a cemetery influences anyone who enters those spaces. They become enveloped in the Atmosphere. (Powers/Chekhov xlv)" Performers can carry personal Atmospheres, as well as entire scenes or productions carrying one. Once created and maintained, the Atmosphere both affects the audience and influences the performers within it.

## CHAPTER 2

### Michael Chekhov Technique: In the Classroom

*If you are teaching, you must be active. You must not give the impression of activity, you must be active. The teacher must radiate action. You must not form habits—you must be active all the time. The pupils will look to the teacher for inspiration. The teacher must speak with power.*

-Michael Chekhov

#### INTRODUCTION

As an adjunct faculty member at Virginia Commonwealth University, I have taught one section of *Acting I*, two sections of *Acting II* and three sections of the *Acting Techniques of Michael Chekhov*. I have been privileged to work with a large section of the performance majors and have discovered four major problem areas of their professional development as actors:

(1) Lack of transformative capabilities (i.e. versatility and/or ability to take on the physical form of a character), (2) Preference given to *showing* versus *doing*, (3) Ability to manifest and maintain performance consistency, (4) Ability to remain emotionally balanced and physically healthy within demanding rehearsal and performance schedules. Using specific examples from my *Introduction to the Techniques of Michael Chekhov* course at Virginia Commonwealth University, each "problem" area as

described above will be discussed and resolved utilizing specific techniques as created by Michael Chekhov.

#### IMAGINARY BODY

In my experiences, young actors often approach character creation by focusing on the similarities between themselves and the character they wish to portray. Chekhov urged actors to focus on the *differences* between themselves and the characters, claiming the similarities would appear with or without a conscious choice by the actor to do so. Exploring the differences, Chekhov would ask an actor is the character taller than you, larger than you, faster than you, higher status than you, lower status, etc. claiming that it is within the specific differences that bold physical choices can be made. I attack this concept early in my Chekhov classes quickly introducing students to the concepts of *Imaginary Body* and *Leading Center*, two techniques that guide the actor to instantaneous and transformative characterization. Chekhov clarifies his *Imaginary Body* technique in his *On The Technique of Acting*:

Here again the actor has to appeal to his imagination. Let us say that he has to become, on stage, taller and thinner than he is in reality. The first step he must

take is to imagine, as it were, another body for himself, create an Imaginary Body that is taller and thinner than his own. The next step will be a careful process of putting the actor's body into the Imaginary Body, trying to move the physical body so that it will follow the characteristic movements and shape of the Imaginary one. If the actor lifts up his imaginary long lean arm, he also moves his real arm within it. (Chekhov 100)

Pushing for bold choices and clear differences between themselves and the body they are creating, I use the image of an archetypal Drag Queen when introducing students to *Imaginary Body*. After instructing the students to find a comfortable spot sitting on the floor, I ask them to build the body I describe directly in front of them. Starting off with the feet and moving upwards, the Drag Queen I create is a tall, large lady. Starting off with red, chunky high heels, I then move onto the black fishnet stockings covering a plump calf, round knees, and fleshy thighs covered by a red, sequined mini skirt. After building a detailed and fully fleshed out image including fingernails, eyelashes, makeup, clothing, height, and weight, the actors

are instructed to stand up and walk around their creation, utilizing their five senses to fully explore the differences between them and their creation. I instruct them to feel the texture of the clothing, smell for cologne or perfume, or reach into the pockets to see what you find. After a full exploration, the actors position themselves behind the Imaginary Body of the Drag Queen. They "unzip" her back, and step into the body as though it were a costume, making appropriate physical adjustments filling the body, and finally closing their eyes. The next breath should be that of the characters, and when eyes are opened, the world should be viewed through the eyes of the character. Guided through a series of improvisational situations, the actors explore movement, voice, and behavior allowing the character to guide discoveries. Coached to work in a fully expressive state, I am continually amazed by the incredible transformations undertaken by each actor. Discussions with the actors after stepping out of their *Imaginary Body* prove the power of the exercise. Often marveling at their new found physical capabilities, the actors are particularly struck by the discoveries fed to them by the character they are portraying. Now fully aware of the transformative capabilities their bodies and imaginations possess, the

actors begin to apply the work to texts, characters, and situations of their own design. Below, sample comments taken from student journals share their perspective of the *Imaginary Body* work. In order to protect student privacy, I will simply refer to each student by letter.

The first entry is from Student A (VCU '10): ...with that first step I discovered how she walked, talked, and the fact that she had a huge fake smile permanently plastered on her face! After stepping into this character I was able to stop judging her and really start experiencing the world as her! After that, doing the monologue was no longer a task or chore that I had to perform but an opportunity to play an interesting, entertaining character!

Student B (VCU '10): The idea of the imaginary body is something that has been an extraordinary benefit to me, as it allows me to picture the character flowing through me. It lets me tell the story that he/she needs to tell, and allows me to simply be the vessel.

Student C (VCU '12): Chekhov's concept of the *Imaginary Body* has shown me a new way of completely transforming into a character that is ideal for someone like me, who has trouble letting their own self go.



Actors from class in various stages of building an *Imaginary Body*.



Actors after stepping into their *Imaginary Bodies*.





Actors exploring movement qualities in their *Imaginary Bodies*.

## LEADING CENTER

A second concept I quickly introduce at the early stages of any Chekhov class I am teaching due to its transformative capabilities is that of *Leading Center*. Most acting teachers utilize a version of Chekhov's exercise instructing students to simply alternating the body parts that pull the actor through space. Typically, actors are instructed to let their nose lead them through space, or their forehead, or stomach. Though playful, such a rudimentary task does not lead the actor to strong physical character choices that align with a character's thinking or intentions. Chekhov's *Leading Centers*, comprised of three components, guide the actor to more evocative and compelling physical opportunities. The three elements contained in Chekhov's *Leading Centers* are: (1) Location (where the center exists), (2) Quality (a specific image or concept of the center), and (3) Mobility (direction or movement quality of the center). The example used earlier of the nose as a *Leading Center* can still exist under Chekhov's guidelines; but if the location is the nose, the quality may be a tiny, sharp bee stinger on the tip of the nose. Perhaps the character is particularly nose-y and judgmental and likes to "sting" people with their harsh observations. The mobility of this center may be as a

staccato poke. If a character is a seductive young woman, her *Leading Center* may be her lips as lush, ripening strawberries that get larger when she takes interest in a man in the room. Rooted in the personalities and behaviors of the characters they are based upon, Chekhov's *Leading Centers* guide the actor to exciting physical choices that consequently inform the thoughts and experiences of whom they are portraying. Again, discussions after exploring the concept of *Leading Center* prove the power of the work. Students revel in the simple, yet wildly effective results of the *Leading Center* work. Below, sample comments taken from student journals share their perspective of the *Leading Center* work. Again, to protect their privacy, students will be referred to as letters.

The first entry is from Student D (VCU '10): When my character Heather eventually loses it, I imagined that her leading center...this piece of metal...had completely melted and was running rapidly through her veins very hotly. The weight was no longer there and this change helped me find the motives for Heather's outbursts.

Student E (VCU '11): I have found that I have been able to adapt leading center for working with masks. With the mask, you must create an imaginary body from the chin

down, using the lines of the mask to dictate its shape...a  
leading center always emerges...



*Leading Center:* Lips as strawberries growing large and lush with every step...



*Leading Center:* Left knee as an angry dog chasing the right knee as a fearful cat

## APPLICATION OF THE TECHNIQUE

Although I have given two specific examples of the transformational capabilities of Michael Chekhov's technique in *Imaginary Body* and *Leading Center*, I could make the same argument for any of the psycho-physical exercises he has created for actors. From *Contraction* and *Expansion* (considered by Chekhov to be the Grandparents of all movement), to his space and energy shifting *Atmospheres*, the technique lends itself to immediate and instantaneous acting results.

Along with these results, actors are given control over their character and acting choices to manifest and maintain performance consistency. For example, once the *Imaginary Body* is built, once the *Leading Center* is invoked and the actor decides to *Contract* with the *Sensation of Sorrow* during the funeral scene while manifesting an *Atmosphere* of crumbling walls, they can repeat the action and experience in a completely systematic and visceral way. As the technique is based on universal movement patterns and a physical commitment that fully connects the feelings and emotions directly to the movement, the actor will not only present a consistent character journey performance after performance, but also *feel* it as well.

I would like to briefly note the acting concept of needing to "feel it"; the Michael Chekhov Technique relieves the actor of this illogical expectation. While working with Mala Powers one afternoon, she drew a picture of a little bear. The bear had heavy, angled eyebrows, a scowl for a mouth, and tears coming out of its eyes. When asked by Mala how the bear was feeling, I was quick to respond with, "anger, frustration, rage." She then crumpled the paper up, threw it in the trash can and told me that it "didn't feel anything. It's just a piece of paper." She then explained to me that I as the audience felt the emotion being portrayed by her picture as emotion is universal, movement qualities associated with the emotion are universal, and that function follows form: as long as we perform it with appropriate sensations and movement patterns, the audience will feel it; and as we perform with specificity and commitment, we will feel it. I raise this point as one more example of how the Michael Chekhov technique has served my students in the classroom setting. Though often trained in a variety of techniques and styles, a majority of the students I have worked with want to feel everything, and gauge the success of their performance on the ability to do so. In recent performances I have viewed, or monologues and scenes presented in class, this "need to

feel" pushes the students to remain engaged with their intellect while working, robbing them of the freedom to physically express or make authentic discoveries on stage; the students are living in their head and spend time on stage showing versus doing; in other words instead of being angry (moving with a *Sensation* of anger or *Atmosphere* of anger) they are showing that they are angry (shouting, indicative gestures that the actors perceive as angry). One comes off as authentic and impulsive, the other forced and strained. The Chekhov work keeps the actor grounded in doing; the actor is always engaged in moving, creating, and expressing, which when rehearsed and utilized on stage, looks and feels organic. I have seen the huge effect the work has on my students over and over again. The shift in their confidence and acting capabilities is dramatic once they begin to grasp the effectiveness of the Michael Chekhov work and their ability to systematically approach character, movement, storytelling, and emotion.

Below, student comments taken from class journal entries discuss the affect the Michael Chekhov Technique has had on their work.

The first entry is from Student F (VCU '11):  
Consistency is probably the most important thing that I have gained from learning and using Chekhov's technique.

Throughout this year in my Junior Acting Studio we have been exploring the importance of emotional recall. Though using emotional recall is sometimes effective, it is anything but consistent. Through learning about tools like archetypal gestures, imaginary body, and the four movement qualities I am able to get an effective result in a monologue or a scene consistently.

Student G (VCU '12): A lot of the time in class we hear from other teachers that we aren't giving enough over to the character. I have seen in myself and other classmates the relinquishing of judgments so that they can give over through Chekhov. It's that sense of ease that really starts it. I have found that Chekhov technique utilizes a recognizable and universal sensory in the body that informs the emotional core all the way through the character.

Student H (VCU '10) specifically compares her evolution from utilizing *Emotional Recall* to Chekhov's emotion techniques: However, because this method relies on recall of past experiences, the method felt like a dice roll. Sometimes it came up my way sometimes it didn't. I recently attempted to use a palace of sorrow and moving with a sensation of sorrow in class and I was amazed at the result. I began to feel something onstage, but more



importantly my professor was impressed by how much I was 'feeling'. She did not know that the movement started and the feeling came later. I have been able to reproduce the sensation every time since in rehearsal and performance of that scene.

As a final note in this chapter, the "need to feel" or the self induced performance pressure young actors place on themselves, has a negative impact on their physical and emotional health during times in which they must deliver; and though some young students relish the mystique of being the tortured artist, or revel at labeling themselves Method Actors (needing to live as the character in order to play the character), I have found most actors whole-heartedly embrace the effective simplicity of the Michael Chekhov work. Chekhov himself often said the technique becomes infused in your craft, and in your life; that the creative and positive approach to performance will positively impact your day to day life, and vice versa. Michael Chekhov is also the only acting practitioner who discusses the need for love in your work; that you must love what you do, love yourself, love your character, and love the business we are in. I have found this positive approach to craft, work, and existence to be life altering for both myself, and my students.



Students working through Michael Chekhov's *Four Movement Qualities*.



Chair Exercise. Moving with a *Sense of Ease*.

## CHAPTER 3

### Michael Chekhov Technique: On Stage

*When, for instance, we are going to produce Romeo and Juliet, we, first of all, read the play several times and create in our minds and souls the atmosphere. Then the next step will be given - while reading the play - which is to see, to imagine - not understand - but to imagine the text. This is much more pleasant than to read and memorize the lines.*

-Michael Chekhov

Beyond the classroom I have found Michael Chekhov's technique to be invaluable when directing college-age (and beyond) actors in theatrical productions. Moving the work from the skills acquisition phase in the classroom, to the skills application phase of being on stage, allows them to truly understand the power of moving intention and feeling outward through their bodies and into the audience, doing versus showing, and the need for consistency during performance. I will use two productions to describe how I specifically used the Michael Chekhov technique to benefit my actors: *And Sometimes We Just Listen to Each Other Breathe* by Jennifer Broislard in the Spring of 2009, and David Hirson's *La Bête* in the the Fall of 2009. Both productions took place at the Shafer Street Playhouse at Virginia Commonwealth University.

AND SOMETIMES WE JUST LISTEN TO EACH OTHER BREATHE

*This play allows me to explore the darkness; as an artist, with fellow artists, for an audience. The subject matter at first glance appears raw, harsh, and painful. My vision for this piece is to explore the humanity, beauty, and depth within both the characters and the text.*

-Josh Chenard, Director's Statement

Set in the mountains of Virginia, Jennifer Broislard's tragic *And Sometimes We Just Listen to Each Other Breathe*, tells the tale of Zoma, a young woman held captive in a dilapidated shack by an abusive farmer, Henry, and his sullen wife, Alva. Pregnant upon arrival, Zoma has her baby (which, unbeknownst to her, had been stillborn) taken away from her by Henry, who uses the promise of a reunion with her baby as emotional bait to force Zoma into an ongoing sexual relationship. A reluctant friendship forms between Zoma and Alva, who sees her former innocent self in the younger Zoma. The unpredictable Alva even offers to bathe timid Zoma, after slapping her moments before during an argument in which Zoma attempted to discuss her ongoing abuse at the hands of Henry. Eventually weary of his increasingly violent advances, Zoma stabs Henry with a knife during a particularly aggressive encounter. Alva, who had been listening at the door, enters the scene only to watch Henry die and quietly murmur in his ear, "you deserve

to die, you deserve to die." Now free, Zoma runs to Alva in a momentary embrace before the Alva's anger overtakes her, strangles the young woman, finally singing to herself as she sits peacefully amongst the two dead bodies. In my production at VCU's Shafer Street Playhouse in the Spring of 2009, Zoma was played by Amber Martinez, Alva by Vanessa Passinni, and Henry by Phil Reid.

Conceptually, I had several obstacles to overcome with this production. Mainly, I knew I needed the actors to have the ability to fully express the brutality and desperation, as well as the humanity of their characters in an authentic and visceral way. I also needed the actors to be able to disengage from the intense feelings and experiences I was asking them to create, quickly and completely as to not carry any baggage out of the theater. We began exploring Chekhov's *Atmospheres* immediately. There are several versions or variations of Chekhov's *Atmospheres*. I utilize the methodology taught to me by Mala Powers which asks the actors to imagine their bodies as empty vessels, able to be filled with the sensation or feeling of a given image and becoming "molecules" of that image. From rage, to disgust, to mud, to decay, to repression, the actors were guided to allow their bodies to become "molecules" of the given *Atmosphere*, fully expressing both physically and vocally

the qualities they imagined each specific molecule to possess. Within minutes, the energy of the space would take on the quality of the feeling being created. It was amazing to feel the air in the room become thick with anger or oppressive with heat. As the *Atmosphere* of the room would shift, the actors would become actors again, moving through the new energy and the space to see how it affected them. The actors' response to the *Atmosphere* work was so effective, and evocative, we used it daily in rehearsals, and then before each performance to set a mood for the audience.

As the *Atmospheres* created an outward sensorial experience for the actors, I needed to fuel their internal stirrings as well. For this I utilized Chekhov's *Palaces*. *Palaces* is a creative exercise in which you endow a given space with an emotion or image. I often build the space within whatever room I am working with, with chairs becoming walls, creating a "hallway" leaving several open areas to serve as entryways. From here, I label the space as a *Palace of Sorrow*, or a *Palace of Delight*. The actors are instructed to move in one at a time traveling down the hallway (which has been labeled as neutral) and entering a "room". Inside the room the actors are instructed to allow themselves to let their imaginations feed them images,

sounds, colors, smells, and feelings which emerge from the name of the *Palace*. For instance, when walking through a *Palace of Sorrow*, one may enter a room and see a barren wasteland, smell raw sewerage, hear crying babies, and feel lost. After briefly returning to the neutral hallway, actors choose a new room to walk into. In this room, there may be a black forest, a cool chill, the sound of screams, and a feeling of fear. If personal images or situations occur, the actors are asked to leave the room, and move into another room allowing for their imaginations to supply them the room content. If the actors continue to find situations or people from their own lives, I instruct them to leave the palace. Where some may have the inclination to utilize the *Palaces* as an emotional recall exercise, the point of the work is to remind actors of the unlimited, rich imagery and sensations which they can create in their imagination over and over again; to use this as an emotional recall exercise would be overwhelming and dangerous for the actor.

During *Breathe*, the *Palaces* worked beautifully. The actors gave over to the experience and quickly discovered their own ability to actively create emotional stirring from within fully utilizing their own creative intellects. From here we were able to create the heat, fear and decay

of the shack Zoma in which was held hostage; the instantaneous emotional shift from protective mother figure, to raging, jealous wife that Alva undertakes; and Henry's journey from fearful and lonely, to sadistic and manipulative. As rehearsals continued, we were able to effectively and consistently create the characterization, *Atmospheres*, and emotions that could instantaneously move from one extreme to another, and allow us to tell the story in an authentic, visceral way; then something happened. Amber Martinez, who was playing Zoma, became ill, and had to leave the show two weeks before opening night.

This final section of this chapter serves as a perfect testament to the power of Michael Chekhov's work. With not a lot of time to find another actress, I held a quick round of auditions and cast a young woman named Hilary Stallings. With a minimum of theatrical training, Hilary was quickly placed in "Michael Chekhov Boot Camp" for a week to provide her with enough tools to bring truth and power to the role of Zoma. After working through *Atmospheres* and *Palaces*, Hilary was also introduced to Chekhov's *Qualities*; moving with the quality of an emotion. With the *Qualities*, I guide the actors to close their eyes and imagine their blood has evaporated, bones have turned to dust and been blown away, and that their muscles have simply melted away. From here,



I have them stare at their hands and imagine large, ribbon-like threads appearing and running up their arms, through their neck and face, down their stomach and legs, and stretching to the tips of their toes. Previously, I would have endowed the threads with a color and quality; red threads of anger, yellow threads of joy, or white threads of wonder, etc. From here, the actors are able to let the threads guide them, and move through the space with the quality in which they were endowed. Hilary wrote about this in a journal entry which she shared with me and I now share with you: "I have never been able to cry on cue and I remember sitting one on one with Josh and being guided through sadness and it was an overwhelming feeling! My eyes watered and I was so excited!"

Within a week, Hilary had mastered the deeply moving characterization required to portray Zoma. Hilary recently shared some of her memories of the show with me in an e-mail:

I used the threads every night, red threads through my entire body of sadness. I would seclude myself in a corner each night to create that same feeling of seclusion I had felt in rehearsal. The pre-show atmospheres set by the cast also worked for me,

especially mud, dirt, heat. The opening monologue, laying on the mattress was the most difficult moment for me. Filling my body from within the threads of sadness eased me into it. Expansion and Contraction also helped me create the instances she felt big or felt small. All of that lead me to a consistent performance. It is the best performance I have given. (Stallings 1)

I know that without Michael Chekhov's powerful and effective technique, I would not have been able to move Hilary into the stirring performance we so quickly crafted. From opening night to closing night, the actors remained powerful, healthy, and consistent, and the audiences were moved and responsive. Perhaps the best and most consistent compliment I received was when audience members would tell me: "I felt uncomfortable from the second I walked in the door and saw the stage. I knew something was wrong here. I could not take my eyes off the stage."



*Set from And Sometimes We Just Listen to Each Other Breathe*



*Vanessa Passinni as Alva and Hilary Stallings as Zoma from And Sometimes We Just Listen to Each Other Breathe*



Phil Reid as Henry and Hilary Stallings as Zoma from *And Sometimes We Just Listen to Each Other Breathe*



Vanessa Passinni as Alva and Hilary Stallings as Zoma from *And Sometimes We Just Listen to Each Other Breathe*



The final moments of the play..



The Director and the Cast of *And Sometimes We Just Listen to Each Other Breathe*.

## LA BÊTE

*Conceptually I plan to explore the duality of fantasy (popular culture) and reality (art). Blistering, white curtains that get dragged away to expose black, crumbling walls; actors dressing in their costumes and make-up in plain view of the audience to become the character; characters removing their make-up when telling the painful truth.*

-Josh Chenard, Director's Statement

Wanting to tackle a comedy after *And Sometimes We Just Listen to Each Other Breathe*, I chose David Hirson's Restoration comedy, *La Bête*. Set in 17th century France, *La Bête* tells the tale of the passionate and dignified Elomire, the head of the royal court-sponsored theatre troupe. Prince Conti, the troupe's patron, wishing to add some new life and energy to the group, invites Valere, a vulgar and foppish street performer the Prince finds amusing to join the company for dinner and a potential theatrical partnership, much to the violent protestations of Elomire. Despite the clear animosity between Valere and the troupe, Elomire suggests they perform one of Valere's plays in an attempt to unveil him for the fraud he is. Valere manages to fumble his way through a clumsy, yet energized improvisation resulting in an official offer from the Prince. In a final attempt to salvage artistic integrity, Elomire insists that if Valere stays, the troupe

will go. The Prince allows those who want to leave to do so, insisting that Valere is going nowhere. Elomire begins to depart and is dismayed when the troupe chooses to stay behind and work with Valere. As the play ends, Valere slowly removes the garish makeup he has been wearing throughout, quietly revealing to Elomire that despite his idiotic appearance, Valere knew exactly what he was doing. Elomire is left to depart alone as we hear the laughter of Valere, the Prince, and the troupe from off stage. In my production at VCU's Shafer Street Playhouse in the Fall of 2009, Elomire was played by Liz Venz, Valere was played by Adrian Grantz, and the ensemble was made up of Drew Sease, Ariel Shine, Ian Page, Carol Olsen, Dave Leme, Sara Schmatz, Nate Betancourt, and Tori Hirsch-Strauss.

*Atmospheres* played another huge role in this production as I wanted the audience to walk into a feeling of festivity and joy, only to have it dramatically shift to darkness and isolation at the end of the play when Elomire is abandoned. We played around with a variety of emotions and images from party, to frivolity, to luxury in the beginning, to sorrow, loss, pain, destruction in the ending. It was interesting to play around within the nuance of each *Atmosphere*, playing and searching for just the right ones. In the end, festivity and joy were the most

evocative for the bulk of the play, with an *Atmosphere* of loss for the final moments. Again, the *Atmosphere* work proved to be a consistent and completely effective way to contribute to the experiences we hoped our audience would go through.

*La Bête* requires strong actors to effectively bring to life the vivid and rich characters that exist within the story. During our rehearsal process, I spent a lot of time on *Imaginary Body* and *Leading Center*, which again, proved to be wildly useful tools. However, for this production, I added a twist to push the work to another level, and that was the use of animal imagery. Before creating *Imaginary Bodies* for their characters or exploring the possibility of a *Leading Center*, I created a workshop in which we did those things for animals. We created *Imaginary Bodies* for elephants, ostriches, ducks, monkeys, bees, birds, and any other animal that came to mind for us to explore! Once in the bodies, we would let a *Leading Center* emerge, and then add a quality to it. If an elephant led with its ears, maybe the ears were swaying in the wind like kites in the sky; or if it was a high-maintenance elephant, maybe its center was its toenails which were fragile, and made of glass. As we played around with the variety of animal and center based imagery combinations, we began to make



exploratory options based on character choices. Suddenly, if the actor playing Valere had created the *Imaginary Body* of an alligator, his center was his white teeth as flashlights illuminating the room when he speaks, which ties in beautifully with the character. After then moving on to actually creating *Imaginary Bodies* for the characters from the text, we played around with weaving in elements of our animal creations which led to a wonderful discussion about when the characters were more human, and when they became more like animals. Often, these discussions would allow to better clarify movement patterns or vocal qualities that best suited the character. The work was very exciting and proved to translate to the stage beautifully.

I worked very hard to create a striking *Atmosphere* for the final moments of the play, and knew I needed a strong visual element to tie in with the mood being created. After giving the Prince an ultimatum, Elomire is told that he can choose to stay or go, but Valere is staying. After appealing to his troupe to follow him on to a shaky future that ensures their artistic integrity, he is shocked to discover the troupe chooses to stay behind with the vulgar, but momentarily popular Valere. After the Prince excuses himself, the troupe positions themselves in front of the blistering white curtains which have hung so regally during

the play, and each pulls one down, silently walking off stage and dragging the curtains behind them. The lights then fade to a single spot on Elomire, and Valere emerges from the darkness to deliver his final menacing soliloquy. While working through the blocking of these final moments, the actors worked on the *Atmosphere of Loss*, and the effect was a powerful one. Night after night I felt the air drain from the room during the last ten minutes of the play. Left alone on a dark, empty stage, Tori Hirsch-Strauss, as the maid, Dorine, would watch Elomire go, turn to face the audience with a tear in her eye, and wave goodbye.



Cast of *La Bete*



Nate Betancourt as Bejart, Tori Hirsch-Strass as Dorine, Adrian Grantz as Valere, and Liz Venz as Elomire.



Set of La Bete.

## Final Note

Just yesterday, my current *Introduction to the Techniques of Michael Chekhov* class at Virginia Commonwealth University performed monologues to an invited audience for their final. The monologues I ask them to select are what I call "New You Monologues", monologues you would never really get to perform in the real professional world or even in an academic setting. I had young men playing Blanche Dubois and Katherine Hepburn, young women playing Robert DeNiro's role from *Taxi Driver* and Brad Pitt's role from *Fight Club*. I saw actors moving beyond race, gender, age, and genre to perform material they found compelling, and it was some of the most exciting theater I have seen in a long while. These students did not act, they transformed. They moved the energy from their bodies into the audience, and created an experience deeply felt by everybody in the room; it was moving. Michael Chekhov spoke of a "Theatre of the Future". He believed in a theater where people would not filter their experiences through their thinking selves, but instead, filter their experiences through their feeling selves. I too, believe in his "Theatre of the Future", and on days like this, I am experience it.

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## **Vita**

Born outside of Portland, Maine, Josh Chenard graduated with a BA in Performance from the University of Southern Maine in 2003, and an MFA in Theatre Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2010. A certified instructor of the Michael Chekhov Technique, Josh has taught workshops and classes throughout the country including in Los Angeles, California and Boston, Massachusetts. As a performer and director, Josh has worked in Professional, Regional, and Educational theatre. He is part of the Adjunct Faculty at Virginia Commonwealth University.