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‘A new kind of conversation’: Michael Chekhov’s ‘turn to the crafts’

Tom Cornford

Dartington Hall, which was the home of the Chekhov Theatre Studio between 1936 and 1938, also accommodated other performing artists including the Ballets Jooss and Hans Oppenheim’s music school as well as artist-craftsmen such as the painter Mark Tobey, the potter Bernard Leach and the sculptor Willi Soukop. This essay examines the training undertaken in Chekhov’s studio in dialogue with the practice of these artists (who also worked with his students) and theories of practice articulated by the wider constructive movement in the arts in the 1930s. It goes on to propose that Chekhov’s technique be considered as a means of achieving theatre-artistry through craftsmanship, and as an artistic technique whose reach extends far beyond the confines of actor training.

Keywords: Michael Chekhov, arts education, craft, actor training, modernism

The perfection of art must arise from its practice – from the discipline of tools and materials, of form and function . . . and must be taught in intimate apprenticeship. I believe that the teacher must be no less active than the pupil. For art cannot be learned by precept, by any verbal instruction. It is, properly speaking, a contagion, and passes like fire from spirit to spirit. (Read 1966, pp. xxxiii–xxxiv)

At the opening of the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington Hall on 5 October 1936, Michael Chekhov announced to his students that ‘we aim to be actors and more than actors – artists . . . we are going to study, to learn how we can have our inspiration at our command’.¹ Chekhov’s depiction of artistry took the form, characteristic of his technique, of a polarity, balancing ‘inspiration’ against the will of the individual. Chekhov saw polarity as ‘one of the inescapable conditions of life itself’ (Leonard 1963, p. 32), which is sustained not by the absence of death, but by a dynamic tension between the forces of growth and of decay. Chekhov’s artistic technique seeks, likewise, to sustain a creative tension between opposed forces such as ‘inspiration’ and ‘our command’.

1. References to Chekhov’s classes are all taken from Hurst du Prey (1977) in The Michael Chekhov Theatre Studio Deirdre Hurst du Prey Archive, held for the Dartington Hall Trust at The Devon Records Office, Exeter. They are cited in the text by the date of the class from which they are taken.

2. Bely was the author of the celebrated novel *Petersburg* (1916). For examples of his dramatic theory, see Senelick (1981, pp. 89–92, 149–170).

Chekhov (1944, p. 58) recorded observing this tension in the ‘creative process’ of the novelist, poet and theorist Andrei Bely.²

He would conceive the general outline of a novel and then patiently observe the characters he had brought to life. They would surround him day after day, evolving and trying to establish relationships among themselves, altering the plot and uncovering deeper meaning until they had finally become symbols ... An artistic imagination of such dimensions as his was capable of combining two processes that are mutually exclusive. It allowed the images it created to have an autonomous existence, while at the same time subordinating them to the will of the artist. While Bely observed the objective interplay of those images, his ‘insight’ endowed them with his own subjective element. The contradiction turned into co-operation between the images and the author.

Chekhov’s observation of Bely helped him to define the kernel of what was, for him, the distinction between his approach and Stanislavsky’s. At their last meeting, Chekhov (1944, p. 39) recalled that he and Stanislavsky discussed ‘two issues that divided us’: the use of affective memory and the means of creating a character. Chekhov observed that these disagreements were ‘in essence one’: *‘do the personal, untransformed feelings of the actor need to be eliminated from, or engaged in, the creative process?’* Stanislavsky argued, according to Chekhov, that the actor must draw on ‘his personal, intimate life’ in both cases, whereas, for Chekhov, the actor must forget himself and use ‘creative feelings’ and an image of the character ‘cleansed of the personal element’.³ Chekhov’s technique repeatedly makes use of such ‘creative feelings’ and images, which are always considered to have an autonomous existence. Like Bely’s images, an imaginary centre, an atmosphere, a character’s imaginary body, a psychological gesture for a play or a role, all have a life which is independent of the artist’s. The artist’s creative process therefore consists of ‘co-operation’ with these images.

This ‘co-operation’ operates necessarily on both spiritual and material planes, and Chekhov looked forward, in his New York lectures of 1941, to a ‘Spiritual Theatre’ in which ‘the spirit will be concretely studied’ (Chekhov 1992, p. 141). That paradoxical notion depends upon the polarity of spirit and matter upon which the practice of any artist will inevitably and repeatedly turn. Artistic work aspires, by definition, to an aesthetic value beyond the scope of the material but an artist can only even conceive of (let alone achieve) that aspiration in terms of the successful manipulation of material form. A dualistic conception of spirit and matter could not begin to account for such a situation. But Chekhov’s notion of polarity – in which two elements, defined by their mutual opposition, are also inseparably and continually present – is ideally suited to it.

Chekhov’s most influential guide to the exploration of the polarity of spirit and matter was Rudolf Steiner’s ‘spiritual science’ of Anthroposophy, which Chekhov first studied under the guidance of Bely in 1921, and of which he wrote:

how practical the principles of Anthroposophy are, how firmly this science stands on the Earth ... There is no room for unsubstantiated flights of fancy in Anthroposophy ... Those desirous of developing their higher organs of perception can carry out the relevant exercises, and each individual is capable of experiencing for himself in the spiritual world what Anthroposophy describes.

3. I am aware that this may be considered an inadequately nuanced characterisation of Stanislavsky’s system, but my contention is simply that it accurately represents Chekhov’s own understanding of his difference from Stanislavsky.

The world of the spirit is only a 'mystery' to a person who does not wish to exert himself sufficiently to gain access into it. (Chekhov 2005, p. 134)

4. There are timetables in the Papers of Dorothy Elmhirst 1914–1968 (DWE/A/15/C), held for the Dartington Hall Trust at the Devon Records Office, Exeter (see also Pitches 2006, p. 149).

Chekhov's observation that the Anthroposophist can only gain spiritual insight through exertion reflects his insistence that an artist can only achieve freedom through the discipline of concrete study. The world of a play, in other words, is only a mystery to the actor who does not wish to exert himself. Surviving timetables from the Chekhov Theatre Studio show that the students' exertions were frequently grounded in Steiner's work, which was an almost daily feature of their training.⁴ Chekhov's own writings (Chekhov 1991, p. 75) show what recent scholarship (Chamberlain 2004, Pitches 2006, Daboo 2012) has clarified: Steiner-based practices introduced Chekhov's students to certain fundamental principles of his technique in an archetypal form, and exemplified for Chekhov's students what Steiner called 'the artistic forming of inner experience' (1960, p. 254).

Steiner's work was not, however, the only example of artistic practice offered to Chekhov's students. Chekhov told his students that 'nowhere in the world is there such an opportunity as we have been given at Dartington' (30 October 1936). He was referring, presumably, in part to the opportunity to work with adequate subsidy and without political interference. But the Dartington community also offered a range of opportunities to Chekhov and his students in their pursuit of concrete spiritual study. Take the estate workers, alongside whom Chekhov's students ate lunch every day, and who exemplified the emphasis placed by Chekhov on work:

The most important thing is *work* . . . everybody has a gift from nature, more or less, but what we really have in our hands is work. It is the only thing we can do. We cannot *do* the gift, but we can *do* the work. I think of our school, and afterward our theatre, as consisting of work, work, work. (8 November 1936)

The figure of the worker was invoked, though, not merely as a moral precept but as an artistic lesson:

a worker arrives at a mastery of his craft by taking into consideration his own power, the weight of the instrument, and other things. After he has done the work many times freely, he gets a new feeling of freedom. This second feeling of freedom is right. (10 November 1936)

This 'second feeling of freedom' depended upon the development of technique:

In working on the play, we have a first moment of freedom when we do things instinctively. Then the next moment when we must do exercises and go through the narrow, narrow channel of the exercises before we come to the second freedom. After we have gone through the period of assimilating the Method and its exercises, we will be on the other side and will discover many new possibilities which will make us absolutely free. (10 November 1936)

In this respect, Chekhov's approach to acting followed the prescription of Walter Gropius' 1919 manifesto of the *Staatliches Bauhaus*, which urged all

5. As Christopher Frayling has noted (2011, p. 29), Gropius' prescription has been widely mistranslated as 'we must all return to the crafts' (my emphasis) and it has therefore been incorrectly assumed to articulate a desire to return to a (non-existent) pre-industrial idyll.

6. It was valued at \$8 million in 1908 when Dorothy was 21 (Young 1982, p. 41).

artists to 'turn to the crafts',⁵ and proposed an artistic training which would always be founded upon the practice of craft skills. Where Gropius (1919) insisted that 'proficiency in a craft is essential to every artist' because it contains 'the prime source of creative imagination', Chekhov told his students that 'We are not helpless. We have a technique. Appreciate this' (7 October 1937).

The idea of craft as a foundational discipline for art and education was central to the project of Dartington Hall, which had been established by Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst in 1925 as an experiment in rural regeneration and an educational and artistic community with its roots in the Arts and Crafts movement. That movement had emerged in the 1880s in response to the rapid mechanisation, commercialisation, and specialisation which followed the industrial revolution. Tom Crook has argued that it represented 'a countervailing force of dedifferentiation': an attempt not to return to a fictional past, but to create an 'alternative modernity' (Crook 2009, p. 26).

Crook's argument is well-suited to the Dartington project. The estate was purchased by the Elmhirsts thanks to Dorothy's considerable personal fortune, which had been amassed by her father, William Collins Whitney.⁶ Despite having been a reformer as a young man, Whitney's business methods were somewhat unscrupulous. Michael Young has observed that Dorothy's guilt about her father's dealings, combined with her strong feeling of the duty inherited with wealth, and – after she was orphaned – her freedom from parental control all helped forge her radical spirit (Young 1982, pp. 46–47). Dartington was therefore dependent, both financially and psychologically, upon the inequality to which it was ideologically opposed, just as the Arts and Crafts movement was a product of the industrial revolution against whose consequences it fought.

Dorothy's egalitarian instincts and her appreciation for art would have been encouraged by classes with the philosopher John Dewey. He advocated an embodied intelligence, 'not the faculty of intellect ... but ... the sum-total of impulses, habits, emotions, records, and discoveries' (Dewey 1917, pp. 67–68). This proceeded through a process of collaboration between the modes of action and perception, and was exemplified for Dewey by the figure of the artist:

the artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works ... As we manipulate, we touch and feel, as we look, we see; as we listen, we hear ... Because of this intimate connection, subsequent doing is cumulative and not a matter of caprice, nor yet of routine. (Dewey 2005, pp. 50–51)

Dewey argued that the artist's form of intelligence, rooted in the interaction between assertive action and evaluative perception, could liberate intellectual activity from the notion that 'the office of knowledge is to uncover the antecedently real' (Dewey 1960, p. 20) and, in turn, liberate society by ending the separation of scientific from practical knowledge.

Dewey saw such dualism merely as an assertion of the interests of the ruling (intellectual) class, who were served, he wrote, by the attachment of 'prestige' to 'those who use their minds without participation of their body and who act vicariously through control of the bodies and labor of others' (Dewey 2005, p. 21). Disembodied intelligence was therefore, for Dewey,

both socially conservative and fundamentally constrained. By contrast, pragmatic intelligence, which 'develops within the sphere of action for the sake of possibilities not yet given' (Dewey 1917, pp. 63–64) was, he argued, a progressive force. Seen from this perspective, the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement did not appeal to the retrograde desire for a 'land of lost content', but took advantage of the freedoms afforded the workforce by the industrial revolution to reinvent manual labour as a locus of creative intelligence rather than mindless and necessary bondage.

This attitude was shared by the Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, with whom, in 1922, Leonard Elmhirst had established what he called an 'Institute of Rural Reconstruction' in West Bengal, which was renamed *Sriniketan* (The Abode of Grace) by Tagore. At Tagore's nearby school, *Santiniketan* (The Abode of Health), Elmhirst had seen an approach to education which prioritised embodied and purposeful experience rather than intellectual abstraction (Tagore and Elmhirst 1961, pp. 10–11, 20–21).⁷ The students were taught crafts, in which, as Elmhirst saw, 'there is a grammar of procedure . . . but it is a grammar which is not detached from life and which has to be learned at the beginning by trial and error and the bitterness of failure' (Tagore and Elmhirst 1961, p. 71).

Tagore set great store by the egalitarian nature of such work, by which he hoped to counteract the destructive effect of hierarchical divisions in Indian society:

In India the real cause of the weakness that cripples our spirit of freedom arises from the impregnable social walls we raise between the different castes. These check the natural flow of fellow-feeling among the people who live in our country . . . The people of India in this way have built their own cage; but by trying to secure their freedom from one another, they only succeed in keeping themselves eternally captive. (Tagore and Elmhirst 1961, p. 23)

Tagore did not see any freedom in this 'artificial order' by which the ruling class maintained its control, not even for the rich, who were equally condemned to live in isolation. In establishing *Sriniketan*, Leonard had to address Indian social divisions directly. He began by pretending to the Brahmin boys from Tagore's school, who were assisting him, that there would be a 'sweeper' to come and empty the latrines. When, the next day, they saw Elmhirst emptying the buckets himself, some joined in, and a few days later, Leonard recorded 'two red letter days because two students yesterday and two today, including one Brahmin boy . . . cleaned out the offending latrine buckets' (Elmhirst 2008, pp. 90, 100, 109).

But Tagore and Elmhirst did not insist on manual work in education only for egalitarian reasons. It also functioned as a way of developing ability in movement. Tagore wrote that 'in children the whole body is expressive' and he deplored the widespread educational practice of enforcing stillness on 'those lines of movement that would parallel and accompany our thoughts' and therefore making the mind do its work 'unaided by the collaboration of the body', and making 'so many school lessons remain absolutely dead and ineffective' (Tagore and Elmhirst 1961, pp. 102–103, 107). Tagore gave the counter-example of 'the poet, or the musician' who 'gesticulates as he works', illustrating the 'two stages' of thinking: 'the act of thought itself, and the

7. This enterprise was also significantly dependent upon Dorothy's support. Leonard recorded in his diary shortly after arriving in India that 'I shall have to cable Dorothy tomorrow for \$25,000 to start us on our way' (Elmhirst 2008, p. 41).

process of giving to that thought appropriate form', a process in which 'the body should sway with the inner movement of the thought' (p. 105). Therefore, while work was promoted for reasons of social equality, both in Tagore's educational theory and at Dartington it was also considered to provide access to the quasi-aristocratic status of the artist.

In short, ideas of craft surrounding the Dartington project are inescapably paradoxical. The Estate's work for and with those whose labour and lives were otherwise all but unrewarded and invisible was sustained by vast inherited wealth. The desire to conserve at Dartington practices whose extinction seemed imminent could tip over into nostalgia, but it also looked forward to an alternative modernity. And while that impulse could be radical and socially progressive, the practice of craft could not help but also construct its own hierarchies. These tensions might be seen in Chekhov's work too. While his techniques were certainly *avant-garde*, his preference for directing Shakespeare and adaptations of Dickens, Dostoyevsky and folk tales (hastily recorded in late nineteenth-century Europe as rapid social changes threatened to eradicate them) might be considered somewhat conservative. We might even see the notion, in Chekhov's writings, of a higher and lower self as a translation of socially conservative ideology into the language of spiritual philosophy. But Chekhov's resistance to the imposition of his methodology on others and his insistence upon the principles of improvisation and creative individuality undermine attempts to force his work into a single ideological construct. What is strikingly revealed by considering his work in the context of Dartington and the wider practice of craft is its emphasis upon technique as a habit of action, born of repetitive but evolving practice, and on its conjunction of materiality and imagination.

Chekhov's material imagination is immediately clear from his description, to his students, of the conductor Otto Klemperer. Like Tagore, he was keen to emphasise the musician's gesticulation:

while he does not actually dance, his whole body is doing something, because everything which is art inevitably penetrates our whole body ... with all these visible and invisible movements. As actors we must be more movable than Klemperer ... We must show our whole body, which is like a membrane through which all the finest psychological problems must be *speaking* to the audience. (30 September 1937)

This was not only a theoretical illustration. There was a Music School at Dartington run by Hans Oppenheim, and music was commonly used in Chekhov's studio, where the pianist Patrick Harvey played regularly for classes (Sharp 2002). Therefore music's ability to 'penetrate our whole body' was a daily experience for Chekhov's students, which their study of Steiner's Eurhythmics would have further emphasised, since it is a system of giving physical form to sound. Had Chekhov's Studio not been forced by the threat of war to transfer to Ridgefield, Connecticut at the end of 1938, the connections between Chekhov's approach to acting and the study and practice of music would have been extended in the Music Studio, which was being planned as a collaboration between Chekhov's Studio and Oppenheim's School.⁸

8. There is a reference to these plans in the Studio's archive (MC/S4/14/A).

9. Some might demur that there are exercises in Chekhov's technique which are not movement-based but grounded in the imagination, which is true, but since they invariably require us to imagine movements, these seem to me to be movement-exercises nonetheless.

This planned Music Studio would have looked for common ground between the work of a musician and an actor in the study of movement, in which Chekhov's exercises were invariably based.⁹ 'We must research the world of the play in a special way', he told his students, 'we must penetrate into the atmosphere with our hands, legs, bodies, voices' (27 October 1936) and he insisted that the 'spiritual content' of 'desires ... feelings ... ideas ... must be expressed by the motions or gestures of the human body' (21 January 1938). In order to develop the students' capacity for and experience of movement, the Studio's Steiner-based movement work was augmented by classes from the dancer Lisa Ullmann. Ullmann had come to Dartington with the choreographers Kurt Jooss and Sigurd Leeder from the Folkwang Dance Theatre Studio in Essen to work with the Ballets Jooss and then to teach at the Jooss–Leeder School of Dance. Jooss had been a student of Laban and they and their numerous students aimed to develop systems of choreography less formal and visually oriented than classical ballet, and founded instead upon the principle that the raw material of dance is the natural movement of the body.

The writer A.V. Coton paraphrased Jooss to create this summary of his project:

The medium of dance is the living human body with the power to convey ideas inherent in its movement ... the intention is to give an image of the various forces of life in their ever-changing interplay; that is, a manifestation of Nature ... The process of reflecting these forces through the body consists in first experiencing and studying them within ourselves in body, mind and soul, then in externalising by corresponding movements, all that is happening within us. (Coton 1946, p. 29)

This overview both reveals deep correspondences between Chekhov's technique and Jooss's and points towards a crucial distinction between them, which was clarified by Chekhov himself:

Dancers ... are able to study movements, which they can repeat, each time very skilfully and elaborately. We, as actors, have not the same possibility. We must create each time a new movement ... Training is as necessary for us as it is for dancers. We have our own kind of movement training. We must bind together our feeling with our body. We must train ourselves to ask our body, by taking new positions, which feeling is arising in us. (18 November 1936)

The distinction, therefore, between the movement-training of Chekhov's actors and Jooss's dancers was that whereas Jooss's students used movement to give the 'forces' in their bodies an external form in performance, Chekhov asked his students to use movement as a means of exploration which would be invisibly or intangibly present in their performances.

Chekhov described this process:

The invisible body must lead, entice and coax your visible body – not the opposite. Our visible body often wishes to serve us too quickly, and this is wrong. When the visible body takes the lead everything becomes wrong, because it has taken its task from the intellect. The invisible body must be the

leader, and you must follow it with great care . . . Our physical body needs time to adjust to the invisible one, so don't force it. Your invisible body will coax the visible one if you will give it time. (20 October 1937)

So where the dancer's material is the physical body and its refined and repeatable movements, the actor's material, for Chekhov, is the invisible body. The exercises of Chekhov's technique – the craft skills to which he repeatedly urged his actors to turn – use the physical body as a vehicle for training the invisible body, for finding and developing concrete forms for spiritual content.

10. Undated Minutes
(MC/S4/14/A).

11. Others who came to Dartington from the Cornish School included the puppeteer Richard Odlin, the dancer Louise Soelberg and Deirdre Hurst du Prey, who had been a student at the Cornish.

In order that his students would, as he put it, 'develop a feeling for "form"', Chekhov asked that they also have classes in drawing.¹⁰ These classes were provided by the American artist Mark Tobey. Tobey had come to Dartington to teach at its recently established School of Dance-Mime in 1931 from the Cornish School in Seattle as part of an arrangement made in 1929 by Dorothy Elmhirst with its founder, Nellie Cornish (Nicholas 2007, p. 58).¹¹ Their connection was made through Maurice Browne, an actor, director and impresario who had entered into partnership with the Elmhirsts to stage R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*, and whose wife, the actor and director Ellen Van Volkenburg, taught at the Cornish. Browne and Van Volkenburg had established the Chicago Little Theater in 1912, where they had sought to create drama which would be 'a "dance" with words . . . a rhythmic fusion of movement, dancing-place . . . light and speech' (Browne 1955, p. 159).

This implied use of dance as a foundational discipline for other artistic practices was echoed by Tobey's teaching of drawing and painting, in which movement played a significant role. Huge pieces of paper were pinned up in the studio and the students were taught, as Paul Rogers recalled, 'to experience the whole being making marks with chalk to music' (Sharp 2002). Chekhov reminded his students of this:

Remember when Mark Tobey tried to get you to dance before the paper, what was he aiming at? To develop the whole body for painting, and for us as actors, it is not enough to develop one part of the body only. The whole body must be made receptive for all these things. We must produce with our bodies and our spirits; and we are able to understand our spirits if our bodies are responsive. (14 December 1937)

The connection between body and spirit was as essential to Tobey's painting as it was to this teaching. While at Dartington, he developed a technique he called 'white writing' in which, he said, 'my way of working was a performance in that my pictures should be accomplished in one go or not at all' (Tobey 1962, p. 11) in movements like the 'dance before the paper' that Chekhov described.

This technique emerged from Tobey's desire not merely to 'look at' a painting, but to 'experience it', and thereby to search not 'for fine draughtsmanship, nor fine colour . . . but directness of spirit' (Tobey 1962, p. 19). Tobey was influenced in this attitude by the Chinese painter Teng Kwei, with whom he had studied techniques of calligraphy and wash, and discovered 'that a tree is no longer solid, but a rhythm, a growing line' (Tobey 1962, p. 10). That understanding echoed both Jooss's concept of dance as 'an image of the

various forces of life' and Chekhov's exercise of finding the gestures within natural forms:

We have spoken about psychological gesture as something which is organic, bound together with the human body and human psychology, but is to be found everywhere, not only in the human body . . . In everything, and everywhere an artist can find or create psychological gestures which are not in immediate connection to the human body. (7 February 1938)

The same exercise can be found in *On the Technique of Acting*, illustrated by the example of two trees:

a cypress streams upward (Gesture), and has a quiet, positive concentrated character (Quality); whereas, the old many-branched oak, rising upward and sideways (Gesture), will speak to us of a violent, uncontrolled, broad character (Quality). (Chekhov 1991, p. 39)

While at Dartington, Tobey developed a close friendship with the potter Bernard Leach, who also lived and worked on the estate, and the two men travelled together to the Far East, on a trip funded by the Elmhursts (Tobey 1962, p. 10). Leach also took drawing classes with Tobey and must have related Tobey's movement-based approach to the 'series of rhythmic movements' by which, he said, clay 'is impressed and expressed, urged and pulled and coaxed' by the potter (Leach 1945, pp. 21–22). These 'rhythmic movements' are also redolent of Chekhov's technique, and particularly recall his exercises in the quality of movement he called 'moulding' (Chekhov 2002, pp. 8–10), in which Chekhov asked his students to imagine that 'a real form is left in space' (28 September 1937). Once again, this description was not only figurative, but grounded in experience. At Dartington, Chekhov's students were taught to mould clay by the sculptor Willi Soukop, who had been taught, in turn, by Leach (Soukop 1991, p. 3).

Soukop, like Leach, was a craftsman-artist who began his career as an apprentice-engraver. He maintained, throughout his life, a 'preference for carving rather than modelling', because, he said, 'the material I use plays an important part' (Soukop 1991, p. 5). Soukop's desire to interact closely with his material also reflects revealingly back on the work of the Chekhov Studio and its exploration of the material of the performer's body and its means of expression. Chekhov aimed to give his students to 'get a new feeling for your body . . . that I, as an actor, an artist, am sitting in my body and from there, from inside myself, I am able to move my body, am able to use my body' (28 September 1937). By bringing his students to this awareness of their body as an artistic material, Chekhov also wanted to develop their awareness of 'what it means to live in a world of *form* – psychological or physical form. Everything must have a form for us – inner or outer actions both must have form' (22 October 1937). Chekhov's techniques were therefore intended to be used in two directions: both to perceive form and to create it.

This undertaking – to reveal the underlying forms of nature and of experience and to make them manifest in new, artistic forms – united the work of all of the artists at Dartington. It connected them to the wider context of the Constructive movement of the early 1930s in the visual and

plastic arts. This movement was remembered by the sculptor Barbara Hepworth (with her then-husband, the painter Ben Nicholson, one of its leading figures) as a moment of fleeting invigoration:

Suddenly England felt alive and rich – the centre of an international movement in architecture and art. We all seemed to be carried on the crest of this robust and inspiring wave of creative energy. We were not at that time prepared to admit that it was a movement in flight. (Hepworth 1985, p. 37)

This ‘wave’ generated a series of exhibitions through the 1930s, such as ‘Abstract and Concrete’, held in Oxford in February 1936, which featured paintings by Nicholson and Piet Mondrian and sculptures by Hepworth. In their abstract-yet-concrete works, these artists abandoned realism, as Nicholson put it, ‘in the search for reality’ (Martin *et al.* 1971, p. 75). This was, for Mondrian, an ‘evolution’ of figurative into non-figurative art, ‘from the individual towards the universal, of the subjective towards the objective; towards the essence of things and of ourselves’ (Martin *et al.* 1971, p. 43).

Mondrian’s evocation of the artist’s search for ‘the essence of things and of ourselves’ could equally apply to Chekhov’s description of the technique of Psychological Gesture, which he told his students at Dartington was

something which underlies everything – it remains our fundamental form. We find it in terms of time, space, quality and activity. What we find through the means of the psychological gesture we carry right into the play. The psychological gesture is not naturalistic, and it is not abstract. It is the thing underlying the whole psychological action and the action of the play. (6 May 1937)

This overlap between Chekhov’s technique and the constructive movement was no coincidence. The term ‘constructive’ was brought to England by Naum Gabo, the Russian-Jewish émigré sculptor and writer. Gabo fled Nazi rule in Germany and joined the Abstraction-Creation Group (whose members included Mondrian) in Paris in 1932, before travelling to England in 1935. Before leaving Russia, Gabo had written, with his brother Anton Pevsner, the ‘Realistic Manifesto’, first published as a poster for an exhibition in Moscow in 1920. Confusingly, their manifesto did not intend ‘realism’ in the conventional sense of representational art, but its opposite: an escape from what they saw as art’s dependence upon ‘impression’ and ‘external appearance’, which had caused it to wander ‘helplessly back and forth from Naturalism to Symbolism, from Romanticism to Mysticism’ (Danchev 2011, p. 190). Pevsner and Gabo’s proposed solution was ‘constructive technique’, a term they borrowed from Gabo’s then-collaborator, the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky (Danchev 2011, p. 193).

Kandinsky, like Chekhov, had encountered Theosophy in the early part of the century and had subsequently written a book titled *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911), which set out to define ‘the course of constructive effort in painting’ and defined the artist as ‘the hand which plays ... to cause vibrations in the soul’ (Kandinsky 1977, pp. 56, 25). This idea was echoed by Gabo and Pevsner’s manifesto:

The realization of our perceptions of the world in the forms of space and time is the only aim of our pictorial and plastic art . . . The plumb-line in our hands, eyes as precise as a ruler, in a spirit as taut as a compass . . . we construct our work as the universe constructs its own, as the engineer constructs his bridges, as the mathematician his formula of the orbits . . . in creating things take away from them the labels of their owners . . . leaving only the reality of the constant rhythm of the forces in them. (Danchev 2011, p. 192)

However, Gabo and Pevsner were not simply reiterating Kandinsky here. They would probably have agreed with him that 'the spirit, like the body, can be strengthened and developed by frequent exercise' (Kandinsky 1977, p. 36), but their vision of the body metamorphosing into a gradually more impersonal tool for the expression of 'the reality of the constant rhythm of . . . forces' departed significantly from Kandinsky. Where Kandinsky saw artistic composition as a process of 'long maturing', of which, in the finished art work, 'nothing appears, only the feeling' (Kandinsky 1977, p. 57), Gabo and Pevsner aimed to manifest 'the reality of the constant rhythm of forces' in objective forms.

Writing in *Circle: The International Survey of Constructive Art* (1937), Gabo argued that there is no need to look in the 'external world of nature', but only to use 'the language of . . . absolute forms' (Martin *et al.* 1971, p. 10) and this attitude was taken up by Mondrian, who argued that since the forms of non-figurative art are objective, it was also necessary to eliminate evidence of 'the artist's hand'. This 'preference for a more or less mechanical execution or . . . the employment of materials produced by industry' (Martin *et al.* 1971, p. 54) identified the Constructive movement with the ideals of Russian Constructivism, as asserted by Aleksandr Rodchenko in his 1921 essay 'The Line':

The brush which was so essential in the kind of painting that conveyed an illusion of the subject with its subtleties, has become an inadequate and inexact tool and has given way to new instruments that provide a convenient, simple, and more appropriate way of working the surface. It is being replaced by the press, the roller, the drafting pen, the ruler and the compass. (Martin *et al.* 1971, p. 163)

This attitude is, of course, a long way from Chekhov's ideal, and very close to Meyerhold's biomechanics, designed to enable the compositional calculation of a production through movement which was always rhythmically controlled, deliberate and self-consciously absorbed into an objective pattern.

But it would be inaccurate to assert that such objective patterns were absent from Chekhov's practice. Directing his students in *The Golden Steed*,¹² he focused, initially, on the play's dynamics:

Antin is coming from the world of passion and trying to rise above it, while all the powers are trying to push him back to their level . . . The mission of the evil group is to push Antin down, pushing him slowly but surely until he is defeated. That is the dynamic of the scene. (8 November 1936)

Use your words and your movements only to express the dynamic at this stage. Speak not as the image but only as the dynamic. (21 November 1936)

12. A Latvian fairy-tale, adapted as a play by Jan Rainis, which was used throughout the first year's training at the Chekhov Theatre Studio.

This stage of rehearsal, in which the actor's individuality is suspended and their task is only to express the objective, compositional forms of the play, was, for Chekhov, only a phase in the evolution of a performance. It enabled the play to begin to take the dynamic form of a sculptural idea. The sculptor Barbara Hepworth described a similar process in her memory of the Yorkshire landscape of her childhood:

Moving through and over the West Riding landscape with my father in his car, the hills were sculptures; the roads defined the form. Above all, there was the sensation of moving physically over the contours . . . feeling, touching, seeing through mind and hand and eye. This sensation has never left me. I, the sculptor, *am* the landscape. I am the form and I am the hollow, the thrust and the contour. (Hepworth 1985, p. 9)

For Hepworth, the constructive ideal of sculpture was not the objective recreation of such forms, but the working-out of these sculptural ideas in a dialogue with her material. For this dialogue to be genuine, form could not be imposed with mechanical precision, but had to be worked out gradually and responsively.

This process required, for Hepworth, 'a complete sensibility to material – an understanding of its inherent quality and character', which, she wrote, could not be achieved without the body's 'sensitivity to the unfolding of the idea in substance' through the artist's 'unconscious intuition' (Martin *et al.* 1971, p. 115). For this reason, Hepworth explained that, like Willi Soukop, she

always preferred direct carving to modelling because I like the resistance of the hard material . . . all the beauties of several hundreds of different stones and woods, and the idea must be in harmony with each one carved: that harmony comes with the discovery of the most direct way of carving each material according to its nature. (Hepworth 1985, p. 27)

Hepworth's depiction of the creative process as an unfolding dialogue, mediated by the artist's embodied experience, between an idea and a particular material is similar to the polarity in Chekhov's artistic technique of the individual and the ensemble. This is found, for instance, in the relationship between those aspects of a performance (such as atmosphere and composition) which Chekhov always considered to be objective, and those in which he insisted that the individual's subjectivity be given freedom. The gestures of a scene's dynamic were, for instance, 'dictated by the composition', but they were also only its scaffolding, and Chekhov criticised his students when they had, in his words, 'not added anything from yourselves to the given scaffolding' (27 September 1937).

The metaphor of scaffolding (which traces a building's fundamental form but disappears once the work is complete) aligns Chekhov's artistic process with Kandinsky's ideal of a painting's 'long maturing' rather than Gabo and Pevsner's preference for the generation of 'objective forms':

When we have released the dynamic of the whole scene in the arrow, we can speak our lines and move in the right way. When we have found the *form of the play*, we can give it any form we like – that is the right of the actor. (21 November 1936)

Chekhov continued this description of his Studio's creative process by contrasting it to the conventional approach, where actors 'remain with the outside form and speak the words and move in the first rehearsal as if we are ready to act' and therefore 'remain always on the surface, on the outside edge' (21 November 1936). For Chekhov this meant that 'at present we have a theatre which exists only for repeating the author's words', a theatre which was incapable either of penetrating deeply into the ideas of its plays or of developing new forms for the expression of those ideas.

In this analysis, Chekhov reflected a widespread concern in the 1930s that the artistic processes of finding and giving form were being severed from each other by mechanisation and persistently dualistic habits of mind. The sculptor Eric Gill announced in his 1934 book *Art and a Changing Civilisation* 'a division never before attempted':

A division not of rich from poor, not of free from unfree, not of good from bad, but unique marvel! a division of artist from workman. (Gill 1934, p. viii)

Gill saw the evidence of this division in his culture's tendency to 'forget the skill of the workman', to conceive of art as 'the act of the creative mind', and its consequent belief that 'physical skill, the will and ability to use tools and the very material itself are inessential to the thing called art' (Gill 1934, p. 4). For Gill, the consequence of this cultural shift was clear: in the future as he saw it, 'the only fully responsible workman would be the designer and all the rest of the workers would, as regards their work, be no more than obedient tools, ants rather than men' (Gill 1934, p. 95). Gill's ant-like workmen reflect Chekhov's vision of the 'present, immovable actor', whose work was limited to 'the repetition of certain habits' because he lacked the technique which would enable him to develop artistry (21 November 1936).

In the 76 years since Chekhov made that observation, the situation has not improved. Gill's vision of the separation of artist from workman is now seen, in the theatre, in the ubiquitous 'creative team', a term which refers to those workers on a production whose jobs are completed at the opening night. This phenomenon is an extension of the dualistic attitude that the creation of a production is separable from its performance, just as design is seen as separable from manufacture. But 'creative' is a misnomer, since, for the most part, this 'team' does not create, it conceives. Productions are now substantially conceived by directors and designers separately from the processes of their creation in rehearsal rooms and workshops.

This situation neither was nor is inevitable. In the mid-twentieth century, artists and theorists, most notably Herbert Read, were trying to find more productive ways of adapting the practices of art and those of an increasingly industrialised society to each other. In his 1934 book *Art and Industry*, Read aligned himself with the Bauhaus movement in identifying changes in the pattern of labour as a much more significant challenge to the development of art than the introduction of machines. He argued that machines are only tools, and that it is therefore *the way in which they are used* which should concern us:

The real distinction is between one man using a tool with his hands and producing an object which shows at every stage the direction of his will and the impression of his personality; and a machine which is producing, without the

intervention of a particular man, objects of a uniformity and precision which show no individual variation and personal charm. (Read 1934, p. 12)

Read's analysis therefore places emphasis on the shift from the 'subdivision of labour' in craft workshops (which gave each maker a degree of autonomy and therefore responsibility for a part of the production process) and the 'one-man control from start to finish' which characterised machine production (Read 1934, p. 54). Likewise, by handing over both autonomy and responsibility to 'the creative team', the contemporary theatre has diminished the contribution of actors and inhibited their capacity for artistry. It has also isolated its directors and designers by forcing them to conceive their productions separately from the materials and processes of creation. The result of depending upon what is already known before the process of creation begins is, inevitably, dependence upon a currency of cliché, or what Chekhov called 'the repetition of ... habits'.

But neither Read nor Chekhov was defeatist in the face of these challenges. Read's book proposed a new form of co-operation between the artist and industrial processes: 'The artist must design in the actual materials of the factory, and in the full stream of the process of production ... the factory must adapt itself to the artist, not the artist to the factory' (Read 1934, p. 53). Likewise, Chekhov proposed, for the theatre, a turn to the craft of acting, so that movement and gesture would become its fundamental language:

This new kind of conversation, which must be developed between actors, playwrights, costume designers, directors, etc., will be much more artistic. It is much better not to talk about the character, but to find the line and gesture of the character. By these gestures, the feeling is much more easily awakened than by describing it. (11 December 1936)

Chekhov's 'new kind of conversation' therefore aimed to place practice at the centre of the creative process, and the actor at the centre of the theatre, by identifying performance as a material for the exploration and development of artistic or spiritual ideas rather than merely a language into which conceptual decisions are translated for communication to an audience.

Seen in this light, Chekhov's technique becomes a means by which we may render tangible those moments which are, in performance, necessarily intangible. It makes a performance's intangible or spiritual content susceptible to the interventions of craft. By using Chekhov's technique, therefore, an actor is encouraged to become an artist, skilled in the manipulation of the living fabric of a performance. But it is equally clear that this technique is inhibited if it is considered only as a branch of the discipline known as 'actor training'. It is also a means by which any artist may borrow the skills of an actor to identify and develop – through their body and in concrete and practical terms – the spiritual content of their work. It provides a language for a 'new kind of conversation'.

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