

Eddie Datz
Movement 1
Movement Theory/Research Paper

Using Physicality to Make Better Actors

Acting pioneer Michael Chekhov once said that an actor's technique is only needed when "inspiration fails" to come to them (*Michael Chekhov Technique Playbook*, 118). In an ideal world, every actor would naturally be able to fully control their emotions and connections in every single character they portray, night after night with absolute consistency and precision. However, this is simply not realistic. It is much more likely that actors may get lucky here and there but will mostly fail to achieve the emotional connection they are looking for onstage. While Chekhov's master and fellow acting pioneer Konstantin Stanislavsky believed that strategies such as Emotional Recall and Affective Memory should drive the actor's performance, Chekhov believed Stanislavsky's methods made the actor unhealthy and liable to become repetitive in their performances of different characters (*Michael Chekhov Technique Playbook*, 117). To ensure that the actor remained a healthy and creative individual, Michael Chekhov created his own version of Stanislavsky's "system" that rested on concepts of physicality leading the actor that included Psychological Gestures, Movement Qualities, and Atmospheres.

Chekhov believed that the Psychological Gesture was the "key to the actor's subconscious" (*On the Technique of Acting*, xxx) while simultaneously allowing the actor to work on their craft consciously without over-analyzing (*On the Technique of Acting*, 94). A Psychological Gesture (PG) can be defined as a physical, archetypal gesture or movement with feelings attached. To hone this skill, Chekhov suggested that the actor rehearse a piece; first

doing an appropriate PG without the words, then performing the words with the PG, and finally performing the words without the PG (*On the Technique of Acting*, 68). The actor can also listen to music and be inspired by different musical phrases to make PGs (*On the Technique of Acting*, 87). The actor can then create PGs for people they know in their lives, historical figures, characters from plays, movies, or books, and even random people on the street (*On the Technique of Acting*, 92). When should the PG be put to use? The actor can perform one right before going onstage and then let that energy fuel them, while internally repeating parts or all of the PG in order to keep the momentum going throughout the entire scene and/or play (*Michael Chekhov Technique Playbook*, 84). It is important to remember that even when the character is weak; the PG must be strong to “stir and increase our will power,” and be free of muscle tension. After all, it is the actor doing the PG-not the character (*To the Actor*, 70-71)!

Along with Psychological Gestures, Chekhov said that different Movement Qualities can help evoke emotions more freely and more often in the actor because the “secret lies in arousing the Feelings without forcing them immediately” (*On the Technique of Acting*, 36-37). Four of Chekhov’s main Movement Qualities were Molding, Flowing, Flying, and Radiating. The theory behind these qualities is that if the actor moves with a “quality (caution), the quality awakens a sensation (danger), which coaxes a feeling (fear)” (*On the Technique of Acting*, 50). Working with Molding, the actor plays with the quality of shaping the air around them, leaving an outline of where they move and imagining the air as a “medium which resists” the actor (*To the Actor*, 9). The movements cannot be “vague”, but instead “broad, full, and clearly differentiated from one another.” Working with Flowing, the actor makes every moment slur into each other without a definitive start or finish, with a “wavelike” ebb and flow (*On the*

Technique of Acting, 45). Working with Flying, the actor must imagine that their entire body has the “tendency to lift itself” from the earth with an “element of air” (*On the Technique of Acting*, 46). Working with Radiating, the actor imagines that “invisible rays stream” out of their movements into the environment, releasing from the chest, arms, hands, and whole body at once (*On the Technique of Acting*, 46-47). Chekhov cautions actors not to worry about whether they are really radiating, reassuring that true imagination of the radiation will produce the same effect as if they were actually radiating (*To the Actor*, 12). For all four of these Qualities, the actor should play with different tempos. Then, the actor should do every day business with the separate qualities, and, like the Psychological Gestures, should then change the Quality from fully external to fully internal while doing everyday tasks before finally advancing to theatrical text. Performing with these Qualities internally will help stir the actor’s feelings without forcing them to come out.

While Psychological Gestures and Movement Qualities are used to bring the actor’s internal emotions out, Atmospheres are utilized to bring the outside in to the actor. Chekhov says that different Atmospheres are like different “keys in music” (*On the Technique of Acting*, 27), and that they further assist in stirring and awakening Feelings in us that are the “essence of our art” (*On the Technique of Acting*, 31). One must not confuse Mood/Personal Atmosphere with Overall Atmosphere. Chekhov gives the example of a catastrophe on the street to show this distinction: everyone may have different personal moods/atmospheres such as “afraid”, “indifferent”, “sympathetic”, etc. However, the overarching Atmosphere of the tragedy prevails over everyone, no matter what their personal moods are (*On the Technique of Acting*, 31). Onstage, if the actors are not all in the same Atmosphere, then chaos is bound to ensue

(*On the Technique of Acting*, 35). However, the objective feelings of an Atmosphere can still absolutely seep into the actor's mood even if the Overall Atmosphere and Personal Atmosphere conflict, such as when a gloomy character enters a festive party. The character can't help but feel the effects of the party's Atmosphere despite their starkly different mood (*On the Technique of Acting*, 32). The actor can practice creating Atmospheres by imagining feelings spreading around them, filling the air, and making slight movements in harmony with the Overall Atmosphere. Then, they can advance to more complicated movements, then speak a few words, and finally do a simple action that develops into a short, improvised scene while Radiating their energy back into the Atmosphere. As with all of Chekhov's concepts, actors should look out for different Atmospheres in books, history, and plays in order to increase their skill in creating their personal atmospheres for future characters (*To the Actor*, 56).

Despite his status as an innovator in Acting, Chekhov always maintained that he did not actually create his own method, but instead simply watched and analyzed himself and others during inspired moments and then asked how that inspiration came to the actor (*To the Actor*, xxviii). Through these observations and discoveries, he found many aspects of Physicality that helped the actor reach emotional heights in healthy, unique ways such as Psychological Gestures, Qualities of Movement, and Overall Atmospheres. Chekhov believed it should be the actor's duty and pleasure to share their perspective of the world as they see it with the average layman (*To the Actor*, 3). As artists, we must work to refine our craft and technique in order to serve society to the fullest. By using Chekhov's methods, Actors will be able to serve society better by safely creating unique characters and emotions in ways that would have been previously impossible.

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Bibliography

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