

Michael Chekhov's Final Gift

The Three Sister Sensations of Gravitational Stability

Falling, Balancing and Floating

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The following paper was presented at the Sept 2007 International Michael Chekhov Symposium in Paris, following Lisa's three days of teaching in the accompanying workshop.

I am delighted to share with you my journey to grasp and expand upon a theory that I believe Mr. Chekhov was developing shortly before he died.[1] To my knowledge, this is the first formal writing on this technique as it was evolving after the last publications during Chekhov's life. I will give you the background, the basic concepts and their potential. I will further define each Sister, touch upon the experience of it and provide some idioms as Mr. Chekhov does in Chapter 5 of *On the Technique of Acting*. [2] I will discuss three specific applications that I have found for the Three Sisters. For time sake, following the conclusion, you will find suggestions for the Psychophysical training of these Grounds as well as resources for further exploration.

Allow me to set the background. Jack Colvin taught the fundamental premise of this theory to me in 1994.[3] As an adolescent, Jack was noted to be a prodigy with an amazing knowledge of philosophy that later connected very well with Mr. Chekhov's passion for the same subject. Their shared interest in theory makes it easy to picture a brilliant young actor engaging in inquisitive discussions with the ever-expanding consciousness of Mr. Chekhov. Jack told me that among the final topics that he and Mr. Chekhov discussed was the concept of "Falling, Balancing and Floating.

At the time Jack taught me these concepts, I was on the Organizing Board of the International Michael Chekhov Association, helping to formulate the Third Michael Chekhov International Workshop at Emerson College, Sussex, UK, under Sarah Kane's Artistic Direction. When it became possible for the IMCA to host a group of special guests who were direct students of Mr. Chekhov, we invited Jack to be among them. Jack and I had been working very closely, with him attending the classes I taught in Los Angeles, CA. We decided to introduce these concepts at the Festival using a scene from Neil Simon's *The Good Doctor*. This play is a collection of one-acts inspired by Anton Chekhov and we used a sketch called *The Audition*, directed by Jack. The two characters are the Famous Writer from Moscow (played by Jack) and the provincial Actress (played by me) who has walked for days from Odessa to audition. By the end of the scene, she has worn down the recalcitrant Writer and won permission to perform from the Three Sisters. Which sister? All three. And to his amazement, she shifts from Masha to Irina and then Olga.

For this final three-part monologue, under Jack's scrutinous direction, each character was rendered by employing one of the three sensations. Masha was balancing, Irina was floating and Olga was falling. In rehearsal, if I added the slightest bit of atmosphere, gesture, characterization or anything beyond pure movement with one of these three sensations, Jack stopped me. He was meticulous in having the tool as the singular inner focal point.

At the Festival, the demonstration generated a search to name this set of tools. I believe it was Franc Chamberlain who volunteered that we might call them the Three Sister Sensations, as those were the characters we used to demonstrate them. Additionally, such a title would fit well with the already existing Chekhov tools known as The Four Brothers of Art. And so the theory of Falling, Balancing and Floating was baptized *The Three Sister Sensations*.

The fundamental concept of the Three Sisters Sensations of Balancing, Falling and Floating describes the relationship of an object's stability due to gravity. Gravity is the law of physics that affects the human being most powerfully and continuously. We are speaking about the nature of equilibrium, the search for stability. In the three-dimensional world, any object can be identified either as Falling, Floating, or Balancing. This includes our bodies, our breath, and our eyes. Likewise, intangible energies such as our thoughts, feelings, desires, spirit, centers and personal atmospheres have their own degree of stability and can be described with these three sensations. Our basic breathing pattern as well as our walk can be described as a sequence of balancing, floating and falling.

By mastering the potential to freely move with these three sensations, we can then allow images of them to inspire us in several different applications that are effective in any style, medium or genre of performance.

What is FALLING?

One could say that if the energy is yielding to a gravitational pull in a specific direction, there is a sensation of falling. Usually this fall is in a downward direction. To experience this, simply raise one arm up, and release all tension. The arm will fall down. The breath falls in an exhale from the lungs.

Have you ever fallen up a flight of stairs? If we want to choose the broadest interpretation possible, we will consider things can fall in any direction. The key distinction here is that there is a yielding to the gravitational pull.

Imagine your chest falling and allow it to actually sink. What does this motion awaken? We might be crest fallen, heart broken, exhausted, relieved. It could trigger an emotional response, an image or a desire; a feeling of age or illness. Chekhov uses idioms and I too find them very useful.[4] As you grasp the phrase, picture the literal physical pattern of energy described. Imagine and observe its impact.

- Fall to pieces
- Fall for that old trick
- Fall asleep, fall into bed
- In the military, fall in and out of line.
- Fall in love
- Fall out of favor
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- Fall on your face
- Fall into a trap
- Fall in your lap
- Fall within the limits
- Fall behind or below
- Fall into ruin

What is FLOATING?

If Falling is sinking into the pull of gravity, Floating is a sense of freedom from gravitational pull and is directionless. The breath of floating is the inhale.

Floating in the 3 Sisters concept is different from the “Floating/Flowing” Quality of Movement. The possible confusion is a matter of English Semantics. The easiest way to clarify the difference is to note that the 4 Qualities of Movement are, as stated in *On The Technique of Acting*, movements correlated to the four basic elements of Earth, Water, Air, and Fire.[5] An expanded interpretation of the “Floating/Flowing” Quality of Movement could include any kind of water-like movement from a floating lily in a pond to a flowing waterfall.

Within the 3 Sister Sensations of Gravitational Stability, Floating refers to the sensation of weightlessness, suspension, detachment, levity or neutral buoyancy.

I was initially resistant to having two different tools called Floating and for a period of time taught it as Rising. Rising made sense to me as a polarity to Falling. It was easy to find idioms with Rising. However, Jack pointed out that while Rising is indeed one aspect of this Sister Sensation, calling it Rising is inaccurate and limits the tool to only mean the direction of the movement. As with Falling, Floating too can be in any direction. His point is well taken for we can in fact experience the sensation of floating weightlessly while moving downward, sideways or hovering.

Move your hands as if you are weightlessly floating in space. What does it awaken within you? Float forward. Float upward.

To move, breathe, and speak with a sensation of Floating Weightlessly may awaken feelings of being spacey, airy, lost, shocked, awed, stunned, disconnected, naïve, hopeless, loftiness. Stupidity, incapacity, retardation, dysfunction, elevation or superiority may be perceived. Paralysis, Inflation, expansion, rising, ascending, meditating are all aspects that can be explored with this sensation of weightless floating. Here are some idioms:

- Get a rise out of you
- The rising generation
- Drifting in sorrow
- Floating in a sea of grief
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- Head in the clouds
- Spaced out
- Airhead
- Empty-headed

What is BALANCING?

Balancing (the active attempt to become balanced) is the urge to attain or sustain equilibrium of opposing forces. The energy is willfully engaged in the struggle against gravity and levity- to not fall, to not float. Yielding to gravity is encompassed by the term Falling. Trying to stop or break the fall is encompassed by the term Balancing. The state is imbalance, unbalance, and instability. One tries not to topple or drift. The breath of balancing is held. It is a very highly charged state of energy that, like a tightrope walker, is most riveting in a chaotic struggle for control. It provides strong contrast to floating weightlessly and falling yieldingly.

For our artistic purposes it is important to distinguish between balanced and balancing. Balanced (to be in a state of balance) suggests that the forces on either side of the center of gravity are equal, producing stability. This condition is one to be desired as a human being since it suggests a lack of tension. In the Chekhov Technique we describe this condition as a Feeling of Ease. It is conflict-free. However, the nature of storytelling is centered

on Conflict. As such, only in brief moments would Balanced be the ideal choice of sensation without losing the interest of our audience. Balancing as an active process will be infinitely more useful to the actor.

To veil[6] this tool, I often think of the fulcrum of a scale with arms. That fulcrum can be as thin as a knife blade, but it will hold up the arms only if the balance is perfect. To do so, it must maintain an upright tension. As you sit, look straight ahead while trying to touch the ceiling with the fontanel of your head. Picture that you are sitting on a chair on a tight rope, pulling everything straight up through your spine, and balancing by tightening your gluteus muscles. You are inwardly trembling with the struggle. What does the image awaken?

Common responses to this include: Terror, Anticipation, Excitement, Eagerness, Worry, Aggravation, Panic, Apprehension, Contraction, Chaos, Disorientation, Hyperactive, and Repression. A Few idioms are:

- Hanging in the Balance
- On the Edge
- On pins and needles
- Strike a balance
- The scales are still in motion
- Balance of Power
- Balancing out

Observing these 3 Sister Sensations at play in the universe will render a vivid knowledge of the variety of states and conditions that can be expressed through them. These are three major applications I recommend: for **Emotional truth, Characterization and Transitional Gestures.**

Employing one or more of these can awaken any Emotional state. And they can be localized to a center in the body. Here is an exercise done with veiling so that the only motion is very subtle, very natural motion.

Float your head to a doorway across the room. Imagine someone enters. As they do, your heart begins to float. They walk across the room and your gut begins to balance, then your hands struggle for balance. With each step, the struggle travels to an additional body part. The person turns away and your heart falls, your breath falls, your left ear falls, your right toe falls.

An audience will see a story in this etude. They may project upon the stage an emotional heightening, anticipation, hope, anxiety, excitement, yearning, abandonment, depression, disappointment, relief, etc. The actor allows the audience to color the work as they see it and accomplishes this very simply by moving and breathing the tools. It may awaken many images in the actor but the most important part of any tool is that regardless of how it impacts the performer, the audience will have an active response.

These 3 Sister Sensations can be a defining Character trait in the same way that Thinking, Feeling, Willing and personal atmospheres can be predominant traits.

Perhaps Lady Macbeth is a Balancer and Ophelia is a floater. May be Hamlet is a balancer one day and a floater the next, and then a faller. Goneril and Reagan can be contrasted by choosing falling versus balancing personal atmospheres.

In the famous film, The Wizard of Oz, one could say the Tin Man is balancing in search of his feeling heart, the Scarecrow is floating in search of his thinking, and the Cowardly Lion is falling in search of courageous will. The Good Witch is Floating and the Wicked Witch is Balancing and Dorothy is Falling. With the help of the man behind the curtain, they achieve balance.

In the famous Television show, Seinfeld, Jason Alexander's George could be called a Falling Character. Jerry might be a floater, and Kramer would be the balancing character. In Friends, Ross and Rachel are hapless fallers, Monica and Chandler are balancers and Phoebe and Joey are floaters.

Additionally, the arc of a character can be expressed by transforming the personal atmosphere from one "Sister" to another.

Let us explore the Three Sisters as Transitional Gestures. When a character reaches, pushes, pulls, lifts, etc. there is a moment where it does not know whether its effort has succeeded. They experience a sensation of "hanging in the balance." Once it knows the result, there is an inner and/or outer reaction. There must be a visible or invisible movement to connect the initial effort with the next movement. If the initial action has failed, an increased effort of the same gesture or a more effective gesture will follow and one of the Three Sisters can be the ideal transitional tool. If the gesture is a reach, for example, the movement can fall away from the failed reach in frustration, float away in confusion or balance away in fear of defeat until the character decides, prepares and executes the next gesture. Once again it will be hanging in the balance to see if it has won or lost. With a victorious win, the transitions can also be any of the Three Sister Sensations: falling in relief, balancing in excitement, floating in joy, until the next gesture is determined.

In Chapter 5 of *On The Technique*, Chekhov uses Horatio's speech to the Ghost of Hamlet's Father to demonstrate a Reaching Psychological Gesture (PG).[7] In this case, the arm extends. By leading our imagination with questions, this set of tools can provide many answers. Are there seven different reaches, or is it one reach that is sustained inwardly gaining momentum? If it is seven different reaches, what segues or transitions the gestures? To reach and then reach again requires withdrawing the arm. How? To try this sequence of reaching gestures with the two different reactions Chekhov suggests for Horatio is an excellent exercise to witness the possible impact the Three Sisters as transitions can offer the actor.

Conclusion

In some sense, what I offer is like an ending to a great composer's unfinished symphony. Some questions inevitably arise.

Did Chekhov in fact identify this set of tools? I find it easy to believe that Mr. Chekhov was unstoppable in his pursuit of a more complete system and that he was working right up to his final heart attack. I believe my source, Jack Colvin, to have been of the utmost integrity. That Jack has credited Mr. Chekhov as his source is sufficient for me.

Next Question: How would Chekhov have developed its use? Well this is truly unknowable. There is ample evidence that what and how Mr. Chekhov taught evolved from Russia to Hollywood. To continue in the path of the Master is the greatest way to honor him. I am in constant pursuit of enhanced clarity and increased potential. If we perceive Chekhov's tools as ways to describe energy patterns, we might see Expansion/Contraction as the most basic pattern of all moving energy. We could view molding, flowing, flying and radiating as how resistance affects this movement. So, to consider how gravity affects the stability of this movement seems to be a wonderfully useful tool.

Over the six years following the 1994 Workshop, under Jack's mentorship, I gained deeper understandings than what he or I had shared in England, later in New York and at the 1998 and 1999 Michael Chekhov International Workshops in Connecticut, USA. So if you have learned of these previously, please allow for some differences here. If someone asks me "Is it this?" or "Is it that?" my response is, "Pretend the answer is YES to both and see what you get by exploring both." I encourage the use of "other" rather than declaring things or people to be "wrong" or "right."

Final Question: How much effort needs to be expended in proving these are indeed Michael Chekhov's final contribution to his system? If the Three Sister Sensations, as presented here, serve as valuably as the other tools Chekhov surely developed, I hope you will embrace them. Whether your interest lies wholly in the person of Michael Chekhov or in the potential service Chekhov's theories offer to humanity, the Three Sisters are a fascinating and valuable concept worthy of his genius.

Thank you, my International Congress of Chekhovian Colleagues. Thank you, Jack for entrusting me with your knowledge. Thank you, Misha for your final gift to the actor and the Theatre of the Future.

Psycho-physical Training tips for the Three Sister Sensations

To train actors in this set of tools, I follow the same model of pedagogy as I do with the Qualities of Movement (QOM). Safety is always a priority. Be sure to warm up the body before embarking. Do large, full-bodied abstract movements expressing the energy and then practice veiling (making the physical movement less visible while maintaining the invisible movement). Give special attention to veiling and unveiling the tool in the center of the chest, the eyes and the breath. Work specifically on allowing the Ideal Artistic Center in the chest to fall, float or balance independently of the shoulders and waist.[8] Many actors' chests are locked, some muscle bound, sunken or expanded and move en masse. If they free up the thoracic segments of the spine to increase articulation in the torso, many emotions can be triggered.

For Falling

I encourage the breath to be actively falling, any sounds to be falling as well. In the physical falling, one can fall the arms up, the body sideways, and then fall the whole body gently to the ground or to brush the floor. You can have actors fall into each other's arm or in to cushions. When the actor has thoroughly explored the nature of falling, then they begin the process of veiling the large full-bodied movements by varying degrees until they can radiate the sensation subtly, invisibly. Practice letting different body parts fall with greater or subtler degrees of expression.

For Floating

Images of astronauts can be useful and the speed of the movements is best practiced at an extraordinarily slow legato tempo. On a scale of 0 (motionless) to 10 (maximum speed), floating is between 0 (zero) and 2 (two). I observe in teaching this, that many actors are initially resistant to maintaining this extraordinarily slow tempo. With the age of instant gratification, super speed Internet and communications, the average young person feels that a 6 (six) is dreadfully slow. It requires patience and courage to speak and move with this legato slow sensation and trust it is enough. When actors recover this versatility of tempo, it multiplies their means of expression significantly. Try Rising to see if it brings something different from Weightlessness. And again, work the chest, spine and sound with the floating breath.

For Balancing

For most actors, the desire to maintain their balance is so deeply rooted that it can be challenging to get them to place their physical bodies into actual struggle for balance. Yet this is precisely what you want to do. Pretending to struggle for balance becomes like mime and does not serve to increase the actors' ability to build a feeling of ease with this tool. Pretending to be off balance allows the artist to remain in conscious control with the lower ego, a state not likely to induce a peak performance. Work with partners, so that one can prevent injury, in a cushioned space if possible, to push the limits and experience the chaotic tension and frequent holding of breath and cessation of dialogue.

Float up onto your toes or one foot. Can you feel your instinctive counterbalancing system take over? Can you shut off the counterbalancing and literally lean back on your heels without bending your waist? Try speaking a constant stream of numbers. Do you stop each time you truly lose your balance?

Dr. Birdwhistle's 1970 study at the University of Pennsylvania showed that 38% of our communication is tonal. We grow up trying to block our voices from showing our weaknesses such as loss of control. In real life, we often just stop talking when we fight for control of our physical, mental or emotional equilibrium. Additionally, the classically trained actor will have a higher level of mastery of control over tone and breath. The result is that

the actor who tries to render an unbalanced character will often fail to express the vocal qualities that could occur. Practice in such a way that the sound is continuous and reflective of the unstable movement to develop a feeling of ease with this tool. We must breathe the character's breath.

References Cited

- [1] Sept. 30, 1955 Chekhov died in Los Angeles CA, USA and is buried at Forest Lawn Hollywood Hills Cemetery, next to his second wife Xenia Chekhova. The Address of his gravesite is 5564, coincidentally numbers include the year and his age.
- [2] M Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting* (New York, 1991) Hardcover, p. 59.
- [3] Jack Colvin was a successful Actor, Director, Teacher of film and stage. Jack, as a teenager, sought out Mr. Chekhov and was his protégé the final five years of Mr. Chekhov's life. Mr. Colvin passed away on Dec. 1, 2005 in Los Angeles, CA.
- [4] Idioms don't always translate well but the World Wide Web has some translations and definitions that may help your understanding and sharing of this tool at <http://www.answers.com>. See Attached copies.
- [5] M Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting* (New York, 1991) Hardcover, p. 47.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 165. In the Afterword of *On the Technique of Acting* by Michael Chekhov, Mala Powers describes the process of veiling powerful expression in order to meet stylistic demands of genre that require naturalistic expression.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 66-73.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p.44. The Ideal Artistic Center is the center of the chest, as Mr. Chekhov states in *On the Technique of Acting* and *To The Actor*. I emphasize this information primarily because other methods use lower centers in relation to emotion and stability and some teachers choose to work with those as the primary center. All the direct students of Michael Chekhov with whom I have trained and interviewed, at least 15, have agreed on this location. Mala Powers, late Executrix of the Chekhov Estate, with whom I taught for 18 years, was adamant about Chekhov's observation of the unique energy of this location. She described it as approximately three inches below the where the clavicle bones connect, and a few inches deep in the body. It is distinctly neither the heart nor the heart Chakra. It is the point in the body that most humans instinctively touch or point to when referring to themselves. My investigation suggests that this is at the thymus gland that controls the immune system and is somewhat tender. If one stands with arms extended parallel to the floor, the Ideal Artistic Center is where a horizontal line drawn from fingertip to fingertip will cross a vertical line drawn from fontanel straight down to the ground. This location unifies the will forces of the lower body, the feeling forces of the torso and the thinking forces of the head in to a balanced trinity of the psychology. It is the point that radiates most powerfully during peak inspiration.