

THE MIND AND BODY CONNECTION: ALBA EMOTING AND
MICHAEL CHEKHOV'S TECHNIQUE

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts
of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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May 2009

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Yuko Kurahashi, Eric van Baars, Mark Monday, Chuck Richie, Terri Kent, Dr. Rosemarie Bank, Cindy Stillings, Nicole Perrone, Roxane Rix, Dr. Susana Bloch, Matthew Earnest, Seth Gordon, Brittany Barnes, John Traina, Kaylin Major, Wendy Wygant, and Kat Palcsak.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the thirty-five years that I have been an actor, I have spent years learning Stanislavski's, Sanford Meisner's, Uta Hagen's, Susana Bloch's, and Michael Chekhov's techniques. All of them have been extremely useful. Aside from Bloch's technique of Alba Emoting, the others find their core in Stanislavski's invaluable work. My earliest training was in the Stanislavski technique at the *American Center for Stanislavski Theatre Art* in New York City, otherwise known as the *Sonia Moore Studio*. Though I found the technique highly effective in breaking down a text and creating a character, at times I also found it too cerebral. I would become *stuck* in my head thinking too much. Stanislavski's approach to an emotional state through *Affective Memory* was problematic for me. I would seek the appropriate memories that would sometimes evoke an emotion for my character's given circumstances. Unless I was inspired in the first place, I would often find myself *pushing* for a desired emotional state which would render access to it nearly impossible. For this reason, I set out to find the technique or techniques that when combined would become my "magic bullet."

After working with the Alba Emoting technique for a number of years under the tutelage of Roxane Rix, then having the great fortune of meeting and working with Dr.

Susana Bloch at a workshop sponsored by ATHE, I was convinced. Alba Emoting was surely part of my “magic bullet.” Then, I had the great fortune of learning the basics of Michael Chekhov’s technique from Mark Monday at Kent State University. From my vantage point, I see that all the techniques I have studied benefit me greatly, though it is Alba Emoting and Michael Chekhov’s technique on which I currently rely.

Alba Emoting and Michael Chekhov’s Technique

Two distinct methodologies, the Alba Emoting technique and Michael Chekhov’s technique have had an enormous impact both on my professional work as an actor and as a teacher of acting. Dr. Susana Bloch, an internationally known research psychologist who specializes in neurophysiology and psychophysiology, developed Alba Emoting, a scientifically proven system of accessing real emotions through what she calls *emotional effector patterns*. These patterns consist of respiratory-postural-facial combinations for each of six basic emotions: joy, tenderness, anger, fear, sadness, and erotic love. She observed universal patterns for these basic emotions through experimentation and discovered that these specific and naturally occurring emotions can be induced by an individual through the conscious control of breathing rhythms, facial expressions, and body attitudes, (gestures and posture) when executed precisely. Her intention was to create a technique for accessing specific and repeatable organic emotions without bringing harm to the actor’s psyche. Though her initial interest was in developing Alba Emoting for the actor, psychologists and others have found the technique extremely useful.

Michael Chekhov worked with Constantin Stanislavski, Artistic Director of the Moscow Art Theatre, for 16 years as an actor. In 1923, Stanislavski named Chekhov the Director of the Second Moscow Art Theatre where Chekhov experimented and taught his own technique for the actor. Though Chekhov originally studied and applied Stanislavski's system to his acting, he did not agree with Stanislavski's use of *Affective Memory* which he found limiting and potentially harmful to the actor. These are the reasons I could not always be successful in evoking a desired emotional state when I was relying on Stanislavski's technique. Often, even if a memory from my past had worked during rehearsal, by the time I was in performance it usually had lost its potency. I was left to *push* for the emotion. Ultimately, using my own memories to fuel a character's world often took me out of the character's circumstances and plopped me back in my own: an actor in search of a feeling.

Chekhov understood my dilemma. Instead, Chekhov expanded on Stanislavski's theory of the method of physical action. Chekhov discovered that through specific and repeatable physical movements, which he called the Psychological Gesture (P.G.), the actor could awaken his will or action center. The P.G. is a tool used by the actor to increase his desire to take an action. Chekhov understood the subtle nature of the mind/body connection and how an emotion can be provoked through a psychological gesture. Dr. Bloch discovered this mind/body connection through the physical actions of breathing patterns, physical postures, and facial expressions that when correctly utilized ignites the mind/body/emotional connection. The combination of these techniques gives

the actor an excellent venue to access easily and effortlessly the desired energy with which to act in any given circumstance.

In order to analyze the application of these two techniques, I will first address the Alba Emoting intensive workshop I participated in during May 20th through May 29th of 2006 at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota. I will explain how I utilized this technique in my process of creating and performing the role of Mrs. Webb in the Porthouse production of *Our Town* in the summer of 2006. With my investigation of Alba Emoting, I will combine the impact of the Michael Chekhov technique—the technique I began to study in September 2007—on my acting (the 2007 and 2008 productions of *A Christmas Story* at the Cleveland Play House) and teaching (Acting Process class in 2008) and in my direction of a lab show at Kent State, (*Down Town and Watermelon Boats: Preparation and Execution of a Whole*). Through this discussion, I intend to prove that Alba Emoting and Michael Chekhov's technique can be joined to create a highly dependable and effective means of bringing clarity, specificity, and emotional truth to a role.

CHAPTER II

ALBA EMOTING

Six Basic Emotions

The gap between reality and the representation of reality on stage has been an issue since the birth of realism when truth became central to the successful portrayal of a role. According to Roxane Rix, Associate Professor of Theatre at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania and the first American certified Alba Emoting instructor, “The attempt to fill the gap left by lack of genuine stimuli has been central to Western actor training since Stanislavski.”¹ Stanislavski approached this stimulus gap through the cognitive, or thinking brain, *visa vie* Affective Memory to launch a physiological response. Alba Emoting approaches the ‘stimulus gap’ through physiological arousal. Neuroscientist, Joseph LeDoux conducted numerous studies in this area. He wrote: “Sensory information travels first to the brain’s emotional center, which begins a physical response *before* a second signal reaches the neocortex (the thinking brain) which then interprets the information and refines the reaction. If I see a bear, I do indeed tremble before I realize that I am afraid.”² This is where Alba Emoting comes in. Alba Emoting bypasses the thinking brain, once it is mastered, and goes directly to the physiological stimulus created

through respiratory, facial and postural patterns to immediately access the desired emotional response.

My initial exposure to Alba Emoting was an intensive 10-day workshop conducted by Roxane Rix at the University of Toledo during the spring of 2001. I learned Neutral breathing and the six basic emotional effector patterns, joy, tenderness, anger, fear, sadness, and erotic love. In an article co-written by Dr. Susana Bloch, Madeleine Lemeignan, and Nancy Aguilera-Torres, the instructions for “respiratory rhythms, degrees of muscular tension/relaxation, degrees of eye and/or mouth opening and postural attitudes prototypical for each basic emotion” are as follows:

Anger. Breathe sharply in and out through the nose; keep your lips tightly closed and contract the lower jaw; focus your eyes, tensing the lids; put tension in the body and incline it slightly forward as if ready to attack.

Fear. Give sharp in-breaths through the open mouth, ‘holding’ as it were, your breath; keep the breathing shallow and irregular; at the same time open your eyes wide; tense the body, inclining it slightly backwards, as if trying to avoid something.

Sadness-crying. Inhale in brief saccades through the nose and then exhale all the air in one expiratory movement through the open mouth, as in a sigh; keep your body relaxed, arms hanging; let your head drop slightly and point your gaze downwards.

Joy-laughter. Inhale sharply through the nose and exhale the air through the mouth in rapid saccades; at the same time stretch your lips horizontally drawing the corners up and back; keep your eyes semi-closed, the body very relaxed, the head loosely hanging backwards.

Erotic love. Breathe in and out through the open relaxed mouth in a rather shallow and fast rhythm; keep the body very relaxed, head tilted backwards and to the side, exposing the neck; move your hips very slowly.

Tenderness. Breathe very evenly through the nose; put up a little smile; keep your eyes open with relaxed lids. Slightly tilt your head sideways. Keep your body very relaxed.³

The beginning stage of learning these emotional effector patterns results in robotic attempts as one tries to mechanically weave together the particular recipe for each emotion. Eventually, the mind allows the body to take the lead and the work becomes much more natural and easily accessible. At the end of that first intensive in 2001, I had a very basic level of proficiency but could easily see how with further study the technique would become invaluable to my work as an actor.

Learning Alba Emoting is a process that cannot be completed in one or even two intensive workshops. The body, mind, and emotions can only digest a portion of the technique during any single 10-day intensive workshop. Pushing the technique too hard and too fast generally ends up with the shutting down of availability to the patterns and the organic emotions they would otherwise induce. In 2005, I attended a second intensive workshop which was held at the University of Cincinnati. My proficiency grew through practice, frustration, release, until ultimately I began to trust my body's ability to execute the patterns, which to my great relief became effortless.

In the summer of 2006, I assisted Roxane Rix in a 10-day intensive workshop at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota. I discovered a deeper level of proficiency with the patterns as I observed, demonstrated, and encouraged the participants. Every workshop begins with the teaching of Neutral Breathing: breath taken in through the nose and released out through the mouth, breath dropping in and out of the abdomen in regular intervals, eyes softly gazing on the horizon, feet hip width apart, toes pointed straight ahead. After Neutral Breathing is well established, Rix describes the protocol designed to maintain the emotional safety of every individual participating in an Alba Emoting

intensive workshop. The protocol is: everyone agrees to trust the instructor's judgment and her directive to drop the execution of a pattern and return to neutral breathing if an emotional effector pattern is on the verge of or has already become out of control.

The Step-Out Procedure

Dr. Bloch believes that one should not enter a pure emotional effector pattern without a means to release the accompanying energy when desired. She considers the *Step-Out* procedure she created to be a cornerstone of her technique. She advocates that actors perform the *Step-Out* before and after working with the emotional effector patterns. She is adamant about the use of the procedure as a means to keep the actor and his/her psyche safe.

As a young woman interested in acting, Bloch rejected Stanislavski's method of Affective Memory, later referred to as Emotional Memory and widely used by Strasberg and others who utilized "The Method." Emotional Memory is used to induce deep emotional responses through the process of reliving past experiences. But, because neither Stanislavski nor Strasberg created a technique for releasing what could and did at times become hysteria, the individual was left to digest the rampaging emotions on his/her own. Chekhov rejected Affected Memory as a fruitful method of provoking imagination and emotion. Even Stanislavski himself later witnessed the potential dangers and limitations of Affective Memory and shifted his emphasis to Given Circumstances, Imagination and the *magic if*. The *magic if* refers to asking oneself the question, "What would I do if I were in these given circumstances?" Strasberg and others who taught "The Method" continued to emphasize the use of Emotional Memory.

Bloch and Chekhov recognized that not only could it be dangerous to summon and dwell on a painful emotional memory but that after a number of times of using it as an emotional trigger, it holds little emotional value. Therefore, whether or not the memory held power for an actor once, over time it becomes empty of its value as the body memory and psyche work it out of the system. Ultimately, the human psyche will attempt to protect itself. This in itself can block powerful emotional memories and the supposed inspiration they hold. On the other hand, if a technique such as Alba Emoting is utilized which by-passes cognitive thinking and goes directly to the psycho-physiological stimulus such as it does with the emotional effector patterns, one must also have a safe way back to neutrality and well-being.

Bloch insists that a person exposed to the Alba Emoting technique must first learn Neutral Breathing and *Step-Out*. The procedure for *Step-Out* is best described in Dr.

Susana Bloch's own words:

Stand in an upright position with feet parallel, aligned with the hip bones, facial muscles relaxed and eyes open looking straight ahead at the level of the horizon. In this posture, you breathe through the nose with a quiet, easy and relaxed rhythm, without forcing the breath, trying to keep inspirations and exhalations equal in time. The respiratory rhythm is then synchronized with a continuous movement of the arms: while inhaling, the extended arms are lifted in front of the body, with hands interlocked loosely, tracing a sort of "generous arc" over the head, bending the elbows as the hands reach behind the neck. During this action, inhalation is synchronized with the speed of the lifting arms. Then, after a brief pause, the air is gently expelled through the slightly open lips (as if blowing out an imaginary candle), while the arms descend in synchrony with the exhalation, until they return to the initial position. At this moment all the air must have been expelled. This cycle is repeated at least three times, very consciously. Then the face is gently touched, both hands giving small massage-like movements, from the center of the face outwards. Finally, the exercise is concluded by shaking the whole body and then changing the posture.⁴

The possible necessity to rescue someone from emotional turmoil at some point during the 10-days of a workshop is extremely high. When this is the case, the protocol is that the rest of the group defaults to the Tenderness pattern, leaving the instructor to deal only with the individual in trouble as she guides that person through a *Step-out*. The Tenderness pattern brings an overall energy of tenderness to the room and allows the person who is struggling to feel surrounded by non-judgmental tenderness from his/her fellow participants.

Introducing Alba Emoting's Effector Patterns

The best introduction to Alba Emoting's emotional effector patterns is the Joy pattern. The respiratory aspect is the first element to be explored as it is the basis of all pure emotions. According to Dr. Bloch, "We feel what we breathe." She wrote, "From our experimental results we concluded that a particular form of breathing corresponds to each of the six basic emotions analyzed. In other words we established the typical respiratory patterns for each basic emotion."⁵ The respiratory pattern engages the rest of the body in the emotion. For example, in the Joy Pattern, one breathes in then out in short bursts (ha, ha, ha) until one is beyond empty before allowing the next breath. Naturally, the corresponding facial expression that is common to all humans during a joyful moment is upturned lips and an unforced smile, bright and lively eyes, the body sometimes flopping or swaying with laughter and relaxation. There are levels of intensity that one accesses during the execution of any effector pattern. If the joy required is a joke one keeps to oneself or with a single other, it's small and intimate. If the joy required is raucous with hilarity, the pattern is accessed to its fullest capacity of breath. During

workshops, Rix has participants explore rising and falling intensities of the six pure emotional patterns. Accessing the patterns is the first step; controlling the intensity levels is the second.

The order of exploring the six pure emotional effector patterns is designed to correspond with the student's ability to access the patterns while developing trust in the instructor and in their own bodies. In 2006, as in the other workshops I attended, the first pattern after Neutral is Joy followed by Tenderness, Anger, Fear, Sadness, and Erotic Love. As you can see, Rix introduces the patterns in the order of least vulnerable to most vulnerable. By the end of the 10 days, everyone was executing the patterns with more or less success, depending on each person's particular emotional entanglements (i.e. allowing oneself to fully experience anger or anger without crying or laughing). As a teaching assistant, I found great value in not only experiencing the patterns for myself while assisting and encouraging others in their experience, but also in my growing recognition of the subtle adjustments in the eyes or the breath or the posture that a person need make to allow the induction of a particular emotion.

Alba Emoting and Our Town

The Porthouse production of *Our Town* went into rehearsal just weeks after the 2006 Alba Emoting workshop. It was directed by Mathew Earnest whose direction allowed me great freedom to explore Myrtle Webb's emotional journey. Through the process, I discovered times when I could use the patterns for joy, tenderness, and sadness. I also discovered the mix of emotions. For example, at Emily and Georges wedding, when I was delivering her monologue prior to the ceremony, it was a mix of joy, sadness,

and anger. I would begin the joy pattern just before entering with the towns people. As we were singing, I would add the sadness pattern with a tinge of the anger pattern. By the time I got up to address the audience at the wedding all three patterns were agitating in my essence. It was a wonderful feeling to just open my mouth and allow the objective and actions of the monologue to flow out as I rode the waves of emotion connected to the relinquishment of Emily to the rigors of matrimony.

The *Step-Out* procedure became crucial in assisting me to quickly transition from one extreme emotion to another. The funeral scene required a deep sadness which arose easily during every performance through the effector pattern. I got to the place where I needed only to begin the breathing pattern and the sadness would come into my body. Immediately after the funeral scene, I exited to the dressing room where I very quickly changed costume, took down my hair, and had to become the tender, loving mother of Emily's childhood. This quick emotional change was accomplished through executing the *Step-Out* and immediately beginning the tenderness pattern.

Mathew Earnest directed the scene when Emily returns to re-experience her 12th birthday in a truly surreal manner. It required me to execute the tenderness pattern in a rather suspended way. In other words, the tenderness had to radiate ethereally. I and Mr. Webb were downstage in lights of our own, not looking at each other, but out into eternity. Emily raced in large circles around the stage, unwinding time. When she stopped running, she tried desperately to get us to see her, to hear her, but of course we could not. It was as though we were in a dream and Emily was alive and real. Earnest ends the scene with me and Mr. Webb running as fast as we can up stage and out the doors to the

dressing rooms, slamming them behind us. It was a profound moment of inspiration on his part and no doubt gave the audience the desired affect of the door slamming shut on a past that cannot be resurrected. Invariably, every performance, I had no choice but to sob, the slamming of the door continuing to reverberate in my nervous system. After that initial release, I would perform the *Step-Out* as many times as it took to cleanse my soul. The pure emotion induced through the patterns had run that deep and were that real.

CHAPTER III

MICHAEL CHEKHOV TECHNIQUE

Michael Chekhov loved the theatre. According to Franc Chamberlain, Chekhov insisted that any actor who does not love the role, the theatre, and the audience should do something else. Chamberlain writes, “But beyond the idea that the actor loves the theatre is the notion that love is, or at least needs to be, the basis of stage emotion.”⁶ Chekhov’s notion of an ideal actor is one who leads from an open heart through space and time. Chekhov’s love of the process of theatre is evident when he writes, “The author’s excitement, imagination, feelings, creative ideas, his love, laughter, and tears are hidden behind the printed words.”⁷ It is with this spiritual quality of compassion, empathy, and attraction to the wholeness of life that he encourages actors to mine the story and one’s part in it.

Chamberlain insists that one need not know anything about Chekhov’s spirituality and connection with Anthroposophy to benefit from its aspects embedded in Chekhov’s system. Chamberlain suggests, “We could just as easily ground our work in a sense of playfulness, lightness, and fluidity as in love.”⁸ These are qualities that Chekhov would encourage as he does with the Four Brothers: Feeling of Ease, Feeling of Form, Feeling of Beauty, and Feeling of the Whole. In my discussion of Michael Chekhov’s technique,

I will illuminate various elements which make the technique easily accessible to me as an actor and a teacher. These elements include: imagination, qualities, imaginary body, centers, psychological gesture, atmosphere, and radiation.

Imagination

Chekhov believed that the power of imagination was the port key to access other realities. These other realities if communicated truthfully should extend the audience's experience of reality. This is the goal. As an actor and a teacher, Chekhov knew that an actor could achieve this only with the fundamental communicative devices recognizable and identifiable to all humans on psychological, physiological, and spiritual planes. Unlike Stanislavsky who sought to stir the imagination through emotional and sensory memory and later the "magic if," Chekhov took the direct path of observation to stir his imagination.

Qualities

Michael Chekhov's technique inspired my imagination and creativity through its many facets. One of which is the *quality* of an action—the *how* I *do* what I do to get what I want. The *action* is what I *do*. The *quality* is *how* I do it. For example, in the sentence I *write carefully* to be understood, the action is to write and the quality is carefully. This concept was an epiphany for me and became an important aspect of my work as an actor and a teacher, bringing a level of specificity to my thinking, creativity, and ability to communicate the moment.

In 2007, during the rehearsal process of my third production of *A Christmas Story*, the qualities of the actions became more specific than they had been in the prior two seasons. I considered *how* I would *call* young Ralphie to get him downstairs for breakfast. My line is: “Ralphie, come down to breakfast! You’ll be late for school!” In prior years, I merely called up to him. In 2007, I called him urgently. In 2008, I called him urgently then listened to discern whether I needed to increase the quality of urgency. The quality and the action had developed a composition: a beginning, middle, and end.

Not only had the concept of qualities become an important tool for my own analysis of an action, but it became the first question I would ask of a director if I was unclear as to what he was wanting from me. For example, in rehearsal for *A Christmas Story*, I would ask my director, Seth Gordon, what kind of *quality* he was looking for in an action that I was having difficulty delivering to his satisfaction. A particularly interesting example of this is when my younger son, Randy, is playing with his food. “Oh, Randy, don’t play with your food, eat it!” The line seems as though it should be delivered as a scolding. Especially since directly after my line Randy begins to cry in protest. Gordon wanted a softer, mothering tone rather than the scolding motherly tone. In 2005 and 2006, before studying Chekhov, I found it difficult to deliver the line without scolding. Since my objective was to get him to eat before going to school, it seemed that my action to convince him to do it needed to have high stakes. I was caught in a conundrum. In 2007, I discovered the action of begging Randy to eat and the quality of pleadingly. This was closer to what Gordon wanted but not quite it.

In 2008, I begged Randy lovingly, which worked even better because it communicated the true nature of the character and her relationship with her son. Mother remains in control of the situation, breathing in neutral. She does not lose her temper. She is not surprised when Randy begins to throw a fit of sobs to manipulate her out of having to eat. She just turns around and fills a bowl with fresh oatmeal, having decided that her next tactic will be the piggy game. This adjustment of chiding Randy lovingly communicated to the audience that Mother goes through some version of this charade every morning. Mother succeeds in being the archetypal *good wife* by sparing her husband a screaming child at the breakfast table while she succeeds in being the archetypal *good mother* by getting at least some of the oatmeal in her young son's stomach. My discoveries in 2008 with actions and qualities led me to a deeper and more fleshed out performance. At last, I embodied and delivered the archetypal *Mother* that was required by the story. Finally, Gordon was satisfied.

In the fall semester of 2008, I taught an Acting Process class at Kent State University where for the first time as a teacher I combined Michael Chekhov's technique with aspects of Alba Emoting. I began each class with *Neutral Breathing* which relaxed, focused, and centered the students, making them ready and open for the Chekhov work. If they were still having difficulty focusing in the present, I would lead them through a *Step-Out*. This would inevitably bring them to the emotional, physical, and mental state of neutral.

My students were quick to adopt and value the *quality* of an *action* and the accompanying specificity in their work. I introduced the quality of an action to my class

through what would appear as a ball game. The class had already experienced the action of throwing the ball with the objective that it is received by the other. They had successfully experienced the composition of a moment: beginning, middle, and end. Then I assigned a fundamental quality, Chekhov's *Feeling of Ease*. According to Chekhov, "Undoubtedly the artist must have this ability to express things in a light and easy way, in his psychological and physical makeup. An actor needs this perhaps more than any other artist."⁹ The quality of *lightness and ease* became fundamental in my own approach to any other quality and it was clearly very useful to my students. The more they could approach a moment with this fundamental quality underlying all other qualities, actions or objectives, the more successful they were in communicating the essence of the moment. We continued with the other fundamental qualities, feeling of form, of beauty, of the whole. When we got to the place where they were responding to the fundamental qualities, I assigned specific qualities such as lovingly, angrily, tenderly, joyfully, etc. It was fascinating to notice how some students would naturally adopt the corresponding breathing patterns of Alba Emoting though they had no idea that they were doing so.

Imaginary Body/Centers

In Michael Chekhov's technique, to truthfully create a character that has different physical attributes from one's own, an actor must imagine the *imaginary body* of the character. Chekhov sites as an example an actor who needs to portray someone taller and thinner than himself. First he must imagine another body for himself. Then he must put his own body into this imaginary body bit by bit. The actor lifts his own arm while imagining that it is the character's long, thin arm. The movement is different than it

would be if he were merely moving his own not so long or thin limb. The actor continues this process throughout his own body until he is fully grounded in the imaginary body of the character.

According to Chekhov, every character has a *center*. Mala Powers reduced Chekhov's description of Centers in her preface to his book. "This is an imaginary area inside or outside the body where the character's impulses for all movement originate. The impulse from this Center initiates all gestures and leads the body forward or backward, and to sit, walk, and stand, etc."¹⁰ Three fundamental centers that are functioning always to one degree or another are: the head (thinking center), the heart (feeling center), and the hips (will power center). Beyond these fundamental centers, there are many possible secondary centers such as in a foot, a hand, or even a finger. Chekhov said, "Finding someone's center, therefore, helps us intuit his hidden psychology."¹¹ For example, if my character responds first by feeling rather than thinking, her center is in her heart and everything she does will filter first through how she feels rather than what she thinks. While directing *Down Town and Watermelon Boats: The Preparation and Execution of a Whole*, we spent a significant amount of time finding each character's *imaginary body* and *center*.

In rehearsal, I asked the actors to walk around the room while imagining their character's body. I wanted them to discover their character's imaginary body while moving through space in search of the character's *center*. From my own work with the technique, I discovered that the character's center led me to discover much about the personality and physicality of the character. Therefore, to explore the character's center

while exploring the character's imaginary body became an obvious and necessary combination.

I found that by having my students walk to discover the imaginary body and center it focused them and their imaginations as they moved through space. It was fascinating to watch John Traina, who is not a gay man in life, discover the imaginary body and center of his gay character in *Down Town*. John moves through space in his own life like a man who plays defensive football, leading from his broad chest. As he discovered the character's physicality, his center dipped down into his hips and legs. His chest was lifted but not dominant any longer as he walked. Also, John has a tendency to fidget in his chair, a leg moving at all times. Through his exploration of his character's imaginary body and center, the leg twitching disappeared. He had become grounded in his will center—his hips and legs.

In *Watermelon Boats*, Wendy Wygant and Kat Palcsak portrayed their characters' friendship through the process of three vignettes spanning a period of ten years. The first was when they were eleven years-old, then sixteen, and then twenty-one. The imaginary body and center work was invaluable to them in order to differentiate the psychology and physiology of the characters through time and how they related to themselves, the other, and the world. We had to discover the underlying essence of each character that would remain intact throughout their characters' evolution. This brought us to walking with purpose, imagining the eleven-year-old body and center. Kat found the center in her heart/chest. Wendy found the center to be her head. The young girls skipped and tossed the ball to each other, laughing and joking with lightness and ease. Kat's center

communicated love and fun from her heart. Wendy's center being in her head, she had fun calculating a strategy to win the ball game. These centers remained dominant through the other ages, though they took on different qualities depending on their character's given circumstances.

When we got to the text, it became clear that Wendy's center, being concentrated in her thinking center, was blocking her from experiencing feelings. She was missing a fundamental element of the relationship, the quality of love. These girls are best friends. I reminded them of the ease, playfulness, and love required in the first scene. I also remunerated that though Wendy's character's primary center was the *thinking* center, her *feeling* center (heart/chest) and her *will* center (hips/legs) were also in play. The solution was to do an action with a quality that would lead her to the desired balance of centers. I asked her to lovingly unraid her friend's hair. Not only did this action and quality bring her closer to a sense of loving her friend and her friend feeling loved but it became a significant psychological gesture for both of them.

Psychological Gesture

My experience with Chekhov's psychological gesture is that when repeated the gesture stirs the *will* to action and then to a feeling. According to Chekhov, "The *strength* of the movement stirs our will power in general; the *kind* of movement awakens in us a definite corresponding *desire*, and the quality of the same movement conjures up our *feelings*."¹² The Psychological Gesture stirs the will center to *do* something, to act on an impulse. The *quality* of *how* one responds to the impulse is what stirs the feelings. As an example, I place my hand over my heart. This stirs the will causing me to have the

impulse to protect my heart. I then hold my heart firmly but tenderly. A wave of sadness washes over me. The next time I hold my hand over my heart in preparation for a moment on stage, the feeling comes almost directly. Therefore, after the psychological gesture is experienced a few times, one internalizes it. The body and psyche have acquired a physical and emotional memory of this experience. Often after internalizing the psychological gesture, one is no longer required to enact the physical doing of it in order for it to stir the will and the feelings.

Psychological Gesture is also a fundamental aspect of Alba Emoting's effector patterns, though Dr. Bloch does not describe it as such. She sees the breath as the fuel for the gesture. According to Dr. Bloch: "Although breathing is harder to perceive visually than facial expression or body posture, we must not forget that it is the basis of it all: **the appropriate gesture without the corresponding breath does not transmit emotion.** Adding the respiratory element immediately brings the emotion alive."¹³ But, the gesture remains an important aspect for the fruition of an emotion. The combination of breath and gesture brings the psychological gesture to life. According to Chekhov, repeating the gesture is stimulus for an emotion. The repetition of a psychological gesture naturally provokes a corresponding breathing pattern.

During the writing of this thesis, I am in rehearsal for the world premiere of *Cleveland Heights*. The director asked me to mask grief during a specific moment. I am to attempt to hide my sadness from the actor playing my brother. I discovered that the use of the psychological gesture of holding my hand over my heart center to suppress the

emotion assisted by the breathing pattern of sadness creates precisely the result that the director wants (i.e. masked but not submerged grief).

In rehearsal for *Watermelon Boats*, I encouraged Kat and Wendy to explore psychological gesture in their initial action as eleven-year-olds. They shove their imaginary watermelon boats out onto a lake. We worked with the psychological gesture of pushing away. For Kat, the psychological gesture developed a quality of excited delight. For Wendy, the psychological gesture acquired a quality of serious competitiveness. These psychological gestures fed what they already experienced with their characters' centers and imaginary bodies. The gesture of pushing the imaginary watermelon boats onto the lake with their relative qualities in action launched the play itself. Another example of the usefulness of Psychological Gesture happened in the rehearsal of the third vignette when they were twenty-one. Kat was having trouble finding the action and quality required to encourage her friend to hold onto her dream of becoming a famous author. She felt she was pushing for an emotion and didn't connect with the truth of the moment. I taught her the position and action of *lifting*. She repeated this several times until the desire to inspire her friend stirred the need and the feeling. Then, she was able to encourage her friend lovingly. After this experience, she never had trouble with the moment again.

In *Down Town*, John Traina found a psychological gesture in his left hand and wrist. Though I initially considered the limp wrist an easy, stereotypical choice, later I could see how it engaged him psychologically and physiologically. Kaylin Major discovered a powerful psychological gesture through snapping her fingers and flicking

whatever over her shoulder as she said, “Enough!” Though Kaylin never used the physical gesture in the play, it was palpable in her performance as a psychological gesture. As her character was the *will* of the trio, her psychological gesture actually drove the piece.

As an instructor of a sophomore acting class, teaching Psychological Gesture was a challenge. When I introduced the position of *open* (arms open to the sky, legs apart yet firmly planted, face tilted up), they looked at me as though I was kidding. They turned into a giggling crowd of undergraduates, afraid to expose themselves to their classmates. Done with full commitment, this psychological gesture is incredibly powerful and even inspirational as Chekhov states: “The character is completely opened to influences coming from ‘above,’ and is obsessed by the desire to receive and even to force ‘inspirations’ from these influences.”¹⁴ There can be an amazing feeling of openness provoked by this psychological gesture. Naturally, it scares some people.

Equally scary for some of my students was the psychological gesture of *closed*. This position is crouched down, head down, arms tightly held around one knee while the other is on the floor. According to Chekhov, the quality of this gesture is entirely introspective, with no desire to come in contact with the world, though it is not necessarily a weak gesture. “Its desire to be isolated might be a very strong one. A brooding quality permeates its whole being.”¹⁵ My experience with this gesture is that it can provoke loneliness, sadness, even fear, depending on the general tempo in which my character lives. When I played Lady Anne in a scene from *Richard III*, I began the scene in a closed position crouched next to the casket of my dead husband. I was crying until I

heard Richard approach. Then the psychological gesture of closed took on a quality of fear and hiding. I was fascinated by how quickly the psychological gesture could shift in quality and not be lost.

Teaching Psychological Gesture to young actors is an interesting task and one for which I am very glad I am experienced with Alba Emoting. After having taught the open and closed positions over a period of several classes, I demonstrated connecting them. I began in the closed position. After attaining the fullness of the closed P.G., I transitioned into an open P.G. I ended the exercise by returning to the closed P.G. Then the students, following my lead, executed the exercise. The next piece of the exercise is to say “no” in the closed position and “yes” in the open position. Needless to say, my students were apprehensive, some were literally afraid to try. One brave young man volunteered. With his usual ability to jump right in and commit, he executed the exercise and truly experienced the psychological gestures. As each student took their turn, some of them allowed themselves to experience the gestures while others were clearly holding back, unwilling or unable to expose themselves to their peers.

One young woman began to whimper in the closed position. When she spoke in the closed position, the pitch of her voice sounded like a little girl alone and afraid in the dark. She bravely continued and attempted the open gesture but wouldn't return to the closed. I asked her to take a seat and breathe the Neutral pattern. The next person didn't quite commit but the next young woman surely did. She experienced the full exercise but when it came for it to end in the closed position, she began to sob. At this point, I asked the class to breathe in the Tenderness Pattern while I worked with the struggling student.

I led her through two cycles of Step-Out until her flush had faded and she was breathing normally, her eyes once again clear. Then I asked the entire class to perform a Step-Out which they were glad to do. The atmosphere in the room was charged with emotion and everyone needed to release it. There was not a person present that day that did not learn about the power of a psychological gesture and the stabilizing effect of Step-Out.

Atmosphere

A fundamental element of Chekhov's technique is atmosphere. There are atmospheres everywhere. Every room, house, city, field, street, country has an atmosphere. There is atmosphere between people. One might call the chemistry between people atmosphere. Chekhov wrote, "The *idea* of a play produced on the stage is its *spirit*; its atmosphere is its *soul*; and all that is visible and audible is its *body*."¹⁶ The air in the room is its atmosphere. The atmosphere in a play is theatrically created through the set, lights, music and so on. But the soul of the play, the atmosphere, does not permeate or become the oxygen in the theatre unless the actors, director, and playwright have created it. According to Chekhov, "With the atmosphere reigning on the stage, your *feelings* (and not only your intellect) will be stirred and awakened."¹⁷ The audience members will be compelled to take the journey with the actors because they too have been awakened by and have become part of the atmosphere. All too many times, spectators are not offered such an atmosphere and that is when the restlessness settles in.

Atmospheres and Qualities are both in the realm of feeling, though the first is *objective feeling* and the latter is *subjective feelings*. They can exist simultaneously. Chekhov says, "Two different atmospheres (objective feelings) *cannot exist*

simultaneously. The stronger atmosphere inevitably defeats the weaker.”¹⁸ Consider a party of friends. They are sharing an atmosphere of celebration. They enter a room where someone has just died. The atmosphere of grief will subdue the partiers. Atmosphere urges someone’s *will* to respond in kind.

The 2008 production of *A Christmas Story* had a very different atmosphere than the prior three seasons. The actor who played the role of grown up Ralph from 2005 to 2007 was a wonderful technician but had no love for the role or the play. He personally disliked Christmas. Therefore, he lacked respect for the play itself and the audience who came to see it. As a fellow actor, it was very difficult to be around this actor off stage because his atmosphere was so negative. As he was not available for the production in 2008, another actor took the role. This actor loved the play, the role, the children, his fellow actors, and the audience. *A Christmas Story* is particularly dependent on the actor playing Ralph to understand that ultimately it is him who creates the atmosphere and draws the audience in. He is the narrator who takes the spectators on a journey. He speaks directly to them. Everyone I spoke with who saw the play this year that had seen it in prior seasons said they loved him and the experience and preferred it to the prior years. This is because the atmosphere he brought to the role and the play was one of love. It was a joy to bask in the loving atmosphere we created together in rehearsal and performance of *A Christmas Story*.

When it came to teaching my students about atmosphere, I used our ball playing. As was our customary warm up, we tossed the ball to each other in silence as we connected to the Feeling of the Whole, Feeling of Lightness, Feeling of Beauty and

Feeling of Form. I asked them to toss the ball to each other with the quality of tenderness. After a while of doing so, I stopped the exercise and asked them what they had experienced. They had experienced the atmosphere of tenderness. It was palpable in the room. The relaxation in the eyes and the body and the breath of the group was warm and sweet. I noticed they were also breathing in the Tenderness Pattern quite naturally.

During the rehearsal process of *Down Town and Watermelon Boats: The Preparation and Execution of the Whole*, I used the ball as a tool to connect them with the atmosphere of the play. As we had done in class, each cast warmed up together by tossing the ball to each other with actions and qualities. The *Down Town* cast discovered their personal atmospheres and the objective atmospheres through this exercise. The three of them formed a triangle with John Traina as the apex. He casually tossed the ball to Brittany Barnes and Kaylin Major with the intention that they catch it. Before long, it became clear that Kaylin's character was in competition for Brittany's character's loyalty and John's character was the odd man out. The atmosphere in the room became quite charged as John's casual atmosphere was overpowered by the competitiveness of the others. They were ganging up on him by throwing him balls that were difficult to catch. We stopped the ball tossing and went to the set. They quite adroitly took the atmosphere into the play. It was fascinating to see how one of the characters would hold that powerful atmosphere over another until it was snatched by yet another character and then another.

In the *Watermelon Boats* atmosphere exercise, Kat and Wendy tossed the ball before each of the three segments. Atmosphere was absolutely essential in differentiating

the time and age of the girls. When they were eleven-years-old, they skipped and played while tossing the ball. The atmosphere was of youth and fun and abandon. The second segment's atmosphere exercise when they were sixteen was more subdued, introspective, and on guard. The atmosphere was strained. In the third when they were twenty-one, the atmosphere was of carefulness almost as if they were strangers. Each of these atmospheres both subjectively and objectively affected the movement of the scene. They breathed these atmospheres into their roles and radiated them.

Radiation

One of the strongest means of communication is the radiation of an emotion, an impulse, a thought. Chekhov said, "If the Atmosphere bears the content in general, then Radiation bears it in detail."¹⁹ The radiation of a strong feeling will cause that feeling to become significant to the audience even without words. "Those indescribable, unspeakable things that the actor has accumulated in his soul while working creatively on his part will be conveyed only through Radiation."²⁰ I had never put a label on it for myself before working with Chekhov's technique, though I knew the feeling of radiation in a role. I would have described it before as the spirit of the moment I was experiencing flowing through me to the audience. Now I see that it is atmosphere in action on the air waves.

In the production of *Our Town*, I experienced strong radiation throughout the play but most powerfully in my last scene. Emily returns from the grave to revisit her 12th birthday. As Mrs. Webb, I was breathing in the Tenderness Pattern doing the Psychological Gesture of stirring imaginary scrambled eggs. I was looking out radiating

tenderness, seeing nothing. Tenderness radiated through me, around me, well beyond me. So much so that Emily couldn't penetrate it. This was the director's goal. At the time, I had not had exposure to Michael Chekhov or the term *Psychological Gesture*. I was merely executing the director's request to stir imaginary eggs. The feeling and radiation it provoked was truly powerful. This proves to me that a strong psychological gesture affects one whether or not one knows the technique. Looking back on this experience, I see that I radiated tenderness and detachment fully by combining the Tenderness Pattern and a strong Psychological Gesture.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

It is my opinion after working with Michael Chekhov's technique and Alba Emoting that not only are they highly compatible, but combined, they are highly effective. It is each technique's aim to reach the desired emotional/physical/mental states without rummaging through one's personal images from the past. Chekhov's use of Psychological Gesture stirs the will and ignites feeling through the act of repeating a strong gesture. Alba Emoting stirs the desired emotion through the combination of breathing patterns, facial expressions, and postures, all of which come into play while executing a Psychological Gesture. After internalized, one can utilize the Psychological Gesture merely through the thought of it. With Alba Emoting, the quality and emotion can begin to flow after a few breaths in a chosen pattern. The effector patterns cause an individual's atmosphere to arise and influence the overall atmosphere in a scene. As the emotional effector patterns mirror the natural breathing patterns, when consciously added to the psychological gesture, qualities, atmosphere, and actions, the result is a clear and organic performance.

When an actor needs to work fast to deliver what is required having both of these techniques at one's disposal is invaluable. I found that by asking a director for the quality

of an action reduces confusion on both of our parts. For example, I played the role of a stressed out casting director in the film *Hollywood and Wine*, scheduled for release in the spring of 2009. The director wanted me in a heightened state of anxiety from the first moment. I chose a quality, *desperately*. I began to breathe in the fear pattern. He wasn't quite getting what he wanted from the scene, so he asked me not to be nice to the actress I was auditioning. This can be interpreted in many ways. I quizzed him for the quality he was looking for. Finally he agreed that he was looking for sternness. At the same time, he wanted high anxiety. This time before the camera rolled, I started the anger breath pattern and mixed it with the fear pattern. Then I delivered my action (to get the best out of the actress auditioning) *sternly*. The result was that through the combination of the techniques I was able to clearly give the director what he was looking for though he could not articulate it. Through the quality of sternness I masked my character's fear and anger that the actress I had called back would not be chosen by the producers. This was what he wanted from me.

After years of searching, studying, and working as a theatre artist, it is my firm belief that Stanislavski would be very glad to know that the evolution of realistic acting had come so far. What he desired most was the truth to be on the stage rather than a facsimile. Stanislavski said as much in his book *My Life In Art*.

The production of the stage director and the playing of the actors may be realistic, conventionalized, modernistic, naturalistic, impressionistic, futuristic, — it is all the same so long as they are convincing, that is,

truthful or truthlike; beautiful, that is artistic; uplifted, and creating the true life of the human spirit without which there can be no art.²¹

It is with this same conviction to truth that Michael Chekhov and Dr. Susana Bloch created their techniques. Though Chekhov utilized much of what he learned from Stanislavski, both Chekhov's and Bloch's contributions to truthful acting are through engaging physiology to evoke the emotional and psychological life of a character. Alba Emoting is an excellent tool for an actor using any acting technique. Bloch understands that Alba Emoting is not all that is required for truthful acting. "Again it must be stressed here that we are dealing with *technical support* for the actor's mastery, which **in no way will affect his creativity and imagination.**"²² It is for this reason that I find such value in the combination of the two techniques. Michael Chekhov's technique and Alba Emoting give me the most tangible, repeatable, and natural method of communicating a role. These techniques when combined offer a full spectrum of possibility in the discovery, creation, and performance of a given reality.

NOTES

¹Roxane Rix, "Alba Emoting: A Revolution in Emotion for the Actor." *Performer Training: Developments Across Cultures*, ed. Ian Watson, (London: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2001), 4.

²Ibid., 4.

³Susana Bloch, Madeline Lemeignan, and Nancy Aguilera-Torres, "Specific Respiratory Patterns Distinguish Among Human Basic Emotions," *International Journal of Psychophysiology* (1991), 53.

⁴Susana Bloch, *The Alba of Emotions* (Santiago-Chile: Ediciones Ultramarinos PSE, 2006), 149.

⁵Ibid., 122.

⁶Franc Chamberlain, "Michael Chekhov: Pedagogy, Spirituality, and the Occult," *University of Toronto, Academic Electronic Journal in Slavic Studies* 23 (2003), 9.

⁷Michael Chekhov. *On the Technique of Acting* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 60.

⁸Franc Chamberlain, "Michael Chekhov: Pedagogy, Spirituality, and the Occult," *University of Toronto, Academic Electronic Journal in Slavic Studies* 23 (2003), 9.

⁹Michael Chekhov. *On The Technique of Acting* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 48.

¹⁰Mala Powers. Preface: *Michael Chekhov's Chart for Inspired Acting. Michael Chekhov. On The Technique of Acting* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), xxxviii.

¹¹Mel Gordon, *The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia* (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1987), 156.

¹²Michael Chekhov, *To The Actor: On The Technique of Acting* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 64.

¹³Susana Bloch, *The Alba of Emotions* (Santiago-Chile: Ediciones Ultramarions PSE, 2006), 182.

¹⁴Michael Chekhov, *On The Technique of Acting* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 68a.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 68b.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 115.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 116.

²¹Contantin Stanislavski, *My Life In Art* (New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1948), 487.

²²Susana Bloch, *The Alba of Emotions* (Santiago-Chile: Ediciones Ultramarions PSE, 2006), 182.

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