

# I

## TOWARD A PHYSICAL CHARACTERIZATION

AT THE beginning of our lesson I told Tortsov, the Director of our school and theatre, that I could comprehend with my mind the process of planting and training within myself the elements necessary to create character, but that it was still unclear to me how to achieve the building of that character in physical terms. Because, if you do not use your body, your voice, a manner of speaking, walking, moving, if you do not find a form of characterization which corresponds to the image, you probably cannot convey to others its inner, living spirit.

"Yes," agreed Tortsov, "without an external form neither your inner characterization nor the spirit of your image will reach the public. The external characterization explains and illustrates and thereby conveys to your spectators the inner pattern of your part."

"That's it!" Paul and I exclaimed.

"But how do we achieve that external, physical characterization?" I asked.

"Most frequently, especially among talented actors, the physical materialization of a character to be created emerges of its own accord once the right inner values have been established," explained Tortsov. "In *My Life in Art* there are many examples of this. One is the case of the part of Dr. Stockman in *An Enemy of the People* by Ibsen. As soon as the right spiritual form was fixed, as the right inner characterization was woven out of all the elements germane to the image, there appeared, no one knows from where,

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Stockman's nervous intensity, his jerky gait, his neck thrust forward and two jutting fingers, all earmarks of a man of action."

"But if we are not lucky enough to have such a spontaneous accident? What do you do then?" I asked Tortsov.

"What do you do? Do you remember in Ostrovski's play, *The Forest*, how Peter explains to Aksyusha the way to act so that the two will not be recognized on their flight? He says to her, 'You drop one lid—and it makes a squint-eyed person!'"

"Externally it is not difficult to disguise yourself. I once had something of the sort happen to me; I had an acquaintance I knew very well. He talked with a deep bass voice, wore his hair long, had a heavy beard and bushy moustache. Suddenly he had his hair cut and shaved off his whiskers. From underneath there emerged rather small features, a receding chin and ears that stuck out. I met him in this new guise at a family dinner, at the house of some friends. We sat across the table from one another and carried on a conversation. Whom does he remind me of? I kept saying to myself, never suspecting that he was reminding me of himself. In order to disguise his bass voice my friend used only high tones in speaking. This went on for half the meal and I talked with him as though he were a stranger.

"And here is another case. A very beautiful woman I knew was stung in the mouth by a bee. Her lip was swollen and her whole mouth was distorted. This not only changed her appearance so as to make her unrecognizable, it also altered her pronunciation. I met her accidentally and talked to her for several minutes before I realized that she was one of my close friends."

As Tortsov was describing these personal experiences he squinted one eye almost imperceptibly, as though he were bothered with an incipient sty. Meantime he opened his other eye wide and raised the brow above it. All this was done so that it could be scarcely noticed even by those standing close to him. Yet even this slight change produced

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a strange effect. He was of course still Tortsov but he was different and you no longer had confidence in him. You sensed knavery, slyness, grossness, all qualities little related to his real self. It was only when he stopped acting with his eyes that he became once more our nice old Tortsov. But let him squint one eye—and there again was that mean little slyness, changing his whole personality.

"Are you aware," he explained to us, "that inwardly I remain the same and speak in my own person regardless of whether my eye is squinted or open, whether my eyebrow is raised or lowered? If I were to acquire a twitch and that were causing my eye to squint I should also have remained unchanged in personality and continued normal and natural. Why should I change inwardly because of a slight squint in my eye? I am the same whether my eye is open or shut, whether my eyebrow is raised or lowered.

"Or, let us suppose, I am stung by a bee as was my beautiful friend and my mouth is distorted."

Here Tortsov, with extraordinary realism, pulled his mouth to the right side so that his speech was completely altered.

"Does this external distortion not only of my face but of my speech," he went on in his radically changed method of pronunciation, "impinge on my personality and natural reactions? Must I cease to be myself? Neither the sting of the bee nor the artificial distortion of my mouth should influence my inner life as a human being. And what about lameness (Here Tortsov limped) or paralysis of the arms (Instantly he lost all control over them) or a humped shoulder (His spine reacted correspondingly) or an exaggerated way of turning your feet in or out (Tortsov walked first one way and then the other)? Or an incorrect position of the hands and arms holding them too far forward or too far back (He illustrated this)? Can all these external trifles have any bearing on my feelings, my relations to others or the physical aspect of my part?"

It was amazing with what ease, simplicity and naturalness

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Tortsov instantly demonstrated all the physical shortcomings he was describing—a limp, paralysis, a hump, various postures of legs and arms.

“And what remarkable external tricks, which completely transform the person playing a part, can be accomplished with the voice, with speech and pronunciation, especially of consonants! To be sure your voice has to be well placed and trained if you are to change it, for otherwise you cannot, for any length of time, speak either with your highest or your lowest tones. As for altering your pronunciation, especially that of consonants, this is done very simply: pull your tongue back, shorten it (Tortsov did it as he was speaking) and a special manner of speech, rather reminiscent of the English way of handling consonants, will result. Or lengthen your tongue, pushing it a little in advance of your teeth (Again he did what he was describing) and you will have an inane lisp, which with proper elaboration would be suitable for a role like that of the Idiot.

“Or else, try putting your mouth into unusual positions and you will get still other ways of talking. For example, take an Englishman who has a short upper lip and very long, rodent-like front teeth. Give yourself a short upper lip and show your teeth more.”

“But how can you do that?” I said, trying it out on myself without success.

“How do I do it? Very simply,” answered Tortsov, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket and rubbing his upper teeth and the inside of his upper lip until they were quite dry. Then under cover of his handkerchief he tucked in his upper lip which remained stuck to his dry gums, so that when he took his hand from his face we were amazed at the shortness of his upper lip and sharpness of his teeth.

This external artifice hid from us his ordinary, familiar personality; in front of us there stood the Englishman he had just mentioned. We were under the impression that everything about Tortsov was changed; his pronunciation, his voice were different, as well as his carriage, his walk, his

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hands and legs. Nor was that all. His whole psychology seemed transformed. And yet Tortsov had made no inner adjustment. In another second he had abandoned the trick with his upper lip and continued to speak in his own person, until he again put the handkerchief in his mouth, dried his lip and gums and, when he dropped his hand with the handkerchief, was at once changed again into his Englishman.

This happened intuitively. It was only when we worked it out and confirmed it that Tortsov admitted the phenomenon. It was not he who explained it to us but we who told him, how all the characteristics which intuitively came to the surface were appropriate to and filled out the portrait of the gentleman with a short upper lip and long teeth—and all the result of a simple external artifice.

After digging down into his own thoughts and taking account of what went on inside himself Tortsov remarked that even in his own psychology in spite of himself there had been an imperceptible impulse which he found difficult immediately to analyse.

It was, however, an undoubted fact that his inner faculties responded to the external image he had created, and adjusted to it, since the words he pronounced were not his words, although the thoughts he expressed were his very own.

In this lesson then Tortsov vividly demonstrated that external characterization can be achieved intuitively and also by means of purely technical, mechanical, simple external tricks.

But how to find the right trick? Here was a fresh problem to intrigue and disturb me. Is this something to be learned, to be imagined, to be taken from life, or found accidentally, in books, by studying anatomy?

“The answer is—in all those ways,” explained Tortsov. “Each person evolves an external characterization out of himself, from others, takes it from real or imaginary life, according to his intuition, his observation of himself and others. He draws it from his own experience of life or that of his friends, from pictures, engravings, drawings, books,

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stories, novels, or from some simple incident—it makes no difference. The only proviso is that while he is making this external research he must not lose his inner self. Now I'll tell you what we shall do. For our next lesson we'll have a masquerade."

This proposal produced general astonishment.

"Each student will prepare an external characterization and mask himself in it."

"A masquerade? An external characterization of what kind?"

"No matter what kind. Choose anything you like—a merchant, a Persian, a soldier, a Spaniard, an aristocrat, a mosquito, a frog—whatever and whoever appeals to you. The costumes and the make-up facilities of the theatre will be at your disposal. Go and choose clothes, wigs, make-up."

His announcement at first caused consternation, then discussion and curiosity, and finally general interest and excitement. Each one of us began to think of something, to imagine something, make notes, secret drawings, preparing his choice of a portrait, costume and make-up.

Only Grisha remained, as usual, indifferent and cool to the whole idea.