

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE:

Hollywood's Best Kept Acting Secret!

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PART 1

The Psychological Gesture is an amazing acting tool developed by the great Russian actor, director and teacher, Michael Chekhov (1891 to 1955). Designed to get the actor instantly into character, the Psychological Gesture is used today by many great actors such as Jack Nicholson, Anthony Hopkins and Johnny Depp.

Mr. Chekhov was deeply admired by Stanislavsky, Meisner, Strasberg, Adler and Hagen and many thought his brilliant acting was unteachable genius. He believed otherwise and dedicated his life to developing and inspiring genius in other actors. Stanislavsky's final development in the Method, The Method of Physical Actions, was inspired by Chekhov's belief that the path to great acting was through the physiology. Today, most actors training in the United States relies on changing only the psychology of the actor. Highly mystical at the time, Michael Chekhov believed in the mind-body connection and took the psychological approach and married it to full-bodied gesture to create: The Psychological Gesture.

What is the Psychological Gesture?

If we define gesture to mean a movement that has intention, we could say that the Psychological Gesture is a movement that expresses the psychology of the character. Chekhov defines the psychology to consist of the thoughts, feelings and will of a human being. Hence, the PG is a physical expression of the thoughts, feelings and desires of the character, incorporated into one movement. You can liken it to a moving logo, like the Nike logo, which captures the essence of Nike in one image.

So, in one movement, the PG awakens the essence of the character in you thus aligning your thoughts, feelings and will (objective) with that of the character. When this happens, your walk, your expressive mannerisms, your voice and line delivery are all inspired by one moving image. You perform the gesture prior to your scene to trigger your artistic nature. While in the scene, if your inspiration weakens, you simply envision the gesture in your imagination as you are acting and it will revitalize you.

How do you find the right Psychological Gesture?

There may be times when the image of the PG appears to you as soon as you read the script, or story board. This spontaneous inspiration will occur often when you have trained your body, mind and voice to respond to each other. When the intuitive process doesn't happen, there are a couple of other ways.

One path created by Chekhov is called, Leading Questions, in which you cultivate your imagination by asking questions. Your imagination will respond instantly and your body will begin to express the movement in small ways before you can even verbalize your answers.

For example: if you are playing a villain, you might begin by asking what it is your character desires. Power? Okay, how do you go about getting power? By dominating? Okay, what is a physical movement that dominates? Pressing down.

Now, your first practice with PG: Start with your hands as high as possible and press them down against an imaginary resistance. Picture the character's opponents as you press down to the floor. Add to the press a quality: rage, frustration, sinister, conniving, fear, etc. Try different qualities until you feel the quality and desire to dominate in every cell of your being. If you need further help:

PART 2

In Part One on Michael Chekhov's Psychological gesture, we discussed "who", "what", "why" and "how." Now we go deeper into the "how" to create a more effective PG. Try your villainous PG as developed at the end of article one. Is it stimulating you artistically?

If the movement does not affect you, there might be several reasons. The form of the movement may not be right for you. Perhaps your villain snatches rather than presses? Or maybe you are only committing a half-portion of your energy? This will result in only being half inspired. Perhaps your concentration on the image is weak? In this case you must develop strength there. In Michael Chekhov's system there are many exercises to awaken the mind-body connection. Doing these increases the impact of the gesture. Like any great musician, you first learn the scales and then how to play a melody.

Some times you can shorten the Leading Questions sequence by visualizing the character and asking it to show you it's PG. This requires well-developed concentration skills.

Visualize a beam of energy (light) going up from your core through the top of your head straight into outer space. Now, visualize beaming the character down as in Star Trek. Imagine the details as the character materializes from the feet to the head. Now, imagine it shows you the PG.

Imitate what you see as closely as possible. Observe how the movement impacts you. Your ability to identify and imitate what you see is developed through additional Michael Chekhov tools.

Is there only one PG for each character?

You can have an Overall PG that will help you perform any given moment in the story and you can have different PG's for different sections, moments or beats in the story. Every objective you identify can be gesturized. This transforms your intellectual knowledge of your objective into your body and voice: the only parts of the actor that the audience actually experiences. You know you have found your Overall PG when it stimulates you for every moment regardless of the scene you are creating.

Why don't we know more about this?

When new ideas are introduced they are often attacked and mocked before given fair consideration. It may appear self-evident to many that the mind and body are inextricably connected, however, the idea that one can activate emotion, desire and images through a body movement was too mysterious, too mystical for most people during Michael Chekhov's life. Fortunately, he wrote the books: *On the Technique of Acting* and *To the Actor* which were the primary means of learning the PG for Hopkins and Depp. Today, more actors are willing to share their secrets, and modern technology has helped to spread the word.

As it would be difficult to learn to play the piano only through reading an article, the same is true with the PG and all of Mr. Chekhov's unsurpassed techniques. Hopefully this information has inspired you to pursue new possibilities with your acting.