

**MICHAEL CHEKHOV AND HIS APPROACH TO ACTING IN  
CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE TRAINING**

by

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Michael Chekhov was an actor, director, and teacher who was determined to develop a clear and accessible acting approach. During his lifetime, his ideas were often viewed as too radical and mystical. Over the past decade however, the Chekhov method of actor training has enjoyed an expansion of interest. The following thesis will examine who Chekhov was, and what the major points of his technique were. It will also consider why and where his techniques are experiencing growth in our contemporary performance environment.

Chekhov was a student of the great acting teacher Constantin Stanislavski. After studying with him for several years, Chekhov concluded that many aspects of the Stanislavski method of creating a role were potentially dangerous and unnecessary. Both men were constantly searching for new and improved ways to create and direct a role. Chekhov began to design his own approach which placed heavy emphasis on imagination and movement. He developed what became known as the 'psychological gesture'. This is

a physical movement or gesture which captures the total essence of a character and is executed inwardly while an actor portrays a character. Many contemporary actors and teachers are now acknowledging Chekhov and his development of this 'psychological gesture'.

Upon parting ways with Stanislavski, Chekhov studied with spiritualist Rudolph Steiner, a writer, philosopher, and movement specialist. By taking his own ideas and combining them with some of Steiner's and Stanislavski's, Chekhov developed a fresh approach to performance that many contemporary actors and teachers are finally discovering. This thesis will be an exploration of his ideas and how they successfully apply to the present day performer.

The first chapter of this thesis will examine the life of Michael Chekhov and his two major influences, Constantin Stanislavski and Rudolph Steiner. Chapter Two will explore the major elements of the Chekhov technique and how they differed from Stanislavski's. The resurgence in interest and usage will be discussed in Chapter Three. This section will unmask the people and places that are presently working with and teaching the Chekhov techniques. Will the Chekhov technique continue to expand, or is it just a passing phase in the contemporary performer's search for a reliable and accessible method of performance? The thesis conclusion will examine how Chekhov's work has been promulgated over the years. A final analysis of the method and its expansion will also be formulated in the final chapter.

**DEDICATION**

To my beloved Karin, and my Mother and Father. Thank you for all your love and support.

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## INTRODUCTION

Michael Chekhov was a passionate actor, director, and teacher who was driven to develop an accessible and exciting approach to acting. Chekhov grew up admiring and then working with the great acting teacher Constantin Stanislavski. The Stanislavski approach to acting was at the time focused on the conscious training of the senses, leading to the unconscious creative means. As Stanislavski noted: "The most important aspect of this training was the use of the soul of the actor as the material for his work and the necessity for the study of the personal emotions and analysis of simple and complicated feelings."<sup>1</sup> Unlike the early teachings of his acting teacher Stanislavski, the techniques that Chekhov developed did not require delving into one's personal experiences and emotional memories.

Theatre theoretician Michael Kirby explains:

Although Chekhov did not reject all of Stanislavsky's system, accepting for example, the concepts of action and objective, his approach to creating a character was radically different than Stanislavsky's. He stressed the imagination rather than the actor's personal history, characteristics and psychology. If only for this reason, Chekhov deserves a hearing.<sup>2</sup>

Chekhov's method was an external and imaginative approach to performance which did not generate enormous enthusiasm during his lifetime.

Although he enjoyed moderate success as a stage and movie actor, his

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<sup>1</sup>Constantin Stanislavski, Stanislavski's Legacy, ed. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (Theatre Arts Books, New York, 1958), 52.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Kirby, The Drama Review, Michael Chekhov ed., vol. 27 (1983), 2.

performances and his unorthodox performance training techniques were often viewed as ‘over the top’ and mystical. When he died in Hollywood Hills, California in 1955, so did much of the interest in his many teachings about acting and the theater. As a teacher, he was successful in tapping into a small, dedicated core of actors, but never enjoyed the prosperity or popularity of Stanislavski. Over the past twenty years, however, there has been a notable increase in interest in the Chekhov Technique by contemporary actors, directors, and learning institutions.

This increase in interest and in usage of the Chekhov approach began in the late 1970's, in Los Angeles, California, at the Michael Chekhov Studio. This studio was founded by Artistic Director Jack Colvin and actress Mala Powers, both of whom were dedicated students of Chekhov. Actress Lisa Daulton, President of the Chekhov Studio says: “Today, the Chekhov techniques are gaining world-wide recognition in an amazing expansion of interest as artists seek to discover a consistent means to peak states of performance.”<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to explain why contemporary performers seem ready to grasp the Chekhov ideas, Daulton notes: “Current technology can scientifically support the once considered ‘too mystical’ means of Mr. Chekhov and humanity is now ready to embrace this inspirational, organic means of accessing one’s highest artistic aims.”<sup>4</sup> Presently

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<sup>3</sup>Lisa Daulton, (President) Michael Chekhov Studio West (<http://chekhov.net/mic-main.html>, 2001), 1.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*



there are over one dozen professional Michael Chekhov Studios worldwide and in recent years the technique has begun to receive academic attention as well.

Contemporary scholars and practitioners, such as Berkeley professor Mel Gordon and Broadway actress Joanna Merlin, are also currently spreading Chekhov's ideas and techniques. Both Gordon and Merlin were Chekhov students. In her recent book, Auditioning, Merlin states:

I studied acting for several years with Michael Chekhov, a great actor, director, and teacher, considered by Stanislavski to be his most brilliant pupil. In my search for a simple and accessible approach to auditioning, I found that many of Chekhov's ideas could be adapted and used in preparing an audition scene. His techniques allow you to work quickly and playfully, using your intuition, senses, and imagination as well as your reason.<sup>5</sup>

In 1980, the Michael Chekhov Studio was founded in New York City, by actors and former students Beatrice Straight and Robert Cole. In 1983, The Drama Review published an issue dedicated to Chekhov and his work. Michael Kirby writes:

This issue of The Drama Review is rather unusual. It is devoted to the work of one person: Michael Chekhov. Not since the issues of Artaud (T27), Brecht (T13 and T38) and Stanislavski (T25 and 26) has this occurred. We do not mean to imply, of course, that Chekhov had the historical significance or the influence of Stanislavski, Brecht, or Artaud. He was, however an extremely important actor/ director and, above all, a teacher/theoretician who deserves more comprehensive understanding.<sup>6</sup>

It was during this time in the early eighties that the expansion of interest in Chekhov and his techniques began. Over the past twenty years it has continued to

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<sup>5</sup>Joanna Merlin, Auditioning (Vintage Books, 2001) Intro. xx.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Kirby, The Drama Review, Michael Chekhov ed., vol. 27 (1983), 2.

grow and is slowly working its way into the mainstream of contemporary performance.

The first chapter of this thesis will examine the life of Michael Chekhov and his two major influences, Constantin Stanislavski and Rudolph Steiner. Chapter Two will explore the major elements of the Chekhov technique and how they differed from his mentor, Constantin Stanislavski. The resurgence in interest and usage by contemporary performers and teachers will be discussed in Chapter Three. This section will unveil the people and places that are presently working with and teaching the Chekhov techniques. Will the Chekhov technique continue to expand, or is it just a passing phase in the contemporary performer's search for a reliable, accessible, method of performance? Will the Chekhov approach overtake the Stanislavski method, the foremost technique taught in North America for almost a century? In 1952, Chekhov writes in his book, To The Actor:

To the best of my knowledge, theatrical history records the existence of only one method expressly postulated for the actor-that created by Konstantin Stanislavsky (and, unfortunately, much misunderstood and often misinterpreted). Let this book, then, be another effort in the direction of a better theatre through better acting. I proffer it as a humble but nevertheless eager attempt to place at the disposal of my colleagues a few systematically arranged ideas and experiences for bringing some order and inspiration to our professional work.<sup>7</sup>

The thesis conclusion will examine how Chekhov's work has been promulgated over the years. This often misinterpreted and misunderstood technique is now being experimented with by performers. Many of these

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<sup>7</sup>Michael Chekhov, To The Actor (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1953), 178.

performers have found excellent results while using the technique. Some have called him a genius with a gift for each and every contemporary performer. Others have noted Chekhov as a scene stealer and revolutionary, with a curious acting notion and severe mental condition. Regardless, this thesis will examine his work, how it has grown, and how his ideas have been split into two different styles of interpretation.

## CHAPTER 1

### A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE LIFE OF MICHAEL CHEKHOV

#### 1.1. The Early Years

Mikhail Alexandrovich Chekhov was born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1891. He was the son of Alexander Chekhov, and the nephew of playwright Anton Chekhov. During his lifetime, Michael Chekhov underwent four separate periods of development. He enjoyed a celebrated acting career in Moscow from 1913 to 1928. He then endured a period of wandering in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Latvia and Lithuania from 1928 to 1934. During this stage of his life, despite personal and artistic setbacks, he established new techniques in acting and staging. In the seven years that followed Chekhov enjoyed a period of teaching and directing in New York City and Dartington Hall in Devonshire, England. In the final stage of his life, from 1942 to 1955, Chekhov developed a Hollywood career where he combined teaching, writing and film acting.<sup>8</sup>

As a boy, in his middle-class home in St. Petersburg, Chekhov would construct elaborate sketches. Encouraged by local teachers, Chekhov entered the Alexei Suvorin Dramatic School, and in 1910 he was invited to perform at St. Petersburg's prestigious Maly Theatre. The following year Chekhov met with Stanislavski and was invited to join the prestigious Moscow Art Theatre. Chekhov trained and performed at the Moscow Art Theatre from 1912 to 1918. It was

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<sup>8</sup>Mel Gordon, The Drama Review, Michael Chekhov ed., vol. 27 (1983), 3.

there that he not only studied and worked with Stanislavski, but with Boleslavsky, Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, and his favorite teacher, Sulerzhitsky, who died in 1916.

## 1.2. Stanislavski and Steiner

After Sulerzhitsky's death, the Bolshevic victory in 1917, and seven years of working with Stanislavski's techniques, Chekhov became very depressed. Along with a severe alcohol addiction, he developed acute paranoia and became suicidal. His first wife Olga divorced him, taking with her their newborn daughter Ada. Stanislavski was very concerned about Chekhov and sent a team of doctors to diagnose his psychological ills. It was during this period that Chekhov became interested in spiritual scientist Rudolph Steiner, a man who would greatly influence his life.

More than the advanced therapies of Stanislavsky's physicians was his encounter with Hindu philosophy and especially with Rudolph Steiner's Anthroposophy that altered Chekhov's psychic condition. In fact, Chekhov's passionate investigation of Steiner's 'spiritual science' filled a dangerous void in his creative world.<sup>9</sup>

Anthroposophy is a meditative science that attempted to discover the archetypal and universal emotions that Steiner believed were inherent in every human being. He thought that the spirit and soul of most people was buried and must be unearthed in order to achieve enlightenment and creativity.

Anthroposophy receives its mighty task from the voice of the human heart itself, and is no more than what humanity is longing for today. Because of this Anthroposophy will have to live. It answers to what man most fervidly

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<sup>9</sup>Mel Gordon, On the Technique of Acting (Harper Collins 1991), Intro. xv.

longs for, both for his outer and inner life . “Can there be such a world conception today?” one may ask. The Anthroposophical society has to supply the answer. It must find the way to let the hearts of men speak from out their deepest longings; then they will experience the deepest longing for the answers.<sup>10</sup>

It was this Anthroposophical study, and his work with Steiner’s Eurhythmy, the science of movement and visible speech to the rhythm of musical compositions and color, that Chekhov credited for his mental and physical rejuvenation.

Although Chekhov did not meet with Steiner until 1922 during a central European tour, his contacts with local Russian Anthroposophical groups were frequent and productive. More important they stimulated Chekhov’s ideas for an ideal theatre. Marrying the inner truth and emotional depth of Stanislavsky’s system with the beauty and spiritual impact of Steiner’s work became Chekhov’s obsessive quest.<sup>11</sup>

Combining what he learned from Steiner’s eurhythmics and Stanislavski’s method, Chekhov designed his own ‘psycho- physical’ approach to performance. During the late 1920's his approach became the subject of severe governmental criticism. He was denounced by Bolshevic officials as an ‘idealist’ and ‘sick artist’, whose productions like The Case, in 1927, were seen as alien and reactionary. In 1928, Chekhov was forced to flee Russia and the Moscow Art Theatre to avoid arrest. Upon leaving the Moscow Art Theater, Chekhov, like Vaktangov and Meyerhold, began to develop and teach his own new method. Constantin Stanislavski, Evgeni Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov and Vsevelod Meyerhold were four tireless workers and visionaries who created the modern

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<sup>10</sup>Rudolph Steiner, Anthroposophy: An Introduction (Rudolph Steiner Press, London 1931), 66.

<sup>11</sup>Mel Gordon, On The Technique of Acting (Harper Collins, 1991), Intro. xvi.

style of acting.<sup>12</sup> The Stanislavski system was being challenged, changed and expanded by his core of artistic students.

Vakhtangov, Meyerhold and Chekhov were three artistic children of Constantine Stanislavski. Individuals as different from each other as they were from their artistic father.<sup>1</sup> But even as they extended, challenged and rejected his ideas, their love for the man and his accomplishments never wavered. And no matter the disagreements, Stanislavski loved them back.<sup>13</sup>

Over the next ten years Chekhov wandered throughout Europe, with sojourns in Austria, Germany, France, Latvia, Lithuania and finally England. He developed his first English speaking training school in Europe, with the assistance of student and actress Beatrice Straight and the wealthy Elmhirst family, who owned Dartington Hall in Devonshire, England.

### **1.3. Life in the United States**

In America at this time, the Group Theatre in New York City was flourishing. Actors like Stella Adler and Morris Carnovsky were being taught Stanislavski's method and director Lee Strasberg's new method. "Strasberg's method was another derived from Stanislavski's. It placed heavy emphasis on concentration, improvisation, and the use of the remembered feelings of the actor

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<sup>12</sup>Richard Brestoff, The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods (Smith and Kraus, 1995), 76.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

or 'affective memory' as he called it, to create a character."<sup>14</sup> In 1935 the Group Theatre was searching for new directors and Chekhov was invited for an interview.

Lee Strasberg was not happy about this, however, the other members of the Theatre were excited to meet him and be introduced to his ideas directly. Strasberg was not impressed with Chekhov's external directorial and acting techniques and was pleased when the Group members concluded that his style was so personal to him that it could not be taught or used by others. In this they were probably mistaken. It was an historic opportunity that was left unrealized.<sup>15</sup>

During his time in America, Chekhov appeared on Broadway in a four week, four play repertory of Russian classics which included Gogol's The Inspector General and Ostrovsky's Punishment Is No Crime. He then went on to tour Boston and Philadelphia with the Moscow Art Players. He played to full houses and received favorable reviews, gaining recognition and respect among his peers in the United States. In 1938, the onset of World War II inspired Chekhov and the Elmhursts to move the Chekhov Training School from Devonshire to Ridgefield, Connecticut. The Ridgefield based company played on Broadway in 1939 with an adaptation of Dostoyevsky's The Possessed. The show, written and co-directed by George Shdanoff, Chekhov's assistant, was considered a disaster by leading theatre critics. In 1941, Chekhov began teaching professional acting classes in New York City at the New Chekhov Theater Studio. He then directed the enthusiastically reviewed Broadway production of Twelfth Night.

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 91.



In both Connecticut and New York, Chekhov trained numerous members of the Group Theater and the Actors Studio before moving to Hollywood in 1942. Between 1943 and 1954, Chekhov starred in nine Hollywood films. In 1945, he received an Academy Award nomination for his role as the psychoanalyst in Alfred Hitchcock's Spellbound. He continued to teach his technique in Hollywood to such well-known actors as; Jack Palance, Gregory Peck, Clint Eastwood, Elia Kazan, Yul Brynner, Beatrice Straight, Anthony Quinn, and Marilyn Monroe, until his death in 1955. Monroe, who also studied under Lee Strasberg, displayed her gratitude for the guidance Chekhov had given her by willing an annual sum of money to be disbursed to his widow Xenia and the Chekhov estate.

Marilyn was introduced to Chekhov in 1951 by one of his devoted students, the American character actor Jack Palance. Marilyn opened herself like a sponge to water to Chekhov's approach to theatre, which was so deeply influenced by Steiner that Chekhov left Stanislavsky's method behind.<sup>16</sup>

Three books by Michael Chekhov were published in his lifetime: his autobiography, The Path of The Actor, in 1928; Lessons For the Professional Actor, in 1946; and To The Actor, in 1953. In the preface of his book To The Actor, famous Chekhov disciple and Academy Award Winner, Yul Brynner writes:

As I have said before, everything I have learned from you I have applied, through the years, in every medium in which I have worked, not only as an actor, but as a director, not only in the theatre, but also in television, in camera work, in scenery design, in coordination of the complex thing that

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<sup>16</sup>Tom Mellett, Nashville, (<http://www.southerncrossreview.org/13/letters.htm>, 10/21/01).

is live dramatic television production. To my mind your book, To The Actor, is by far the best book of its kind.<sup>17</sup>

When Chekhov died of heart failure in Hollywood Hills, there no longer was a creative master to proliferate his techniques. The interest that he had generated while alive began to dissolve. Conversely, the Stanislavski approach continued to grow during the latter part of the twentieth century. There remained a few fervent Chekhov disciples, but many performers were not interested in taking a chance with Chekhov's unorthodox approach. In 1962, seven years after Chekhov's death, student and long-time secretary Diedre Hurst Du Prey and writer Charles Leonard compiled and published Chekhov's notes on playwriting and directing. The book received little attention over the next twenty years. Despite his dedicated core of students, the Michael Chekhov approach to acting and performance endured a period of stagnation.

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<sup>17</sup>Yul Brynner, To the Actor (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1953), preface, x.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE MAJOR ELEMENTS OF THE CHEKHOV TECHNIQUE

#### 2.1. Chekhov and Imagination

Chekhov developed a technique for acting and performance that was centered around imagination and movement. His approach did not focus on emotional memory like Stanislavski's, but on imagination and movement. Admittedly, Chekhov employed many of Stanislavski's ideas in his teachings, however his stress on imagination, imagery, and physicalization were different than anything being taught at the time.

Michael Chekhov, a great acting teacher, stressed image work in his teaching. The student was to seize some image in his imagination, then let it change and develop.<sup>18</sup>

Chekhov felt that Stanislavski slighted the imagination and he was determined to bring it to its primary place of importance. Where Stanislavski put stress on using personal emotional memory to stimulate feeling, Chekhov placed it in the imagination. Chekhov believed it was wrong for the actor to be restricted to using personal and emotional memories from his own life to understand and create a role. He did not understand why the actor could not use imaginary events and images to stimulate feelings.

He felt that using one's own experiences exclusively would soon exhaust the actor's emotional resources, and that after a while, actors would begin imitating themselves. Stanislavsky's response to this was that the actor

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<sup>18</sup>Richard Hornby, The End of Acting (Applause Books, 1992), 90.

must always be closely observing others so that an inexhaustible source of emotional life was always available.<sup>19</sup>

To Chekhov, imagining a feeling was as justifiable as using emotional memories. This idea contradicted the methods of Stanislavski. In his book Creating a Role, Stanislavski explains:

The more an actor has observed and known, the greater his experience, his accumulation of live impressions and memories, the more subtly will he think and feel, and the broader, more varied, and substantial will be the life of his imagination, the deeper his comprehension of facts and events, the clearer his perception of the inner and outer circumstances of the life in the play and in his part.<sup>20</sup>

Stanislavski's point that one must have some experiences to be able to imagine at all is one that Chekhov differed with. He felt that one could imagine and create realistic environments without having experienced them personally. Stanislavski goes on to say:

With daily systematic practice of the imagination on one and the same theme everything that has to do with the proposed circumstances of the play will become habitual in his imaginary life. In turn these habits will become second nature.<sup>21</sup>

Chekhov believed that Stanislavski was focusing on memory not imagination, and he was driven to bring what he considered to be the proper use of the imagination to the forefront. Richard Brestoff explains:

For Chekhov this was not enough. Why not give imagination the importance it deserves? Why can't an actor search for emotional stimulation from things that never happened to anyone, or are impossible,

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<sup>19</sup>Richard Brestoff, The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods (Smith and Kraus, 1995), 63.

<sup>20</sup>Constantin Stanislavski, Creating a Role (Theatre Arts Books, 1961), 40.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

but suggestive? Why not imagine walking on the surface of the moon with its one-sixth less gravitational pull? Wouldn't a feeling of giddiness and joy result? Why must the actor go into his personal past in order to stimulate such a feeling?<sup>22</sup>

Chekhov felt that the imagination was a reliable tool that could be exercised with less difficulty and more success than the emotional recall process. He questioned the validity of using one's emotional history to stimulate the feelings needed for creating a character. He shared with Stanislavski a belief in developing the actor's source for inspiration, but felt that the stimulus should come from outside the private world of the actor. Chekhov believed that Stanislavski understood imagination in the following way: to prepare the part of Don Quixote one must imagine his surroundings and he himself, and consider himself as Don Quixote. In the Chekhov method one has to imagine Don Quixote, enjoying him in the imagination and gradually becoming inspired by him.

Stanislavsky and I have discussed this point but have never agreed on it. He thinks that almost everyone can act anything, but to get this ability I must consider myself from the beginning as Don Quixote. Whereas my idea is that I have to see him (Don Quixote) fighting, as long as I need to, until I get the feeling that I want to fight.<sup>23</sup>

The substitute Chekhov used for emotional recall and sense memory was the creation of Atmospheres and Qualities. These were external expressions with movement, which provoked the feelings they mimed.

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<sup>22</sup>Richard Brestoff, The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods (Smith and Kraus, 1995), 63.

<sup>23</sup>Michael Chekhov, from class notes taken by Deidre Hurst Du Prey at Dartington Hall, June 1938, The Drama Review, Michael Chekhov ed., vol. 27, no. 3 (1983), 2.

What about 'qualities'? Chekhov used this word as a substitute for emotion. He realizes that asking for a feeling directly is often the best way to make it run and hide. So instead of saying 'be more happy here', says 'add a quality of happiness to what you are doing'.<sup>24</sup>

To create despair in a character, a student would be asked to add the quality of anger to his gesture or movement, rather than search for a personal motivation. Former student Mala Powers describes: "Once, in an acting class at the Moscow Art Theater, Michael told a story of his father's death which was very emotional and believable. The class cried, as did Stanislavski, and Chekhov was given comforting hugs by all. During the next class Chekhov explained to his teacher that his father was still alive and well and that the story was made up in his imagination. Stanislavski was very angry and he kicked Chekhov out of class for two weeks."<sup>25</sup> Chekhov often tried to explain to Stanislavski that he saw delving into one's emotional memory as tiring and potentially dangerous, causing both anxiety and depression in the actor. Both he and Stanislavski struggled with bouts of depression early in their careers. Later in his life Stanislavski renounced his stress on the emotions as he acknowledged its tiring and sometimes hazardous results.

It is not that Stanislavski, after years of working from the inside, suddenly reversed himself and decided to work from the outside in some cold, mechanical way; instead, he recognized that inner and outer work together, feed off each other.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Richard Brestoff, The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods (Smith and Kraus, 1995), 66.

<sup>25</sup>Mala Powers, American College Theatre Festival, University of New Hampshire, January, 2001.

<sup>26</sup>Richard Homby, The End of Acting (Applause Books, 1992), 197.

Method actors such as Group Theatre actress Stella Adler also began to see the dangers of using emotional memory, and she was gaining interest in the Michael Chekhov approach.

Adler focused on imagination, circumstances, actions, justification and character just as Stanislavski did, and like him later in life, she rejected affective memory as ultimately more destructive than helpful.<sup>27</sup>

Chekhov developed a technique that incorporated elements of Stanislavski and his work with spiritual scientist Rudolph Steiner. By adding his personal touches he created a method that became known as ‘psycho-physical’.

The Michael Chekhov Acting Technique consists primarily of work with the ‘imaginary body’. By manipulating and working with the ‘imaginary body’, the actor is able to affect both physical and psychological changes. This is neither a ‘physical’ approach to acting, nor a ‘psychological’ one. Chekhov referred to his work as ‘psycho-physical’.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.2. The Psychological Gesture

The development of his ‘Psychological Gesture’ was another major Chekhov innovation. This was a movement that would embody the psychology and objective of a character, executed inwardly during performance. This was an external way of achieving an internal state of understanding and developing a character. Chekhov believed the key to the actor’s will was through his movement.

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<sup>27</sup>Richard Brestoff, The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods (Smith and Kraus, 1995), 127.

<sup>28</sup>David Lind, (<http://www.tctfa.org/thirdcoast/Michael-Chekhov-faq.html>, 2001).

You might know only too well what the feelings and desires of your character are, but that knowledge alone would not enable you to fulfill the desires truthfully or experience its feelings sincerely on the stage. It is like knowing everything about a science or an art and ignoring the fact that this intelligence per se is far removed from being proficient in it. Of course, your mind can and will be very helpful to you in evaluating, correcting, verifying, making additions and offering suggestions, but it should not do all these before your creative intuition has asserted itself and spoken fully.<sup>29</sup>

Chekhov believed the psychological gesture technique was the nearest thing to the actor's creative individuality, possessing spiritual power and enabling the actor to renounce all sorts of pushing and forcing in his acting. By consciously working the gestures an actor would be rewarded with a rich flow of inspiration from his subconscious.

Michael Chekhov's psychological gesture is based on nothing but indicating, but as the first step in a carefully planned journey, rather than as an end point. The goal of the psychological gesture technique is the feel of the emotion, in the intuitive sense. Such feeling is essential to good acting; Such feeling is also perfectly observable because it is inherent in the action itself.<sup>30</sup>

Certainly, the great acting teacher Stanislavski did not attack his roles in this way. He delved into his personal library to discover a character's appropriate gesture, placing primary importance on internal emotional discovery. Chekhov took his objective theory and made it into a psychological process, using active verbs to produce feeling on the stage.

Many active verbs project an image of a movement or gesture. If such a gesture is projected by your defined objective or action, try to make the gesture physically, at home, in the largest way possible, to bring the

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<sup>29</sup>Michael Chekhov, To the Actor (Harper and Brothers, 1953), 73.

<sup>30</sup>Richard Hornby, The End of Acting (Applause Books, 1992), 129.



objective into your body. Find a sound or word that arises from that gesture. After making the gesture several times, try saying some of the lines while making the gesture. Then imagine yourself making it inwardly without moving. The gesture will resonate in your work as an impulse for whatever your objective or action may be. It will help connect your body and mind.<sup>31</sup>

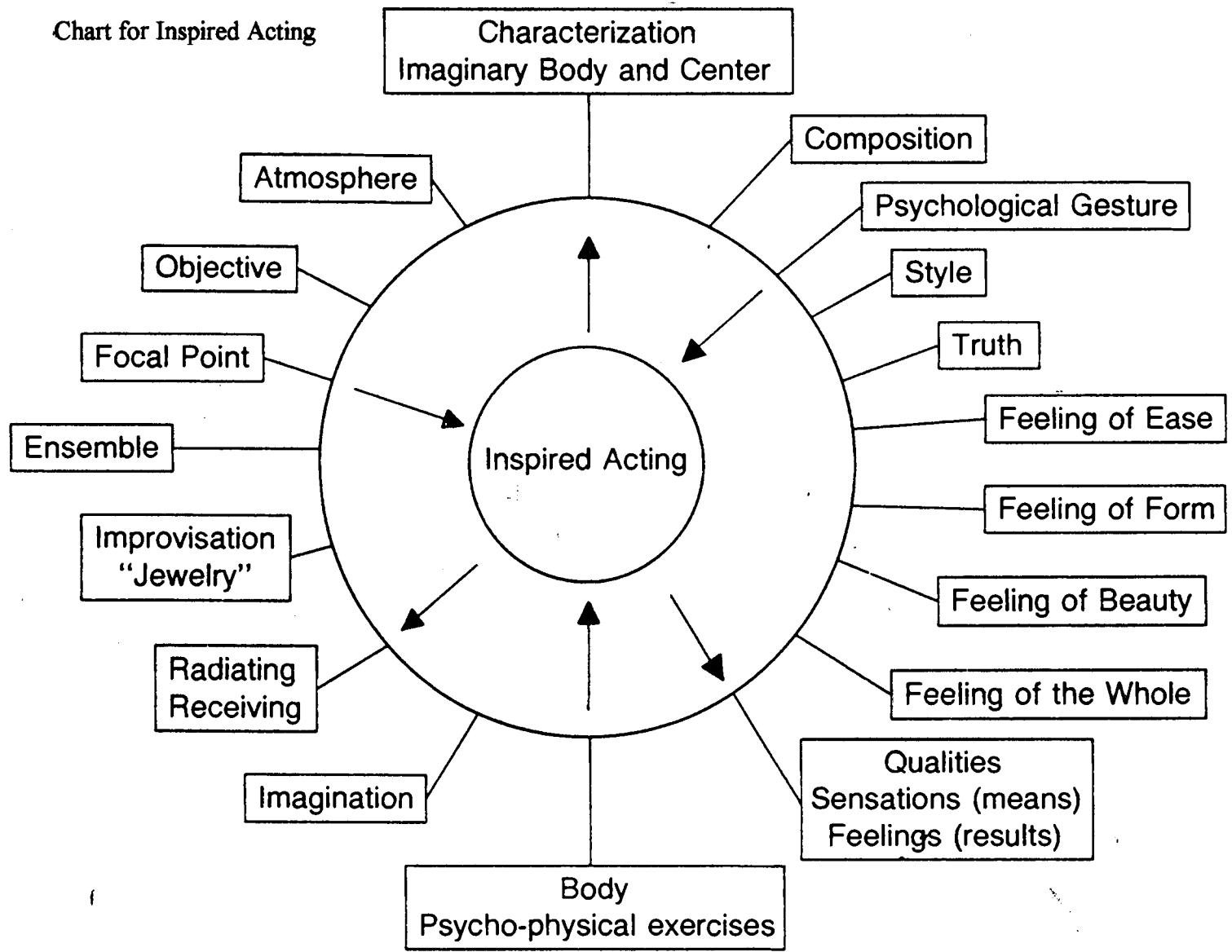
### 2.3. The Chart for Inspired Acting

To facilitate the understanding of his technique, Chekhov developed a *Chart for Inspired Acting*. This chart (see Figure 1) contained the previously mentioned concepts of imagination, qualities, and psychological gesture, along with the other main elements of the technique. In many of the elements on this chart, such as Radiating, Receiving, Objective and Atmosphere, one can see the Stanislavski influence on Chekhov. These concepts were taken directly from the teachings of Chekhov's former teacher. There are seven elements on the chart that include the word feeling. Instead of asking his students to relax, Chekhov would ask them to sit with a feeling of ease. He believed this to be a more accessible and immediate direction that could be carried out by the actor. He purposely wrote 'feeling of' in front of each of these elements in order to make them attainable. He wanted his students to imagine that each of the various elements were like light bulbs on the circumference of a circle, and when inspiration struck all the light bulbs would become illuminated. This chart serves as a complete summary of the Chekhov technique. One can take a closer look at each element of the chart in the

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<sup>31</sup>Joanna Merlin, *Auditioning, An Actor Friendly Guide* (Vintage Books, 2001), 58.

Figure 1. Chart for Inspired Acting



book On the Technique of Acting which is the Mala Power's reprint of Chekhov's To The Actor. Chekhov believed that consciously working each aspect would create a chain reaction that would lead to inspiration and quality acting. The Chekhov technique consists of more than just the use of imagination and psychological gesture, however, those two have been singled out as major elements and illustrations of how the technique differed from Stanislavski's.

Stanislavski and Steiner were two accomplished creative influences in the twentieth century. Both of these two men had a profound influence on Michael Chekhov and the development of his acting and directing technique. Chekhov combined elements from their creative methods, developing his own method, in an attempt to open the doors to an actor's creativity.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE CHEKHOV TECHNIQUE IN PRACTICE TODAY

#### **3.1. Chekhov Growth in the Professional Studio**

Interest in the Michael Chekhov performance technique has grown considerably over the last twenty-five years. One can study the Chekhov Technique at a studio and read a Chekhov book or a republished and re-edited book about Chekhov. It is now possible to become Michael Chekhov Certified as a teacher of the technique by taking certain intensive studies in both Maine and Connecticut. The Connecticut courses are sponsored by the Chekhov organization MICHA, and the Southern Maine classes are endorsed by Mala Powers. Much of current attention given towards Chekhov can be attributed directly to Chekhov disciple, actress Mala Powers, who is most well-known for her role of Roxanne in the 1950 Marenga Films Academy Award-winning production of Cyrano de Bergerac. In 1970, Chekhov's wife Xenia named Powers executrix of the Chekhov estate. During this period, Powers began to teach the technique in an attempt to regenerate and broaden the interest in the Chekhov techniques. She began by teaching workshops across the United States and Europe and soon opened the Michael Chekhov Studio U.S.A. West, with actor Jack Colvin. In her teachings Powers focuses heavily on Chekhov's use of the actor's imagination. Over the past twenty-five years the Michael Chekhov Studio West has grown into the largest Chekhov school in the world.

The studio offers seminars, intensive acting workshops, classes, showcases, play and video production and networking opportunities. Emphasis is on balancing internal/external acting technique through physicalization of emotional/psychological work.<sup>32</sup>

The studio is presently run by Artistic Director Jack Colvin and Studio President, second generation Chekhov student Lisa Daulton. When integrating Michael Chekhov's ideas with Lisa Daulton's guidance, actors have experienced excellent results. "Our students are booking more acting jobs and have greater joy in life as an actor."<sup>33</sup>

In 1985, the Michael Chekhov Acting Studio opened in New York City. This studio was operated by former Chekhov student and friend Beatrice Straight. Today the studio is under the direction of Artistic Director Leonard Petit. The New York Studio runs independently of the Hollywood Studio and has not enjoyed as much growth and consistency as its predecessor. The New York Studio is smaller and has had more struggles. University of Southern Maine Professor Wil Kilroy, a former student at both the Studio West and the New York Studio, says of the New York Studio, "It's still running. It's sort of gone though ebbs and flows. As far as I know they are back on track."<sup>34</sup>

By 1991, Mala Powers succeeded in her long time project of republishing Chekhov's classic acting book, To the Actor. Powers reorganized the book in an

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<sup>32</sup>Lisa Daulton, Michael Chekhov Studio West, (<http://chekhov.net/mic-main.html>, 2002).

<sup>33</sup>(<http://chekhov.net/mic>, 2002).

<sup>34</sup>Mr. Will Kilroy, interview by author, Tape recording, Portland, Maine, 6 March 2002.

attempt to make it clearer and more accessible for the contemporary actor.

Throughout this process she continued to give Chekhov workshops at professional and collegiate theatre festivals worldwide. During this time in the early nineties, Director Floyd Rumohr opened the successful Michael Chekhov Theatre Ensemble in Brooklyn, New York. This group focuses heavily on the movement aspect of Chekhov's work. Actor Peter Swander says: "The Chekhov Theatre Ensemble Intensive was a privilege and departure from my typical experience in this country. The combination of spirit and precision were rare."<sup>35</sup> This group, which formed in 1994, has taken the Chekhov word and made it accessible for young people. Their concentration has been on developing interest and confidence of young people. Using Chekhov's imagination techniques, they teach and perform Shakespeare and other classics. The Ensemble has developed a program called Stages of Learning, described as a 'model' by teachers.

This program is charged with inspiring children who do not respond to traditional methodologies. Stages of Learning has reached 14,000 children and 400 teachers since our inception in 1994 in New York City, Westchester and Nassau counties, Fort Myers (Florida), and most recently in Philadelphia in a partnership with Temple University.<sup>36</sup>

The Theatre Ensemble also offers classes for adults which culminate with ensemble productions. The Ensemble often travels throughout Europe and the United States with its productions and workshops.

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<sup>35</sup>Peter Swander, (<http://www.checkhovtheatre.org/pate19.html>, 2002).

<sup>36</sup>Floyd Rumohr, Chekhov Theatre Ensemble, New York, (<http://www.chekhovtheatre.org>, 2002).

In Birmingham, United Kingdom, there is a recently developed Professional Training School which offers short courses, evening classes and workshops. Classes are taught by European actress and University of Plymouth Professor Sara Kane, and actress/mime Marjolein Baars. Baars has also formed her own theatre company called 'Tiny Heroes' which combines clowning and the Michael Chekhov Technique.

Tiny Hero Productions is a theatre group specializing in tailor made theatre performances based upon the combination of the Michael Chekhov acting technique and clowning.<sup>37</sup>

Members from all the above mentioned groups have recently collaborated to form the Michael Chekhov Association, called MICHA. This is an organization that links the artistic vision Chekhov created with the work of actors, directors and teachers of today.

An international collective of teachers leads the Association and provides classes, workshops and conferences for those who wish to study Chekhov's technique. Using this approach, we believe artists will find a new impulse for their work, add exciting tools to the methods, and revitalize their craft.<sup>38</sup>

### **3.2. Academic Interest in Chekhov**

Michael Chekhov is beginning to receive academic attention as well. Chekhov acting workshops have recently been given at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, and more universities are experimenting with

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<sup>37</sup>Marjolein Baars, Tiny Hero Productions (<http://www.pharo.com/chekhov>, 2002).

<sup>38</sup>MICHA, (<http://www.michaelchekhov.org/workshops/workshops.html>, 2002).

and researching the Chekhov technique. Broadway actress Joanna Merlin teaches the Chekhov technique at New York University. Berkeley Professor Mel Gordon directs classes which concentrate on the technique. University of Southern Maine Professor Wil Kilroy teaches classes which implement Chekhov's styles of acting and directing. Kilroy notes: "We also offer a Summer Chekhov intensive for interested teachers and students."<sup>39</sup> The Southern Maine Summer Program is taught by Kilroy, Mala Powers and Lisa Daulton.

Many universities and professional studios now offer classes that specialize in movement, which is another reason that the approach has grown in popularity over the last twenty years. This increased awareness of the importance of the actor's body blends well with the Chekhov approach, which places heavy emphasis on movement. Yoga and Tai chi, body awareness, and the connection between the mind and body are elements that are becoming more and more important in the contemporary actor's life. By attacking roles from a more physical and external approach the contemporary actor is beginning to realize the potential of Chekhov and his actor training techniques.

### **3.3. Why Chekhov, Why Now**

Currently there are also some well-known, contemporary, professional actors who have employed Chekhov's techniques, and who are also beginning to spread the Chekhov word. Noted actor Jack Nicholson, while receiving his

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<sup>39</sup>Mr. Will Kilroy, interview by author, Tape recording, Portland, Maine, 6 March 2002.



Golden Globe Award, and Anthony Hopkins, on “Inside the Actor’s Studio,” have both acknowledged the power of Michael Chekhov’s Psychological Gesture.<sup>40</sup> Broadway actress Joanna Merlin dedicates her book, Auditioning; “To Michael Chekhov, whose teaching and spirit continue to inspire me.”<sup>41</sup> Actor Spaulding Gray states: “The main influence, the book that I remember as being very influential, was To The Actor, the Michael Chekhov book.”<sup>42</sup> Professor Will Kilroy notes: “Academy Award winning actor Clint Eastwood and Academy Award nominee Julianna Moore have acknowledged Chekhov for his use of imagination and psychological gesture.”<sup>43</sup> Students, teachers, actors and directors are taking a look at the technique that was once thought to be unworthy.

During his life, however, Chekhov was often viewed as an eccentric. His innovations became a threat to the Soviet government, and he was denounced in 1927 as an idealist and mystic. Moscow newspapers referred to Chekhov as a ‘sick artist’ and ‘alien and reactionary’.<sup>44</sup> Chekhov was often perceived as a scene stealer by his peers and early in his career, a difficult person with whom to work. His external approach seemed fake and ineffective to many actors. He was an outsider who had the drive to develop his own method of performing which was

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<sup>40</sup><http://www.chekhov.net/mic-main.html>, 3/30/01.

<sup>41</sup>Joanna Merlin, Auditioning, An Actor Friendly Guide (Vintage Books, 2001), pref.

<sup>42</sup>Spaulding Gray, Acting Now (Rutgers University Press, 1997), 103.

<sup>43</sup>Will Kilroy, Interview by author, Tape recording, Portland, Maine, 6 March 2002.

<sup>44</sup>Kelly Ellenwood, (<http://www.chekhovtheatre.org/page4.html>, 2002).

fundamentally different from the one which he was taught early in his career by Stanislavski.

It was against the excesses of both internal and external approaches to acting and emotion on the stage that Constantin Stanislavski, unquestionably the most influential acting teacher of our time, rebelled. The purely external approach was called 'mechanical acting' by him. You will understand this better when you come to realize the origins and methods of mechanical acting, which we characterize as rubber stamps. To reproduce feelings you must be able to identify them out of your own experience. But as mechanical actors do not experience feelings they cannot reproduce their external results.<sup>45</sup>

Later in his life, however, members of the Group Theatre began studying Chekhov's approach and even Stanislavski himself renounced his stress on personal emotional memory, realizing that a performer could experience feelings without delving into their personal library. "Stanislavski had moved on to his 'Method of Psycho-Physical Actions', which emphasized actions and circumstances far more than emotional memory."<sup>46</sup> This in no way nullifies the many brilliant ideas that Stanislavski developed. He was the most influential actor and teacher of his time and his writings still dominate the academic and professional environment. Nevertheless, over the last twenty years, the writings of Michael Chekhov have infiltrated the academic and professional performance world and the interest and usage continues to grow.

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<sup>45</sup>Stanley Glenn, The Complete Actor (Allyn and Bacon, Inc. 1977), 50-51.

<sup>46</sup>Richard Brestoff, The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods (Smith and Kraus, 1995), 88.

## CONCLUSION

The Stanislavski technique has been used as a basis for development of many different acting approaches. Many of his own students, such as Boleslavsky, Meyerhold, Vaktangov, and Chekhov, all branched out to develop their own ideas in an attempt to broaden and develop Stanislavski's concepts. There have been many American visionaries as well, including Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner, and Uta Hagen. Every one of these artists is in debt to the great Stanislavski. However, each artist has made the technique his own by changing and developing ideas and concepts that he believed would improve and facilitate the already existing method. The same can be said about the Michael Chekhov technique.

The first generation of Chekhov students have taken the work and divided it into the areas of concentration. The emphasis of the Mala Powers work is on the spiritual and imagination side of the technique, and in New York, at the Theatre Ensemble, the focus is on the movement side of the Chekhov technique. As with the Stanislavski method, performers are taking specific elements from Chekhov, not necessarily the whole thing, and employing it to fulfill their needs. Will the Chekhov technique become the foremost method taught in this century and expand into as many different branches as Stanislavski's did? Its present growth in interest and usage indicates that the proliferation of this approach will continue for many years to come.

During the last years of Chekhov's work, he frequently called upon each actor to develop clear concepts and visualizations of what an ideal theatre should be for the future. He envisioned a theatre that did not confuse 'Naturalism' with 'Realism' and that could entertain the public with diverse theatrical styles. His vision of a future theatre also called for a sense of moral responsibility on the part of producers, directors and writers, as well as actors. He said they must be willing to ask:

What will be stirred up within the spectators? Will what we are presenting have any positive value for them as human beings?...Those who have worked seriously with Michael Chekhov's technique know that each aspect, when exercised sufficiently, becomes a gift to the actor, not only as an artist but also as a human being - a gift that can become nourishment for the human spirit, given through the actor to the world.<sup>47</sup>

There are presently eight professional studios where one can study the Chekhov approaches to acting. They are scattered throughout the United States and Europe and are all identified in this thesis. A student can now also study the techniques in universities throughout the world. There are presently two Chekhov certification programs available and many workshops and intensive studies throughout North America.

Anyone who believes there is more than one way to develop a role, anyone looking for an alternative to the omnipresent Stanislavsky system and American Method, anyone interested in non-realistic acting, anyone concerned with analyzing the entire spectrum of performance possibilities may find something extremely provocative and/or significant in Chekhov's approach.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Mala Powers, On the Technique of Acting (Harper Perennial, 1991), 172.

<sup>48</sup>Michael Kirby, The Drama Review, Michael Chekhov ed., vol. 27, no.3,(1983) Intro. iii.

Many students of acting, both professional and academic are searching for reliable and accessible acting approaches. Like Michael Chekhov, some have had difficulty using the early Stanislavski emotional memory approach, finding it at times arduous, draining and stifling. The Chekhov technique is being unveiled as a new and approachable way to immerse oneself into a role and the creative process. For almost a century, well-known successful professors and performers, directors, and actors have had much success with the Stanislavski approach. Undoubtedly, Stanislavski was a master teacher who opened many doors to performance and creativity. He once said: "An actor must work all his life, cultivate his mind, train his talents systematically, develop his character; he may never despair and never relinquish this main purpose— to love his art with all his strength and love it unselfishly."<sup>49</sup> He laid the ground work for Michael Chekhov to attempt to improve his method. Many students and professionals are now discovering that the Chekhov approach to performance and actor training is at least worthy of an investigation. It may not replace the Stanislavski system of acting, but it is now being accepted as a viable, invigorating approach to performance training.

We aim to be actors and more than actors— artists. What does this mean? It means that we are going to study, to learn how we can have our inspiration at our command. That is our most difficult task, but we shall have a method that will make it possible.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Constantin Stanislavski, Creating a Role (New York Theatre Arts Books, 1961), 40.

<sup>50</sup>Michael Chekhov, from class notes taken by Deidre Hurst Du Prey at Dartington Hall, June 1938, The Drama Review, Michael Chekhov ed., vol. 27, no. 3 (1983), 6.

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Richard Solomon was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in September of 1961. He was raised in Maine and graduated from Presque Isle High School in 1979. He attended the University of Southern Maine and graduated Magna Cum Laude in 1983 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Theatre. After performing statewide in both academic and professional productions, Richard returned to school in the Graduate Theatre Program at The University of Maine. Mr. Solomon is a three time Irene Ryan Acting Competition Nominee and an undergraduate and graduate high honors student. Richard is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in Theatre from The University of Maine in May, 2002.