

## **Introduction. How did I learn this technique and what did I gain from it?**

Jakub Margosiak

### **How did I learn the Michael Chekhov technique?**

I came across the Chekhov technique for the first time (apart from my short-lasting fascination with the first chapter of the book "To the actor", which I had read during my first year of acting studies), in 2018, when, after completing my master's studies at the Acting Department of the PWST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow and after a two-year of studying at the Dance Theatre Department of the PWST in Bytom, I went to the USA for a 5-week course at the Michael Chekhov School in Hudson (New York). During that course, I had classes among others with: Fern Sloan and Ted Pugh - teachers with over 40 years of experience in working with this technique and members of MICHA-Michael Chekhov Association - an organization committed to cultivating Chekhov's legacy and connecting practitioners of Michael Chekhov technique.

The first and strongest impressions that I had when we started classes:

- I don't have to use my personal experiences and memories to be an actor!**
- I can finally trust my imagination and develop the role based on it!**
- someone invented viable and effective tools to work with the body, imagination, and psyche!**
- after all, I feel pleasure and creativity while performing!**

When I discovered Michael Chekhov technique, I felt as if I finally found something I had been looking for a long time. Already at the end of my studies in Krakow, I knew that I was missing something in acting. I wanted to give up this profession and change my major from acting to dancing - hence my decision to study at the Dance Theatre Department in Bytom. All of a sudden, being very surprised myself, I found in Michael Chekhov technique the missing puzzle piece that bridged the gap between acting and dancing.

After the first, 5-week course, I wanted more - I went to the US to participate in another, advanced, 3-week course. Then I took part in the Michael Chekhov International Summer Academy in Croatia, but my fascination with this technique and at the same time hunger for it was growing. Under the influence of these experiences with Michael Chekhov technique, I decided to start doctoral studies at the Film School in Lodz, to be focused even more on researching it and, ultimately, share my knowledge with the theatre community in Poland.

Knowing that my American teachers have over 40 years experience of working with this technique I felt an urgent need to go and study with them immediately. Fern Sloan and Ted Pugh are among the few teachers certified by direct students of Michael Chekhov. They are the oldest generation of Chekhov teachers who carry thorough and deeply studied knowledge. This motivation helped me in attaining a Fulbright award for 9-month research on this technique in the USA in 2021. During my scholarship, I continued to work under the custody of Fern Sloan and Ted Pugh, but I also had the opportunity to learn from Joanna Merlin (Michael Chekhov's last living direct student), Jessica Cerullo (president of MICHA - Michael Chekhov Association and thesis advisor of this dissertation), Bethany

Caputo (who runs a Chekhov technique studio in New York City) and Dawn Arnold (founder of Chekhov Studio Chicago). In this work, I am intending to describe the effects of my research and my discoveries.

### **What have I gained thanks to Michael Chekhov technique?**

#### **- I don't have to use my personal experiences and memories to be an actor!**

Once I tried to explain to my family what the Michael Chekhov technique, which I have been so stubbornly working on for several years, is, and what is so special about it that I had to fly all the way to the United States to learn it. I replied, simplifying, that during my 5-year studies in the acting school, I had learned how to recall memories, for example, very sad events from my childhood so that later I could use them to break down on the stage. It wasn't the most pleasant method for me, but I was able to execute these tasks, and the fact that I eventually graduated from the university probably proves that I have mastered this skill to some degree. Now I am learning how to achieve exactly the same effect, but in a healthier way for my psyche, that is, with the help of my imagination - the results of this work are more creative and definitely more artistically satisfying.

#### **- I can finally trust my imagination and develop the role based on it!**

Chekhov's technique is based on working with imagination. As an actor, I started ultimately feeling like an artist who has huge creative resources and I am not limited only to the biography and personal experiences but can use images existing in the collective unconsciousness. My imagination turned out to be an unlimited source of fascinating and surprising images and inspirations, which I began to consciously and effectively apply to my work on stage thanks to this technique. My work became much more intuitive, and I started to trust my imagination, and most importantly, I learned how to use it.

#### **- Chekhov created viable and effective tools to work with the body, imagination, and psyche!**

Before I discovered the Michael Chekhov technique, I had been trying to understand my body more by exploring various somatic and acting techniques. At first, because of my struggles with proposed acting approaches, I changed my field of interest to dance. But in dance, I began to lack engaging my inner life more deeply.

I kept searching and exploring other techniques however I could not find any of them as comprehensive and coherent method that combines physical movement with inner processes (psychological, emotional) as in Michael Chekhov Technique. While using Michael Chekhov technique, my entire organism - body, psyche, imagination - is activated and united.

Speaking of the viable tools that this technique gives me, I mean specific psycho-physical activities that I use both in the process of preparing for the role and directly while performing. As actors, we cannot rely on concepts, but we must have things to do. As my teacher, Ted Pugh constantly repeats, "An actor is the one who acts". This technique offers tools that can be applied directly on stage.

"The actor should never worry about his talent, but rather about his lack of technique, his lack of training, and his lack of understanding of the creative process." Michael Chekhov

Thanks to Chekhov technique, I learned to trust my body - to consciously listen and follow the processes happening within. During one class that I had in New York City, I was given a scene to act from an American play that I had never read or even heard of before. I had an out-of-context scene in front of me. I started working on it using the Michael Chekhov technique and after about an hour I presented it in front of the class. The teacher said that she saw the original production of this play and later on several others, but the internal contradictions of this character were portrayed only in this first show and that day by me. She asked me out of curiosity how I was working on that scene. I just registered the images that appeared in me after reading the scene and then using the tools offered by Chekhov I began to follow the sensations they caused in the body. "Start trusting your intuition," she said, "it seems it is guiding you quite well."

**- I stopped being afraid of performing on stage and I finally enjoy the creative work**

Throughout the years of my studies and some time after graduation, it seemed to me that standing on stage must be accompanied merely by a sense of fear and uncertainty. And only after the show, if miraculously I manage to get out of this event alive, will I have a feeling of satisfaction - mainly because I bought my way out of it and didn't compromise myself completely.

While I still certainly experience stress and excitement every time I go on the stage, I also feel like I have viable tools that I can rely on as an actor while performing.

Moreover, this technique gave me, anew, great pleasure in being an actor and an incredible fascination with the creative process. Working on a role is an adventure now - reaching into the unknown and discovering what my imagination can reveal to me. Chekhov in the book "To the actor - on the technique of acting" writes that acting and using this technique should always be a pleasurable art and should never be enforced or depressing.

**- I completely changed my approach to working on a role and a performance.**

This technique is intuitive, not analytical. Chekhov rejects long script analysis, proposing imaginative work instead - imagining the script, working with: the atmosphere, sensations, psychological gesture or other elements. By recalling a memory of working at the Moscow Art Theatre Chekhov gives as an example, that long periods of table rehearsals and a purely intellectual approach always killed the actors' desire and ability to act.

Chekhov suggest to start working on the role and exploring the various elements of the method after reading the script. Surprisingly, in my own experience of using this technique, the character is revealing to me by itself showing its features, inner conflicts, or nuances, for discovering which I would need many hours of table rehearsals to come up with, yet without certainty if I would be able to embody them.

**- I changed my way of thinking about pedagogy in the field of acting.**

The time I spent in the US opened my eyes to the fact that actor training can look in a different way than I had experienced so far. The teachers I met accompanied and supported the individual creative

process in a partnership and often even friendly relationship, which did not diminish their authority or function at all.

My teachers always actively participated in the classes together with the students. They were motivating and supporting each participant, and at the same time giving everyone the time they needed for their growth. And most surprisingly, they did not use negative criticism at all. Constant criticism still present in the actor training in Poland (not to mention violent behaviours) is not, contrary to popular opinions, the only way for an artist's development.

I feel very lucky to have found wonderful teachers, masters of this technique, from whom I could learn for so long. They showed me that a teacher can learn together with a student; be often more fascinated by each student's discovery than the student himself. I also saw with my own eyes that my now almost 90-year-old teachers still go to other classes and actively participate in them, because "there is still so much to discover..." I wish to have such curiosity and openness myself at this age.

The Chekhov technique has become one of the main ways of working in the Living Space Theatre which I founded, becoming an effective way of communication with both actors and dancers (more about the ways of using the technique from the perspective of an actor, dancer or director, I am describing in Chapter Three). When conducting workshops or using the technique while working on performances in Poland, the participants come to me astonished that such a technique exists, is effective, and at the same time so little known or (what's worse) taught incorrectly.

I appreciate very much the fact that I came across the Chekhov technique, which completely changed my way of thinking about acting, and that I found an approach that is close to my heart. My professional life would have been completely different if I hadn't been stubborn and lucky enough to get through to the roots of this technique. At the same time, I am conscious that this isn't necessarily a technique for every type of artist. But for many, it can be as great discovery and help as it was for me. Over the last two decades, this technique has been gaining more and more popularity and spreading around the world (this is largely due to the work done by MICHA - Michael Chekhov Association) and I hope that it will also become more popular in Poland.

"I need your help."

- writes Chekhov in the introduction to "To the actor - on the technique of acting", being aware that careful reading of his book or even its clear understanding is not enough, something more is needed – "co-operation". As long as we are **talking** about this technique, it will not be possible to assimilate it, we have to start **doing** it to capture it - Chekhov asks for such a collaboration with him and his work. In Chapter One, I cover some of the key aspects of the technique, but the essential thing will be to practice the exercises from Chapter Two.