Exploring the Impact of Michael Chekhov's Acting Methods on Character Development in The Proposal

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study explores the application of Michael Chekhov's acting techniques in developing the actor's performance skills through the rehearsal process of the character "Lomov" from Anton Chekhov's *The Proposal*. As a farce requiring emotional complexity and intricate timing, the play challenged the actor to access deep inner states. Through systematic experimentation, three specific exercises were identified as most effective: Staccato-Legato, Qualities of Movement, and Psychological Gesture. These techniques appeared to facilitate a more profound connection to the character's inner world, enabling fuller expression of emotions and dramatic energy. The research process revealed that Michael Chekhov's techniques can serve as valuable tools for character development, particularly in creating and maintaining complex, emotionally nuanced characters.

Keywords: Belief in character, Concentration, Autoethnography, Actor training

Introduction

An actor must utilize physical, emotional, and imaginative skills to create believable characters, becoming the character rather than merely pretending to be one. Constantin Stanislavski emphasized that this process merges the actor's life experiences with the playwright's character, creating a new entity—the role (Benedetti, 2009).

As an actor, the researcher faced two major challenges: "belief in the character" and maintaining "concentration" during performance. At times, the performer found themselves disconnected from fictional circumstances, unable to stay fully immersed in the character. This lack of presence affected storytelling quality, revealing that relying solely on personal experience might be insufficient for true character embodiment.

Michael Chekhov believed that acting based only on personal experience was inadequate. Actors must transform experiences into performances carrying deep, universal meaning that resonates powerfully with audiences. To achieve this, actors must develop concentration and utilize techniques that unlock greater internal creative force (Petit, 2009).

This study explores how Michael Chekhov's acting theory might enhance performance, specifically by applying these principles to Lomov in *The Proposal*. The research examines whether Chekhov's techniques could increase character belief, identify effective rehearsal exercises, and deepen role understanding.

Methodology and Exercise Selection Process

Research Approach

This study employed autoethnographic methodology, involving systematic self-observation and reflective documentation throughout a three-month rehearsal process. Key constructs were defined as:

- **"Belief in character"**: The subjective sense of connection to and embodiment of the character's emotional and psychological state
- **"Concentration"**: The perceived ability to maintain focus on character circumstances and objectives without distraction

- **"Expressiveness"**: The self-assessed clarity and authenticity of emotional and physical communication onstage

Selection Criteria

The researcher experimented with various Michael Chekhov exercises during initial rehearsals, focusing on techniques that could address the two main challenges: belief in character and concentration. Selection criteria included:

1. Ability to stimulate physical energy, intention, and emotional readiness
2. Applicability in various rehearsal contexts and pre-performance preparation
3. Suitability for Lomov's characteristics: emotional fragility, anxiety, mood swings, and exaggerated behavior
4. Effectiveness in handling rapidly changing rhythms and maintaining expressive clarity

Experimental Process

Exercises were tested in both private settings (solo rehearsals, mirror work, video recordings) and group rehearsals. Evaluation used subjective criteria including perceived concentration maintenance, degree of character embodiment, and physical energy readiness.

After experimentation, three exercises proved most beneficial: **Staccato-Legato**, **Qualities of Movement**, and **Psychological Gesture**. These became the core structure of the rehearsal process.

Selected Exercises

Staccato-Legato (Rhythmic Contrasts)

Derived from musical rhythm and adapted by Chekhov for actor training, this exercise involves shifting between:

- **Staccato**: Sharp, detached movements expressing abruptness, urgency, or fragmentation
- **Legato**: Smooth, connected movements expressing flow, gentleness, or continuity

This technique became essential warm-up training, providing precise emotional and physical rhythm control crucial for Lomov's rapid mood swings. Practicing alternating rhythms helped control personal energy appropriately for scene situations, especially when emotions must change rapidly.

Qualities of Movement

This exercise uses four elemental forces to access different character energies:

- **Earth**: Heavy, grounded, slow (power, stubbornness)
- **Water**: Flowing, relaxed (sensitivity, vulnerability)
- **Wind**: Light, quick (instability, scattered thoughts)
- **Fire**: Fast, intense (explosive energy, urgency)

After experimentation, "flickering fire" was identified as most matching Lomov's state, expressing uncertainty, anxiety, and rapidly changing physical alertness. This quality became the character's main foundation during rehearsal and pre-performance preparation.

Psychological Gesture

This technique creates internal physical movements capturing the character's driving force in each scene. The researcher selected intentional verbs (push, pull, yield) to create prototype gestures reflecting specific driving forces. These gestures help quickly access character goals and enable immediate return to character when feeling disconnected.

Applied to each of Lomov's scenes—such as "I hold my ground" in assertion scenes and "I push" in argument scenes—this technique creates driving force for powerful physical expression matching emotional states.

Physical Preparation Discovery

During early rehearsals, the researcher discovered significant challenges in making the body cope with Lomov's emotional states—particularly violent behavior, rapid changes, and high energy demands. Physical limitations included lack of movement confidence, inability to reach the character's bodily requirements, insufficient power expression, and early fatigue.

To address these limitations, the director recommended 30-minute daily running before rehearsals to adjust breathing systems and train the body for continuous exertion matching performance duration. Running became a mechanism for generating consistent energy throughout stage time.

Additionally, movement exploration combined with Qualities of Movement exercise revealed that the body could move and expand beyond expectations, leading to freer, more unlimited movement possibilities.

Three-Month Rehearsal Process

The rehearsal process was divided into three phases:

Phase 1: Physical Preparation

Building stamina through cardio training to sustain Lomov's intense energy for 30 consecutive minutes, addressing exhaustion and breathing issues.

Phase 2: Technique Application

Qualities of Movement: Focused on finding character's inner energy through movement reflecting driving forces. "Flickering fire" quality was identified as most matching Lomov's unstable, anxious state.

Psychological Gesture: Applied to each scene with specific intentional verbs creating prototype gestures for the character's driving forces.

Staccato-Legato: Used before every rehearsal and performance to prepare inner energy, especially awareness of body and emotional rhythm.

Phase 3: Performance Integration

All exercises were systematically integrated for use in real performance situations, requiring flexible adjustments for theater environment, audience energy, and collaboration with other actors.

Performance and Results

The production was originally scheduled for March 28-30, 2025, but an earthquake forced venue closure. Fortunately, one performance occurred on March 31, 2025, at the Sodsai Pantoomkomol Centre for Dramatic Arts.

Prior to performance, the researcher used all three exercises in sequence:

1. Staccato-Legato to awaken energy and physical awareness
2. Psychological Gesture to summon Lomov's inner state
3. Meditation for mental stability before going onstage

The researcher successfully maintained character state throughout the entire performance, experiencing continuous embodiment rather than merely "completing the role." The techniques enabled natural, organic character inhabitation from beginning to end.

Conclusions and Key Findings

Research Confirmations

- **Chekhov's techniques significantly help** when actors need to portray characters distant from themselves and lacking believability
- **The three selected exercises created a comprehensive system** covering physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions
- **Physical preparation proved crucial** - if the body isn't ready, training cannot begin effectively

- **Exercises are adaptable** - they can be modified and combined with other acting approaches

Specific Benefits Observed

- **Staccato-Legato**: Provided precise control over emotional rhythms and essential warm-up preparation
- **Qualities of Movement**: Enabled instant access to different character personality aspects
- **Psychological Gesture**: Offered quick return to character's internal driving forces in all situations

Limitations and Future Directions

This study's findings are based on one actor's subjective experience and cannot be generalized. Future research might benefit from:

- Multiple-case studies involving different actors and characters
- Independent performance quality assessment by trained observers
- Comparative studies examining different acting methodologies
- Longer-term follow-up studies assessing sustained technique integration

Recommendations for Actors

- Allocate sufficient time for exercises with observers or guides for effectiveness
- Prioritize physical readiness as foundation for all training
- Experiment with exercises to find personally suitable approaches
- Adapt techniques for use with other acting methods

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