AN ACTOR PREPARES

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CHAPTER THREE

Action

I

WHAT a day! It was our first lesson with the Director.

We gathered in the school, a small but perfectly equipped theatre. He came in, looked us all over carefully, and said: "Maria, please go up onto the stage."

The poor girl was terrified. She reminded me of a frightened puppy, the way she ran off to hide herself. At last we caught her and led her to the Director, who was laughing like a child. She covered her face with her hands, and repeated all her favourite exclamations: "Oh dear, I cannot do it! Oh dear, I am afraid!"

"Calm yourself," said he, looking her straight in the eye, "and let us do a little play. This is the plot." He was paying no attention to the young woman's agitation. "The curtain goes up, and you are sitting on the stage. You are alone. You sit and sit and sit. . . . At last the curtain comes down again. That is the whole play. Nothing simpler could be imagined, could it?"

Maria did not answer, so he took her by the arm and without a word led her onto the stage, while all the rest of us laughed.

The Director turned and said quietly: "My friends, you are in a schoolroom. And Maria is going through a most important moment in her artistic life. Try to learn when to laugh, and at what."

He took her out to the middle of the stage. We sat silent and waited for the curtain to rise. It went up slowly. She sat in the middle, near the front, her hands still covering her face. The solemn atmosphere and the long silence made themselves felt. She realized that something must be done.

First she removed one hand from her face, then the other, at the same time dropping her head so low that we could see nothing but the nape of her neck. Another pause. It was painful, but the Director waited in determined silence. Aware of the increasing tension, Maria looked out into the audience, but turned away instantly. Not knowing where to look, or what to do, she began to change, to sit first one way and then another, to take awkward positions, throw herself back and then straighten up, to bend over, pull hard at her very short skirt, look fixedly at something on the floor.

For a long time the Director was relentless, but at last he gave the sign for the curtain. I rushed up to him, because I wanted him to try me on the same exercise.

I was put in the middle of the stage. This was not a real performance; nevertheless I was full of self-contradictory impulses. Being on the stage, I was on exhibition, and yet an inner feeling demanded solitude. Part of me sought to entertain the onlookers, so that they would not become bored; another part told me to pay no attention to them. My legs, arms, head, and torso, although they did what I directed, added something superfluous of their own. You move your arm or leg quite simply, and suddenly you are all twisted, and look as though you were posing for a picture.

Strange! I had been on the stage only once, yet it was infinitely easier for me to sit on the stage affectedly than simply. I could not think what I ought to do. Afterward the others told me I looked in turn stupid, funny, embarrassed, guilty, apologetic. The Director merely waited. Then he tried the same exercise on the others.

"Now," said he, "let us go further. Later we shall return to these exercises, and learn how to sit on the stage."

"Isn't that what we have been doing?" we asked.

"Oh, no," he replied. "You were not simply sitting."

"What ought we to have done?"

Instead of giving his answer in words he rose quickly, walked up to the stage in a business-like way, and sat down

heavily in an arm-chair to rest, as if he were at home. He neither did nor tried to do anything, yet his simple sitting posture was striking. We watched him, and wanted to know what was going on inside of him. He smiled. So did we. He looked thoughtful, and we were eager to know what was passing through his mind. He looked at something, and we felt we must see what it was that had attracted his attention.

In ordinary life one would not be specially interested in his manner of taking a seat, or remaining in it. But for some reason, when he is on the stage, one watches him closely, and perhaps has an actual pleasure in seeing him merely sit.

This did not happen when the others sat on the stage. We neither wanted to look at them nor to know what was going on inside them. Their helplessness and desire to please were ridiculous. Yet although the Director paid not the slightest attention to us, we were strongly drawn to him.

What is the secret? He told us himself.

Whatever happens on the stage must be for a *purpose*. Even keeping your seat must be for a purpose, a specific purpose, not merely the general purpose of being in sight of the audience. One must earn one's right to be sitting there. And it is not easy.

"Now let us repeat the experiment," he said, without leaving the stage. "Maria, come up here to me. I am going to act with you."

"You!" cried Maria, and she ran up onto the stage.

Again she was placed in the arm-chair, in the middle of the stage, and again she began to wait nervously, to move consciously, to pull her skirts.

The Director stood near her, and seemed to be looking for something very carefully in his notebook.

Meantime, gradually, Maria became more quiet, more concentrated, and finally was motionless, with her eyes fixed on him. She was afraid she might disturb him, and she merely waited for further orders. Her pose was life-like, natural. She almost seemed to be beautiful. The stage brought out her good

features. Some time passed in just that way. Then the curtain fell.

"How do you feel?" the Director asked, as they returned to their places in the auditorium.

"I? Why? Did we act?"

"Of course."

"Oh! But I thought. . . . I was just sitting and waiting until you found your place in the book, and would tell me what to do. Why, I didn't act anything."

"That was the best part of it," said he. "You sat and waited, and did not act anything."

Then he turned to the rest of us. "Which struck you as more interesting?" he asked. "To sit on the stage and show off your small feet, as Sonya did, or your whole figure, like Grisha, or to sit for a specific purpose, even so simple a one as waiting for something to happen? It may not be of intrinsic interest in itself, but it is life, whereas showing yourself off takes you out of the realm of living art.

"On the stage, you must always be enacting something; action, motion, is the basis of the art followed by the actor."

"But," Grisha broke in, "you have just said that acting is necessary, and that showing off your feet or your figure, as I did, is not action. Why is it action to sit in a chair, as you did, without moving a finger? To me it looked like complete lack of action."

I interrupted boldly: "I do not know whether it was action or inaction, but all of us are agreed that his so-called lack of action was of far more interest than your action."

"You see," the Director said calmly, addressing Grisha, "the external immobility of a person sitting on the stage does not imply passiveness. You may sit without a motion and at the same time be in full action. Nor is that all. Frequently physical immobility is the direct result of inner intensity, and it is these inner activities that are far more important artistically. The essence of art is not in its external forms but in its spiritual

content. So I will change the formula I gave you a moment ago, and put it like this:

"On the stage it is necessary to act, either outwardly or inwardly."

2

"Let us give a new play," said the Director to Maria, as he came into the classroom today.

"Here is the gist of it: your mother has lost her job and her income; she has nothing to sell to pay for your tuition in dramatic school. In consequence you will be obliged to leave tomorrow. But a friend has come to your rescue. She has no cash to lend you, so she has brought you a brooch set in valuable stones. Her generous act has moved and excited you. Can you accept such a sacrifice? You cannot make up your mind. You try to refuse. Your friend sticks the pin into a curtain and walks out. You follow her into the corridor, where there is a long scene of persuasion, refusal, tears, gratitude. In the end you accept, your friend leaves, and you come back into the room to get the brooch. But—where is it? Can anyone have entered and taken it? In a rooming house that would be altogether possible. A careful, nerve-racking search ensues.

"Go up on the stage. I shall stick the pin in a fold of this curtain and you are to find it."

In a moment he announced that he was ready.

Maria dashed onto the stage as if she had been chased. She ran to the edge of the footlights and then back again, holding her head with both hands, and writhing with terror. Then she came forward again, and then again went away, this time in the opposite direction. Rushing out toward the front she seized the folds of the curtain and shook them desperately, finally burying her head in them. This act she intended to represent looking for the brooch. Not finding it, she turned quickly and dashed off the stage, alternately holding her head or beating her breast, apparently to represent the general tragedy of the situation.

Those of us who were sitting in the orchestra could scarcely keep from laughing.

It was not long before Maria came running down to us in a most triumphant manner. Her eyes shone, her cheeks flamed.

"How do you feel?" asked the Director.

"Oh, just wonderful! I can't tell you how wonderful. I'm so happy," she cried, hopping around on her seat. "I feel just as if I had made my début . . . really at home on the stage."

"That's fine," said he encouragingly, "but where is the brooch? Give it to me."

"Oh, yes," said she, "I forgot that."

"That is rather strange. You were looking hard for it, and you forgot it!"

We could scarcely look around before she was up on the stage again, and was going through the folds of the curtain.

"Do not forget this one thing," said the Director warningly, "if the brooch is found you are saved. You may continue to come to these classes. But if the pin is not found you will have to leave the school."

Immediately her face became intense. She glued her eyes on the curtain, and went over every fold of the material from top to bottom, painstakingly, systematically. This time her search was at a much slower pace, but we were all sure that she was not wasting a second of her time and that she was sincerely excited, although she made no effort to seem so.

"Oh, where is it? Oh, I've lost it."

This time the words were muttered in a low voice.

"It isn't there," she cried, with despair and consternation, when she had gone through every fold.

Her face was all worry and sadness. She stood motionless, as if her thoughts were far away. It was easy to feel how the loss of the pin had moved her.

We watched, and held our breath.

Finally the Director spoke.

"How do you feel now, after your second search?" he asked.

"How do I feel? I don't know." Her whole manner was languid, she shrugged her shoulders as she tried for some answer, and unconsciously her eyes were still on the floor of the stage. "I looked hard," she went on, after a moment.

"That's true. This time you really did look," said he. "But what did you do the first time?"

"Oh, the first time I was excited, I suffered."

"Which feeling was more agreeable, the first, when you rushed about and tore up the curtain, or the second, when you searched through it quietly?"

"Why, of course, the first time, when I was looking for the pin."

"No, do not try to make us believe that the first time you were looking for the pin," said he. "You did not even think of it. You merely sought to suffer, for the sake of suffering.

"But the second time you really did look. We all saw it; we understood, we believed, because your consternation and distraction actually existed.

"Your first search was bad. The second was good."

This verdict stunned her. "Oh," she said, "I nearly killed myself that first time."

"That doesn't count," said he. "It only interfered with a real search. On the stage do not run for the sake of running, or suffer for the sake of suffering. Don't act 'in general,' for the sake of action; always act with a purpose."

"And truthfully," said I.

"Yes," he agreed; "and now, get up on the stage and do it."

We went, but for a long time we did not know what to do. We felt we must make an impression, but I couldn't think of anything worth the attention of an audience. I started to be Othello, but soon stopped. Leo tried in turn an aristocrat, a general, and a peasant. Maria ran around holding her head and her heart to represent tragedy. Paul sat on a chair in a Hamlet-like pose and seemed to be representing either sorrow or disillusion. Sonya flirted around, and by her side Grisha declared his love in the most worn traditions of the stage. When I hap-

pened to look at Nicholas Umnovykh and Dasha Dymkova, who had as usual hidden themselves in a corner, I almost groaned to see their fixed stares and wooden attitudes, as they did a scene from Ibsen's *Brand*.

"Let's sum up what you have done," said the Director. "I shall begin with you," he said, indicating me. "And at the same time with you and you," he went on, pointing to Maria and Paul. "Sit right here, on these chairs, where I can see you better, and begin; you are to be jealous, you to suffer, you to grieve, just producing those moods for their own sakes."

We sat down, and immediately we felt the absurdity of our situation. As long as I was walking about, writhing like a savage, it was possible to imagine that there was some sense in what I was doing, but when I was put on a chair, with no external movements, the absurdity of my performance was clear.

"Well, what do you think?" asked the Director. "Can one sit on a chair, and for no reason at all be jealous? Or all stirred up? Or sad? Of course it is impossible. Fix this for all time in your memories: *On the stage there cannot be, under any circumstances, action which is directed immediately at the arousing of a feeling for its own sake.* To ignore this rule results only in the most disgusting artificiality. *When you are choosing some bit of action leave feeling and spiritual content alone.* Never seek to be jealous, or to make love, or to suffer, for its own sake. *All such feelings are the result of something that has gone before. Of the thing that goes before you should think as hard as you can. As for the result, it will produce itself.* The false acting of passions, or of types, or the mere use of conventional gestures,—these are all frequent faults in our profession. But you must keep away from these unrealities. You must not copy passions or copy types. You must live in the passions and in the types. Your acting of them must grow out of your living in them."

Vanya then suggested that we could act better if the stage was not so bare; if there were more properties about, furniture, fireplace, ash trays.

"Very well," agreed the Director, and ended the lesson at this point.

3

Our work for today was again scheduled for the School Stage, but when we arrived we found the entrance to the auditorium closed. However, another door was open that led directly onto the stage. As we entered we were astonished to find ourselves in a vestibule. Next to that was a cosy little living-room, in which were two doors, one opening into a dining-room and thence into a small bedroom, the other into a long corridor, on one side of which was a ballroom, brilliantly lighted. This whole apartment was partitioned off by scenery taken from productions in the repertory. The main curtain was down and barricaded with furniture.

Not feeling that we were on the boards we behaved as if we were at home. We began by examining the rooms, and then we settled down in groups and began to chat. It did not occur to any of us that the lesson had already begun. At last the Director reminded us that we had come together for work.

"What shall we do?" someone asked.

"The same thing as yesterday," was the reply.

But we continued to stand around.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

It was Paul who answered. "I don't know, really. Suddenly, for no reason at all, to act . . ." he stopped, as if at a loss.

"If it is uncomfortable to act for no reason at all, why then find a reason," said Tortsov. "I am not putting any restrictions on you. Only do not continue to stand there like sticks of wood."

"But," somebody ventured, "wouldn't that be acting for the sake of acting?"

"No," retorted the Director. "From now on there is to be acting only for some purpose. Now you have the surroundings you asked for yesterday; can't you suggest some inner motives

that will result in simple physical acts? For instance, if I ask you, Vanya, to go and close that door, would you not do it?"

"Close the door? Of course." And Vanya went over, slammed it and returned before we had a chance to look at him.

"That is not what is meant by closing a door," said the Director. "By the word 'close' I imply a wish that the door shall be shut, so that it will stay shut, to stop the draught, or so that persons in the next room shall not hear what we are saying. You merely banged the door, with no reason in your mind, and in a way that might well make it swing open again, as in fact it has done."

"It won't stay shut. Honestly it won't," said Vanya.

"If it is difficult, then it will require more time and care to carry out my request," said the Director.

This time Vanya shut the door properly.

"Tell me something to do," I begged.

"Is it impossible for you to think of anything? There is a fireplace and some wood. Go build a fire."

I did as I was told, laid the wood in the fireplace, but found no matches, either in my pocket or on the mantelpiece. So I came back and told Tortsov of my difficulty.

"What in the world do you want matches for?" asked he.

"To light the fire."

"The fireplace is made of paper. Did you intend to burn down the theatre?"

"I was just going to pretend," I explained.

He held out an empty hand.

"To pretend to light a fire, pretended matches are sufficient. As if the point were to strike a match!

"When you reach the point of playing Hamlet, threading a way through his intricate psychology to the moment when he kills the King, will it be important to you to have a life-size sword in your hand? If you lack one, will you be unable to finish the performance? You can kill the King without a sword, and you can light the fire without a match. What needs to burn is your imagination."

I went on pretending to light my fire. To lengthen the action I arranged that the make-believe matches should go out a number of times, although I tried hard to protect them with my hands. Also I tried to see the fire, to feel the heat, but failed, and soon began to be bored, so that I was compelled to think of something else to do. I began to move the furniture, then to count the objects in the room, but having no purpose behind these acts they were all mechanical.

"There is nothing surprising in that," explained the Director. "If an action has no inner foundation, it cannot hold your attention. It takes no time to push a few chairs about, but if you were compelled to arrange some chairs of different sorts for a particular purpose, as for guests at a dinner who must be seated according to rank, age, and personal harmony, you could spend a long time over them."

But my imagination had run dry.

As soon as he saw that the others had also run down, he gathered us together in the living-room. "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? If I brought a dozen children in here and told them this is their new home, you would see their imagination sparkle; their games would be real games. Can't you be like them?"

"It is easy to say that," Paul complained. "But we aren't children. They naturally desire to play, and with us it must be forced."

"Of course," the Director answered, "if you either will not or cannot light a spark within yourselves, I have no more to say. Every person who is really an artist desires to create inside of himself another, deeper, more interesting life than the one that actually surrounds him."

Grisha broke in: "If the curtain were up, and the audience there, the desire would come."

"No," replied the Director with decision. "If you are really artists you will feel the desire without those accessories. Now be frank. Actually what was it that prevented your acting anything?"

I explained that I could light a fire, move furniture, open and

shut doors, but these acts are not extended enough to hold my attention. I light the fire, or close the door, and that is the end of it. If one act led to another, and gave rise to a third, natural momentum and tension would be created.

"In short," he summed up, "what you think you need is not short, external, semi-mechanical acts, but some that have a broader perspective, are deeper, and more complicated?"

"No," I answered, "but give us something that, although simple, is interesting."

"Do you mean to say," said he, perplexed, "that all that depends on me? Surely the explanation must be sought in the inner motives, in the circumstances amid which, and for the sake of which, you are doing the act. Take that opening or shutting of a door. Nothing can be simpler, you might say, of less interest, or more mechanical.

"But suppose that in this apartment of Maria's, there used to live a man who became violently insane. They took him away to a psychopathic ward. If he escaped from there, and were behind that door, what would you do?"

Once the question was put in that form our whole inner aim, as the Director described it, was altered. We no longer thought about how to extend our activity, or worried about its external form. Our minds were centred on estimating the value or purpose of this or that act in view of the problem presented. Our eyes began to measure the distance to the door, and to look for safe approaches to it. They examined the surroundings for directions of escape, in case the madman should break through the door. Our instinct of self-preservation sensed danger, and suggested ways of dealing with it.

Either accidentally or on purpose, Vanya, who had been pressing against the door after it was shut, suddenly jumped away, and we all rushed after him, the girls screaming and running off into another room. In the end I found myself under a table, with a heavy bronze ash-receiver in my hand.

The job was not ended. The door was now closed, but not

locked. There was no key. Therefore the safest thing we could do was to barricade it with sofas, tables, and chairs, then call up the hospital and arrange to have them take the necessary steps to regain the custody of the madman.

The success of this improvisation put me in high spirits. I went over to the Director and begged him to give me another chance at lighting the fire.

Without a moment's hesitation he told me Maria had just inherited a fortune! That she has taken this apartment, and is celebrating her good luck by a housewarming, to which she has invited all her fellow-students. One of them, who is well acquainted with Kachalov, Moskvin, and Leonidov, has promised to bring them to the party. But the apartment is very chilly, the central heating has not yet been turned on, although it is very cold outside. Can some wood for an open fire be found?

Some sticks might be borrowed from a neighbor. A little fire is started, but it smokes badly, and must be put out. Meanwhile it has grown late. Another fire is started, but the wood is green, and will not burn. In another minute the guests will be here.

"Now," he continued, "let me see what you would do *if* my supposed facts were true."

When it was all over, the Director said: "Today I can say that you acted with a motive. You have learned that *all action in the theatre must have an inner justification, be logical, coherent, and real.* Second: *if* acts as a lever to lift us out of the world of actuality into the realm of imagination."

4

Today the Director proceeded to enumerate the various functions of *if*.

"This word has a peculiar quality, a kind of power which you sensed, and which produced in you an instantaneous, inner stimulus.

"Note too how easily and simply it came. That door, which was the starting point in our exercise, became a means of de-

fence, and your basic aim, the object of your concentrated attention, was desire for self-preservation.

"The supposition of danger is always exciting. It is a kind of yeast that will ferment at any time. As for the door and the fireplace, inanimate objects, they excite us only when they are bound up with something else, of more importance to us.

"Take into consideration also that this inner stimulus was brought about without force, and without deception. I did not tell you that there was a madman behind the door. On the contrary, by using the word *if* I frankly recognized the fact that I was offering you only a supposition. All I wanted to accomplish was to make you say what you would have done *if* the supposition about the madman were a real fact, leaving you to feel what anybody in the given circumstances must feel. You in turn did not force yourselves, or make yourselves accept the supposition as reality, but only as a supposition.

"What would have happened if, instead of this frank confession, I had sworn to you that there was, really and truly, a madman behind the door?"

"I should not have believed such an obvious deception," was my reaction.

"With this special quality of *if,*" explained the Director, "nobody obliges you to believe or not believe anything. Everything is clear, honest, and above-board. You are given a question, and you are expected to answer it sincerely and definitely.

"Consequently, the secret of the effect of *if* lies first of all in the fact that it does not use fear or force, or make the artist do anything. On the contrary, it reassures him through its honesty, and encourages him to have confidence in a supposed situation. That is why, in your exercise, the stimulus was produced so naturally.

"This brings me to another quality. *It arouses an inner and real activity,* and does this by natural means. Because you are actors you did not give a simple answer to the question. You felt you must answer the challenge to *action.*

"This important characteristic of *if* brings it close to one of the fundamentals of our school of acting—*activity in creativeness and art.*"

5

"Some of you are eager to put what I have been telling you into immediate practice," said the Director today. "That is quite right and I am glad to fall in with your wishes. Let us apply the use of *if* to a role.

"Suppose you were to play a dramatization of Chekhov's tale about an innocent farmer who unscrewed a nut off a railroad track to use as a sinker for his fishing line. For this he was tried and severely punished. This imaginary happening will sink into the consciousness of some, but for most people it will remain a 'funny story.' They will never even glimpse the tragedy of the legal and social conditions hidden behind the laughter. But the artist who is to act one of the parts in this scene cannot laugh. He must think through for himself and, most important, he must live through whatever it was that caused the author to write the story. How would you go about it?" The Director paused.

The students were silent and thoughtful for a time.

"In moments of doubt, when your thoughts, feelings, and imagination are silent, remember *if.* The author also began his work that way. He said to himself:

" 'What would happen *if* a simple farmer, off on a fishing expedition, were to take a nut from a rail?' Now give yourselves the same problem and add: 'What would I do *if* the case came up to me to judge?' "

"I would convict the criminal," I answered, without hesitation.

"What of? On account of the sinker for his fishing line?"

"For the theft of a nut."

"Of course, one shouldn't steal," agreed Tortsov. "But can you punish a man severely for a crime of which he is entirely unconscious?"

"He must be made to realize that he might be the cause of wrecking a whole train, killing hundreds of people," I retorted.

"On account of one small nut? You will never get him to believe that," argued the Director.

"The man is only making believe. He understands the nature of his act," said I.

"If the man who plays the farmer has talent, he will prove to you by his acting that he is unconscious of any guilt," said the Director.

As the discussion went on he used every possible argument to justify the defendant, and in the end he succeeded in making me weaken a little. As soon as he noticed that he said:

"You felt that very same inner push which the judge himself probably experienced. If you played that part, analogous feelings would draw you close to the character.

"To achieve this kinship between the actor and the person he is portraying add some concrete detail which will fill out the play, giving it point and absorbing action. The circumstances which are predicated on *if* are taken from sources near to your own feelings, and they have a powerful influence on the inner life of an actor. Once you have established this contact between your life and your part, you will feel that inner push or stimulus. Add a whole series of contingencies based on your own experience in life, and you will see how easy it will be for you sincerely to believe in the possibility of what you are called upon to do on the stage.

"Work out an entire role in this fashion, and you will create a whole new life.

"The feelings aroused will express themselves in the acts of this imaginary person had he been placed in the circumstances made by the play."

"Are they conscious or unconscious?" I asked.

"Make the test yourself. Go over every detail in the process and decide what is conscious, what unconscious, in its origin. You will never unravel the puzzle, because you will not even remember some of the most important moments ıt These

will arise, in whole or in part, of their own accord, and will pass by unnoticed, all in the realm of the subconscious.

"To convince yourself, ask an actor, after some great performance, how he felt while on the stage, and what he did there. He will not be able to answer because he was not aware of what he lived through, and does not remember many of the more significant moments. All you will get from him is that he felt comfortable on the stage, that he was in easy relationship to the other actors. Beyond that, he will be able to tell you nothing.

"You will astonish him by your description of his acting. He will gradually come to realize things about his performance of which he had been entirely unconscious.

"We may conclude from this that *if* is also a stimulus to the creative subconscious. Besides, it helps us to carry out another fundamental principle of our art: 'unconscious creativeness through conscious technique.'

"Up to this point I have explained the uses of *if* in connection with two of the main principles in our type of action. It is even more strongly bound up with a third. Our great poet Pushkin wrote about it in his unfinished article on the drama.

"Among other things he said:

" 'Sincerity of emotions, feelings that seem true in given circumstances—that is what we ask of a dramatist.'

"I add from myself that that is exactly what we ask of an actor.

"Think deeply about this saying, and later I shall give you a vivid example of how *if* helps us to carry it out."

"Sincerity of emotions, feelings that seem true in given circumstances," I repeated with all sorts of intonations.

"Stop," said the Director. "You make a banality of it without uncovering its essential meaning. When you cannot grasp a thought as a whole, break it up into its component parts, and study them one by one."

"Just what," asked Paul, "does the expression 'given circumstances' mean?"

"It means the story of the play, its facts, events, epoch, time and place of action, conditions of life, the actors' and regisseur's interpretation, the mise-en-scene, the production, the sets, the costumes, properties, lighting and sound effects,—all the circumstances that are given to an actor to take into account as he creates his role.

"*If* is the starting point, the given circumstances, the development. The one cannot exist without the other, if it is to possess a necessary stimulating quality. However, their functions differ somewhat: *if* gives the push to dormant imagination, whereas the *given circumstances* build the basis for *if* itself. And they both, together and separately, help to create an inner stimulus."

"And what," asked Vanya, with interest, "does 'sincerity of emotions' mean?"

"Just what it says—living human emotions, feelings which the actor himself has experienced."

"Well then," Vanya went on, "what are 'feelings that seem true'?"

"By true seeming we refer not to actual feelings themselves but to something nearly akin to them, to emotions reproduced indirectly, under the prompting of true inner feelings.

"In practice, this is approximately what you will have to do: first, you will have to imagine in your own way the 'given circumstances' offered by the play, the regisseur's production and your own artistic conception. All of this material will provide a general outline for the life of the character you are to enact, and the circumstances surrounding him. It is necessary that you really believe in the general possibilities of such a life, and then become so accustomed to it that you feel yourself close to it. If you are successful in this, you will find that 'sincere emotions,' or 'feelings that seem true' will spontaneously grow in you.

"However, when you use this third principle of acting, forget about your feelings, because they are largely of subconscious origin, and not subject to direct command. Direct all of your attention to the 'given circumstances.' They are always within reach."

Toward the end of the lesson he said: "I can now supplement what I said earlier about *if*. Its power depends not only on its own keenness, but also on the sharpness of outline of the given circumstances."

"But," broke in Grisha, "what is left for the actor since everything is prepared by others? Just trifles?"

"What do you mean, trifles?" said the Director indignantly. "Do you think that to believe in the imaginative fiction of another person, and bring it to life, is a trifle? Don't you know that to compose on a theme suggested by someone else, is much more difficult than to invent one yourself? We know of cases where a bad play has achieved world fame because of having been re-created by a great actor. We know that Shakespeare re-created stories by others. That is what we do to the work of the dramatist, we bring to life what is hidden under the words; we put our own thoughts into the author's lines, and we establish our own relationships to other characters in the play, and the conditions of their lives; we filter through ourselves all the materials that we receive from the author and the director; we work over them, supplementing them out of our own imagination. That material becomes part of us, spiritually, and even physically; our emotions are sincere, and as a final result we have truly productive activity—all of which is closely interwoven with the implications of the play.

"And that tremendous work you tell me is just trifles!

"No, indeed. That is creativeness and art."

With these words he ended the lesson.

6

Today, we did a series of exercises, consisting of setting ourselves problems in action, such as writing a letter, tidying up

a room, looking for a lost object. These we framed in all sorts of exciting suppositions, and the object was to execute them under the circumstances we had created.

To such exercises the Director attributes so much significance that he worked long and enthusiastically on them.

After he had done an exercise with each one of us in turn he said:

"This is the beginning of the right road. You found it through your own experience. For the present there should be no other approach to a part or a play. To understand the importance of this right point of departure, compare what you have just done with what you did at the test performance. With the exception of a few scattered and accidental moments in the playing of Maria and Kostya, all of you began your work at the end instead of at the beginning. You were determined to arouse tremendous emotion in yourselves and your audience right at the start; to offer them some vivid images, and at the same time exhibit all your inner and outer gifts. This wrong approach naturally led to violence. To avoid such mistakes, remember, for all time, that when you begin to study each role you should first gather all the materials that have any bearing on it, and supplement them with more and more imagination, until you have achieved such a similarity to life that it is easy to believe in what you are doing. In the beginning forget about your feelings. When the inner conditions are prepared, and right, feelings will come to the surface of their own accord."

CHAPTER FOUR

Imagination

I

THE DIRECTOR asked us to come to his apartment today for our lesson. He seated us comfortably in his study, and began:

"You know now that our work on a play begins with the use of *if* as a lever to lift us out of everyday life onto the plane of imagination. The play, the parts in it, are the invention of the author's imagination, a whole series of *ifs* and given circumstances thought up by him. There is no such thing as actuality on the stage. Art is a product of the imagination, as the work of a dramatist should be. The aim of the actor should be to use his technique to turn the play into a theatrical reality. In this process imagination plays by far the greatest part."

He pointed to the walls of his study, which were covered with every conceivable design for theatre sets.

"Look," he said to us, "all these are the work of a favourite artist of mine, now dead. He was a strange person, who loved to make sets for plays which had not yet been written. Take for instance this design for the last act of a play Chekhov was planning to write just before his death: about an expedition lost in the icy North.

"Who would believe," said the Director, "that this was painted by a man who, in all his life, never stirred beyond the suburbs of Moscow? He made an arctic scene out of what he saw around him at home in winter, from stories and scientific publications, from photographs. Out of all that material his imagination painted a picture."

He then turned our attention to another wall, on which