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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Outside In: Using the Michael Chekhov Acting Method to Enhance Dancer Performance

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Melanie Rose Lastrina

Thesis Committee:  
Dr. Jennifer Fisher, Chair  
Professor Molly Lynch  
Professor Alan Terricciano

2018



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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Outside In: Using the Michael Chekhov Acting Method to Enhance Dancer Performance

By

Melanie Rose Lastrina

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2018

Dr. Jennifer Fisher, Chair

Dancers are often asked by choreographers and teachers to be expressive, fill movement with meaning or purpose, and perform steps in captivating ways, but are rarely taught *how* to do so. Is there a way to fill in the gap that exists in dancer training that teaches movement artists how to enhance their performance quality? This thesis explores how the psycho-physical, movement-based Michael Chekhov acting method could be developed to give dancers the tools needed to make choices within their technique. I choreographed and taught a nine-minute dance to five university dance majors while simultaneously training them in the Chekhov method to see if the technique could help them perform the different qualities of movement I was looking for. The students learned the basic Chekhov exercises of the Ball Toss, Expansion/Contraction, Imaginary Centers, Qualities of Movement, and Sensations in five one-hour sessions, and anonymously handed in journal entries after each lesson describing their experience and progress. Because the dancers performed my piece in a much more captivating way after they had gone through the Chekhov training, this suggests that the Michael Chekhov method could be a useful step in filling in the gap that exists in improving dancer expressivity.

## INTRODUCTION

Today, there are few collegiate dance programs that offer introductory acting courses for dancers, yet almost all college acting programs require a “movement” class for actors. With the wide range of characters and storylines dancers are asked to portray, and the consistent expectation for them to embody a vast variety of emotions, one would think there would be more cross-training in the area of acting to enhance their dance performance quality. This thesis will explore the benefit acting training has on dancers at the university level, and focus on the kind of training that could be most beneficial for these pre-professional students.

I have received a B.F.A. in Acting from Elon University, NC, and have been fortunate enough to get work as a professional dancer in various musical theater shows. Because of my past cross-training experiences in the areas of dancing and acting, I am aware of how useful acting training can be in the dancer’s toolbox. I became a more well-rounded dance artist who could not only execute the steps I was supposed to, but had a deeper emotional connection to the movement, or the story I was portraying. I had the opportunity to study many different types of acting methods during my time at Elon University, such as the techniques of Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg, Konstantin Stanislavski, and Stella Adler. I struggled with these, mostly because dance had always been my first language, and improvising a scene or speaking lines of text in front of my classmates felt foreign. It was not until I spent a winter term month at the Michael Chekhov Acting Studio in NYC that I was introduced to the Chekhov technique, and everything changed. In the class, we got to use imagery such as a “block of ice” in our chest to see how our physical body changed or reacted to this sensation. Playing with this sort of energy internally was freeing, and I no longer felt held back by my own fears or ego. Tapping into our imagination to create imagery in the body is something we are often asked to do as dancers. That is why

concentrating on this idea in the Chekhov technique made more sense to me than, say, finding my character's objectives in the Stanislavski method. Chekhov discusses the importance of finding artistry through the use of the body in his book, *To The Actor*. He says, "The actor's body can be of optimum value to him only when motivated by an unceasing flow of artistic impulses; only then can it be more refined, flexible, expressive . . . sensitive and responsive to subtleties which constitute the creative artist's inner life. For the actor's body must be moulded and re-created from *inside*" (To the Actor 3).

Could not the same be said for dancers? My body began to move in different ways than it had before, and it dawned on me how helpful this type of training would be for movers. I have found the Chekhov technique to be the most useful in connecting emotion to movement, and also in creating different qualities of movement through imagination, something we are often asked to do as dancers. Daniel Nagrin, author of the book, *The Six Questions: Acting Technique for Dance Performance*, argues that even if dancers are not expressing emotion in a piece, they play some sort of role every time they perform. He states, "I believe there is no way to enter the stage space . . . without assuming a role, regardless of what the post-modern theorists claim in their manifestos . . . You change when you step on the stage and you change when you leave it" (8).

In a master class at the University of California Irvine, choreographer Lar Lubovitch said he will often ask his dancers to "feel heavy" or "move like water," which could be a useful part of imagery for the dancer, yet does not address the way the dancer might achieve this image. Untrained dancers might be tempted to mimic and indicate these images, lacking the connection or initiation from the inside. In the Chekhov approach to acting, performers are trained to use their imaginations to create internal sensations that can alter the physiology of the body, and



possibly one's emotional state. Chekhov fills in that gap in dance training by giving us the tools to make choices when given a general direction from a choreographer.

To study how dancers would receive this type of training, I compiled a series of five one-hour acting workshops for dance majors at the University California Irvine based on several of Chekhov's psycho-physical exercises, while simultaneously creating a new piece of choreography for the students to perform. As we worked together, I eliminated and added elements to the exercises I chose so that these students might further enhance their dance performance quality and understanding of their artistic expression. I also explored how I could use the technique as a choreographer to extract the emotionally energized movement quality I was looking for from my dancers. I choreographed a nine-minute dance piece with these students in which they embodied four basic human emotions. I used specific tools from the technique to achieve the movement quality and expressivity I was looking for. Through my research and this process, I hoped to determine if the Chekhov technique is indeed a useful tool for dancers by asking the following questions:

1. What can I provide that is not already offered in dance training?
2. How can I use the Chekhov technique to best fit the needs of dancers?
3. What types of Chekhov exercises work best for dancers and which ones should be eliminated?

I hypothesized this ethnographic study would prove the importance acting training has in the role of creating a well-rounded dancer who has a deep understanding of expression, and is able to authentically connect to emotion and/or performance quality through his/her artistry. I hope my research will contribute to the way dance is taught at the university level by including

beneficial courses in acting so that students leave with the best set of tools possible to prepare them for the world as a professional dancer.

## **Chapter 1: Review of Literature**

My literature review includes an online search to see how acting appears on the Dance Department websites of top-ranked college dance programs in the United States, as well as literature on dancing, acting, and the Michael Chekhov technique. I have also included personal interviews with choreographers, acting teachers, dance teachers, and Chekhov masters.

Because the focus of this research is to enhance dance training at the postsecondary level, I began my process with a google search of the top college dance programs in the United States. According to a *College Magazine* article written by Jayna Taylor-Smith in 2016, “The Top 10 Schools for Dance” are:

1. Juilliard School
2. New York University
3. The Ailey School
4. The University of the Arts
5. Indiana University
6. Point Park University
7. Butler University
8. University of North Carolina School of the Arts
9. Skidmore College
10. Towson University

Whether or not this is an accurate list of the top dance schools in America was not my concern. What I gathered from this article was a pool of *some* of the best college dance programs that I could then research, and determine whether or not acting training was included as part of their dance degree requirements for students. I visited each school's website, reviewed their degree descriptions, and the results were as follows:

Of these ten dance schools, Butler University, Towson University, New York University, and Juilliard all *required* their dancers to take an introductory acting course. Indiana University required their students to choose between an introductory acting course or a music theory course to fulfill their degree. Point Park University required an acting course be taken for their Jazz BFA majors only, but "recommended" the class for all dance majors. In the course descriptions of the introductory acting classes offered on these top-ranked Dance Department websites, none named a specific acting technique taught, or if the training was specialized with a focus on dancers. Rather, all course descriptions included words such as "scene work," "monologue work," "scripted material," "improvisation," and "verbal expression." This all seems useful for actors who are required to speak lines of text and use verbal expression, but perhaps might not be the most effective for dancers who rarely do so.

From this search, I was able to conclude that six of the nine dance schools in America require their dance majors to take an acting program with script-based coaching. (North Carolina School of the Arts did not post their required courses online). It is clear, then, that some have caught on to the benefit of acting lessons in a dancer's toolbox. At my current school, University of California Irvine, acting is not a required course for dance majors. A professor, Tong Wang, and a graduate student, Amy Allen, noticed this gap in dancer training, and each developed a one-ten-week, two unit acting course at UCI. In a personal interview, when asked why she decided to

teach the course, Allen explains, “It’s no wonder when you see the students on stage, all they have to offer is technique because all they’re taking is technique class. When do they learn how to light up a stage?” Allen tried multiple approaches during her course, including exercises on character development, to help dancers enhance their performance quality. In Wang’s ten-week course, he trained dancers in balletic mime to teach them how to put meaning behind the story telling aspect in romantic ballet.

I decided to focus on the method of acting I found the most useful as a dancer, the Michael Chekhov technique, and how it could be used to more effectively train postsecondary dance majors than the methods already being offered. I also wanted to find out the possibility and/or benefit of adapting the method to use as a tool in a choreographic context.

Although very little literature states that dancers need to be good actors, many choreographers will, in some way, declare that dancers need to be expressive. When Ronald K. Brown was asked what he looks for in a dancer he said:

I look for someone who is . . . open in terms of their expression . . . We had this piece where we had . . . this confession of love, and someone in the company said, “You want me to dance about love and I can’t even tell my mother I love her,” and I said, “So maybe that’s why you need to do this piece.” So I need someone who’s open, that’s what I’m looking for.

Lar Lubovitch, in a lecture at the University of California Irvine, said that he looks for dancers who are “movement poets,” who use their imagination to turn dance phrases into poetry. Janet Eilber, Artistic Director of the Martha Graham Company, has said, “The Graham technique

is an emotional journey, as well as physical, because these exercises come from the stage, from the drama of theater, and so they are very inherently emotionally descriptive” (Eilber).

Although many dance choreographers will not mention acting as an integral part of dance performance, they expect their dancers to have the ability to express emotion, or *something*, through movement. This could be because the word “acting” has been given a negative connotation at times. My acting professor at Elon University, Richard Gang, told us multiple times in our classes, “I do not want to see you ACTING!” This could suggest that “acting” also meant “being false.” Gang wanted his students to tell the *truth* when they were acting. Perhaps the reasons so many choreographers and dancers do not use the words “acting” and “dance” together is because they don’t recognize what good acting is, and equate it to false, bad acting.

Some choreographers state that they don’t want their dancers to express emotion at all, and prefer a blank face. However, it seems they still expect the dancers to possess a unique quality, or purpose behind each step. In a personal interview with Katarzyna Skarpetowska, a 2017 nominee for Outstanding Emerging Choreographer by the Bessie Awards, she said she looks for a dancer who is organic, and can turn movement into a seamless language. “I look for people who can communicate through their bodies” (Skarpetowska). In other words, she wants a dancer who fills their movement with meaning and purpose. Yet, there is little being done to train a dancer to do this.

Although it was easy to find movement books created for actors, finding books that trained dancers in acting proved to be much more difficult. Yet, in many dance books and journal articles such as *Dance and Somatics*, *Dance Imagery for Techniques and Performance*, *The Mastery of Movement*, and “More Than Skin Deep: The Enduring Practice of Ballet in Universities,” there were mentions of energy, concentration, imagination, and emotion—all

subjects imperative to the Chekhov acting technique. The only book I found relevant to my focus on acting training for dancers was one written in 1997, *The Six Questions: Acting Technique for Dance Performance* by Daniel Nagrin. Nagrin believes that the reason so many choreographers opt for the “classic stone face of modern dance” is because they do not know how to teach acting, and therefore might receive “bad” or “cliché” acting from dancers (32). Robin Lakes, in her essay, “The Messages behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals,” also discusses the inability of choreographers to articulate instruction on performance quality to their dancers. In one such instance, choreographer Anna Sokolow, yelled “Go!” as she hurled chairs at her dancers from across the room to get the quality of movement she was looking for (Lakes 6).

Bengt Jörgen, Artistic Director of Ballet Jörgen Canada and George Brown College’s dance program, is an educator who sees the value in acting, and incorporates acting classes in his programs for dancers. He agrees with many choreographers that not all dance requires the expression of emotion. However, like Natalie Allen, who writes about this idea in her article, “The Value of Versatility,” Jörgen believes it is better to prepare students for the variety of dance opportunities that will come their way. In a personal interview, he explains:

We don’t know exactly what genres of dance . . . will be needed over the next ten to twenty years . . . so we want to train diverse dancers that have the ability to get work in the broader sector of the dance field . . . not just what you consider traditional concert stage performances, so we need to provide broad training, including making sure dancers know how to do basic acting.

Jörgen claims he has noticed the value acting classes have had on the dancers at George Brown College. He says it has made the students more engaged, confident, and vulnerable in performance all around.

Lorin Johnson's journal article, "More than Skin Deep: The Enduring Practice of Ballet in Universities," repeats this idea. Johnson explores how ballet training at the university level could be taught to better suit twenty-first century dancers, who are being asked to perform a variety of styles. One way he believes this can be accomplished is by using imagery and somatic practices to help students find their own creativity and meaning behind the strict ballet technique (Johnson 187). From my own past experience, and from what Johnson found in his research, most dance training puts more focus on technique and precision in movement, rather than artistic freedom.

Despite having found very few journal articles involving acting training for dancers, multiple journal articles have been written for actors on how to move such as, "Playing with History: Personal Accounts of the Political and Cultural Self in Actor Training through Movement," by Mark Evans; "Movement Training for the Modern Actor," by Dymphna Callery; "Does Dance Matter? The Relevance of Dance Technique in Professional Actor Training," by Katia Savram, and "Contact Improvisation to Scene Study: Authenticity in Word and Deed" by Annie Loui. What I found interesting was that most of the literature that included more tools needed for dancer performance came from articles in dance magazines, such as *Dance Magazine's* "Tackle Tricky Characters: Expert Tips from ABT's Acting Guru," and "What Acting Skills Do You Want To See in Your Dancers," as well as *Backstage Magazine's* "Going Inside a Role." In all of these articles, they offer no explanations as to *how* to teach acting to dancers, but give vague insight. In "Tackle Tricky Characters: Expert Tips from ABT's Acting

Guru,” an example of an expert tip is, “A tendu is nothing but a tendu unless you connect it to what your character is experiencing” (Schwab 50). How a dancer might go about doing this is for them to figure out.

One of the two pieces of literature I found that offered methods on *how* to teach performance quality to dancers was Amy Allen’s graduate thesis. In the paper, she describes her experience developing the acting course at UCI, which she taught to dancers over a ten-week span. She discusses the multiple acting techniques used in her UCI class, such as Konstantin Stanislavski’s methods of recalling past experiences and finding character objectives, and Robert Cohen’s exercise about knowing the context of a story (13-14). She had her students memorize dialogue, and create characters so they would have their own backstory when approaching musical theatre dance. She states the difficulty the students faced trying to learn a complex dance routine and work on the performance of their character at the same time (17). This is something I find many dance teachers do—they expect their students to learn multiple layers all at once. As a dancer, I always felt rushed to perform right away. With the Chekhov technique, time slows down. Students are asked to close their eyes, concentrate on what their body is saying to them, and follow their impulses naturally. In a personal interview with Allen, she explained to me that she no longer has her students use monologues in her studio technique classes because she found that it wasn’t applicable to dance (Allen Interview).

The second piece of literature I found in regards to teaching acting to dancers turned out to be the most important article related to my research. In “The Dancer of the Future: Michael Chekhov in Cross-Training Practice,” Suzanne Bennett documents her experience teaching the Chekhov method to dance majors at the George Brown College Dance department in Toronto. Like me, Bennett had chosen to teach the Michael Chekhov technique because it is one of the



few acting techniques that is mostly movement-based, with focus on the body and how it reacts to imaginary stimuli (Bennett 163). Bennett notes that there has been effort to achieve awakened embodiment for dancers through different methods such as Laban, Grotowski, Viewpoints, and Somatics (167). She says that unlike the Chekhov method, however, these techniques do not use the imagination to awaken the body's inner energy which can ultimately result in psychological change (167).

Lenard Petit further explains how the Chekhov method is used to find this inward meaning for outward expression that Bennett speaks of in his book, *The Michael Chekhov Handbook: For the Actor*. He says the Chekhov method makes us conscious of inner experiential forces, or inner energy that can be manipulated through imagination and imagery to produce a greater outer expression for audiences to see (Petit 33). In this way, says Petit, the body can move fully, freely, and purposefully without judgement.

In Bennett's article, she implies that being an acting teacher with no dance knowledge might give her an advantage when it comes to teaching Chekhov methods to dancers (163). Lisa Dalton, president of the National Michael Chekhov Association, heads the Chekhov Certified Teacher Program and claims that no dance instructors have gone through her program to become certified to teach the method (Dalton). If no dance instructors are being trained on how to teach Chekhov, how would we know if acting instructors are better suited to teach dancers than dance instructors who have been working with dancers their whole careers? As it turns out, acting teachers have been coaching dancers in the Chekhov method for some time. Several Chekhov master teachers I interviewed, such as Lenard Petit, Ted Hugh, Sloan Fern, and Dalton have said that they taught the method to dancers at some point in their careers. However, many of them mentioned how difficult it was. Sloan Fern stated, "It's more challenging to teach dancers

because they are so locked in their bodies. If you are locked in your body, there is no transformation that way” (Sloan). Perhaps it could be less challenging and more beneficial for a dance insider, someone who has knowledge and experience as a dancer, to develop this method specifically for a dancer’s needs.

In Suzanne Bennett’s classes at George Brown College, and in Amy Allen’s classes at UCI, they both used exercises in which dancers read lines of text from a script as part of their training. Bennett writes, “I am steering them towards organically matching body and voice” (173). This is an aspect in most acting training I believe to be unnecessary for dancers. Unlike Allen, I had studied Stanislavski in my undergrad, and was warned that dredging up past experiences in order to form an emotional connection could be dangerous, and harmful to a person’s psychology. It can also limit you to one story, rather than using your imagination to create multiple possibilities. Furthermore, Stanislavski’s principles of “action/objectives” could be useless to a dancer who is performing an abstract piece that does not have a story or character, and therefore have difficulty finding what their character’s objective is. I decided to discover ways to adapt the Chekhov technique to best fit a dancer, and dance teacher or choreographer’s needs.

## **Chapter 2: Acting Rehearsals**

Because it had been a few years since I studied the Chekhov technique with Lenard Petit in New York, I decided to attend the Michael Chekhov International Workshop and Festival that took place in New London, CT at Connecticut College from June 26th-30th 2017. Each day, participants at the festival attended two of the nine three-hour Chekhov classes offered in the

morning and evening, each focusing on a different aspect of the technique. Each class was taught by long time faculty member of the Michael Chekhov Association including Marjolein Baars, Ragnar Freidank, Ted Pugh, Fern Sloan, Bethany Caputo, and Marjo-Riikka Makela, John McManus, and Ulrich Meyer-Horsch. The MICHA organization allowed me to attend the workshops as an observer—I was able to sit in on the classes, take notes on exercises that were taught, and formulate my own conclusions about which ones might work best for my workshops.

The MICHA classes I attended during this week were:

1. Chekhov for the Director taught by Marjolein Baars
2. Fundamentals of the Chekhov Technique by Bethany Caputo
3. Qualities of Movement by Ted Pugh
4. Fundamentals of Psychological Gesture by Uli Meyer-Horsch
5. Inviting Inspiration with Energy Exercises by Marjo-Riikka Makela
6. Fundamentals with Four Brothers by Bethany Caputo
7. Character by Fern Sloan and John McManus

I spent lunches with the faculty and actors at the workshop and interviewed teachers, students, and staff about their experiences with the technique, and/or with the dance community. Everyone I spoke to agreed that the Chekhov technique would be a great addition to a dancer's training, with a few warning me that dancers might not be as free or "open" to the training as actors are (Dalton and Sloan).

When creating my acting workshops, I combined portions of exercises taught at the MICHA festival with a few exercises I remembered from taking Lenard Petit's class in New York, as well as some exercises from Petit's book, *The Michael Chekhov Handbook: For the Actor*. Another resource that helped me formulate my workshops was a DVD produced by

Joanna Merlin (president of the Michael Chekhov Association) entitled *Master Classes in the Michael Chekhov Technique*. With these four resources as a guide, I began to plan my acting workshops for dancers.

### Choreographic Component

For my thesis choreographic work, I decided to create a nine-minute piece based on human emotion. I googled what the basic human emotions are, and according to a study done by psychologists Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen in 1972, there are six: fear, joy, anger, sadness, surprise, and disgust (Six Basic). I chose to focus on the emotions of fear, joy, anger, and sadness, and left out surprise and disgust so that I could spend ample amount of time delving into each of the four sensations. I cast four dancers to act as characters representing each emotional state, and a fifth dancer to be the human to which all of the emotional states belonged. I used Alan Terricciano's original music composition, which was layered with different instruments that helped reflect the contrasting moods. The goal was to teach my dancers how to use the Chekhov acting technique to fully embody each emotion sequentially in a short period of time, a difficult task for any dancer or actor to do. Because I wanted to see if the Chekhov technique could be used to purely change the dancer's movement quality, not just their facial expression, which can lead to "bad cliché acting," as Nagrin says in his book *The Six Questions*, I had the dancers wear masks as part of their costume. This way, they needed to focus on expressing the separate emotions through their body rather than through their face.

Before rehearsals, I would create phrases of the dance using different Chekhov exercises to come up with movement, making it apparent to me the ability to use the Chekhov method for

dance improvisation and choreography. Sometimes I would come to the studio with pre-set choreography, and other times I would keep the movement quality and emotional state in mind while choreographing phrases on individual dancers in the studio that day.

My dancers knew the basic concept of the piece, they understood which section was the “fear” section or the “sad” section, and they knew that they were to represent these different emotions. However, I gave them no notes on acting at first, or how to express each emotion, I simply allowed them to make choices. They never asked questions about expression, but asked many detailed, technical questions such as, “What count do we look right on?” or “How do you want our arms on this part?” If I asked them to create an individual pose for themselves in a state of “fear,” they would try out multiple different positions, judge each one, change it, judge it again, then look to me for a solution. I often made the decisions for them during these initial rehearsals to move the choreographic process along.

It became clear to me during this time that these dancers, who I chose because I had seen them all dance before and thought they naturally had that inner light I wanted to work with, were locked in their bodies, and unable to let that light shine. For the joy section, I told them, “This part should be joyful—you want to make the movement light and fun.” Even with this type of direction, their movement quality looked heavy, grounded, like the contemporary dance style their body knew and had memorized from years of training. Before any acting classes took place, I showed the full dance to two of my advisors, Dr. Jennifer Fisher, and Professor Molly Lynch. Their feedback was that the emotions were not clear enough, making the piece a bit one dimensional. “Particularly joy,” said Dr. Fisher, “Which dancer is supposed to be the character for that? I missed it.” All of the dancers were supposed to embody being “joyful” for about two minutes of the piece. I had some work to do.

## Early Ideas

Before I began the acting portion of my rehearsal process, I wrote down the different Chekhov exercises I thought could be useful in helping dancers improve expressivity. These main Chekhov pillars included the “Ball Toss,” “Life Energy,” “Expansion and Contraction,” “Imaginary Centers,” “Psychological Gesture,” “Qualities of Movement,” “Sensations,” and “Atmosphere.” I realized that in order to effectively teach each exercise in the amount of time I had, I would need to focus on just a few of these exercises. I decided to cut “Psychological Gesture” in my workshops, which is one of Chekhov’s main ideas, and also an exercise Suzanne Bennett focused on in her class at George Brown College. In my experience, and from what I researched, psychological gesture has to do with finding the “archetype” of the character. Unlike Bennett and Amy Allen, I wanted to stay away from character work because dancers aren’t always asked to play the role of a specific character. I decided to save “Sensations” and “Atmosphere” until the end, and see how it went with the other basic exercises first.

In total, I had eight weeks to work with my five dancers, four hours each week. Because of holidays and certain conflicts, I was not able to see them for the full four hours every week, however. I spent the first four weeks choreographing as much of the nine-minute dance as possible, then introduced the acting workshops starting on November 1st, 2017. I then split each rehearsal in half, one hour was spent learning/cleaning the dance, and one hour was spent teaching the dancers Chekhov exercises which I incorporated into the choreography that was already set. I videotaped each session, studied it after the rehearsals, and took notes on anything I may have missed during the class. The students handed in anonymous journal entries to me at the

end of each workshop discussing their experience learning and incorporating the different Chekhov exercises.

### Rethinking My Strategies

I prepared to work on different exercises with the dancers each workshop, but after the first session, I had to revise my plan. The dancers seemed apprehensive about the technique at first, using humor to mask their discomfort. The first exercise of the “Ball Toss” was attempted with laughs, and jokes about how tense they were, and how “bad” they were at catching/throwing. The “Ball Toss” is meant to provide the performers with focus and concentration as they stand in a circle and gently toss the ball to each other in a way that allows energy to flow and stay constant. I found myself having to remind them that it was okay if they did not catch the ball perfectly, and that the goal was to focus on throwing and catching with a feeling of ease. Only one student was able to accomplish this, the rest were too concerned about doing the exercise correctly to perform it fully. “It was a little stressful catching the ball, but other than that it was enjoyable,” one student wrote in their journal. After that first session where I also introduced the “Life-Body” and “Expansion/Contraction” exercises, the students wrote that they were noticing changes in their body they hadn’t noticed before, but that they weren’t sure if they were doing it right, or if they were thinking too much. They seemed to face difficulties with the idea of transferring outside movement into internal energy. Part of the Chekhov technique is to create a physical movement, such as expanding your body as far and wide as you can, and then carrying that expansive feeling internally as you walk around, or do normal pedestrian

movement. One dancer wrote, “I was thinking too much about how I looked instead of just moving the way I felt.”

This was a constant challenge throughout the workshops. I had to keep reminding dancers to face away from the mirror, or to not look at themselves in the mirror—something that is second nature for dancers. They wanted to see and judge everything they did. I also had to ask them on several occasions not to indicate that they felt their heart falling downward, or that they were floating, but to *feel* it. For instance, when asked to place a block of ice in the center of their chest, they would cross their arms dramatically, showing me a theatrical physical change, rather than trusting that feeling the sensation was enough. The movement looked forced, as if it weren’t connected to their whole being. I can’t recall a Chekhov teacher telling us this, but I told them to try to *hide* the sensation, try to carry on normally as if it wasn’t there, which gave a much more natural outer expression than when they thought they needed to *show* me how they felt.

I remember having the same thoughts as my dancers when I first learned this method. I wasn’t sure if I was doing it right, or what I was *supposed* to feel. I couldn’t trust that what I had the impulse to do was correct—I wanted someone to tell me. I realized that it was going to take more time for the dancers to trust themselves in this new method, and that I would need to repeat exercises multiple times for them to feel comfortable enough to listen to their bodies, rather than just rely on what their choreographer tells them to do.

Another challenge I faced during this process was handling tired, defeated dancers at the end of a long day, the only time of day we could all get together to rehearse. On the day of the fourth workshop, the dancers had just come from a grueling rehearsal at eight p.m., and I could tell their spirits were low. I gave them some time to scarf down dinner in the studio, and one of them said she felt like crying. I told them we would do a quick rehearsal, and just work on



Chekhov rather than choreography, but it was still a rough session. At one point, we were working with the imagery of having razor blades take the place of our eyes (something I was hoping would help with the Anger section of the piece), but the dancers partnering each other were giggling, and not fully committing. They were in and out of being mentally focused that night, but it still ended up being a success when we got to the imagery of the heart falling down from the chest to the floor. That image helped the dancers to move in a soft, defeated, melancholy way to lead them into the Sadness section.

I learned from this rehearsal that it might have been a different experience if my rehearsals weren't at the end of a long day, because asking the dancers to use their imaginations and concentrate is extremely mentally challenging. It also became clear to me in this session that the dancers might have benefited more from this training had they not been such good friends outside of the studio. Four out of the five dancers were roommates, and I believe that had some impact on how they were able to truthfully perform the exercises because they already had relationships where they made jokes and mocked each other often. When I was an undergraduate acting major studying the technique with fellow acting majors in New York, we didn't know each other, so we were all trying our best to prove our commitment to the art form. Or was it because I was with actors who were more comfortable being vulnerable than dancers, and therefore less giggling erupted?

### Discoveries

A changing point for me in this process was the first time I asked the dancers to incorporate part of the Chekhov technique into my choreographed dance phrases. I pre-decided

which aspects and images of the technique I would use in each section of the dance to help the students better express the emotions they were portraying. I thought Chekhov's method of "Expansion" would be a great exercise for the dancers to do before they went into the "Joy" phrase of the dance, and it proved to work. Prior to this moment, I was having a very difficult time asking the dancers to be lighter, and more joyful with their movement. In their journals, every dancer said how much better the choreography felt after doing the exercise to expand, they said they felt "lighter," less "down in the ground." I hoped the same thing would happen when I asked the dancers to bring the feeling of Chekhov's "Contraction" into the "Fear" dance phrase, but that was not the case. Up to this point, none of the dancers looked afraid or anxious during the Fear section of the dance when they rehearsed it. I was hoping contracting would give them a sense of feeling small, helpless, terrified, and that they would bring that to the dance phrase. Instead, the majority of them danced in a vague, slow-motion way, not at all how I would expect "fear" to look, except for one dancer. My eyes were drawn to her as she frantically performed the dance phrase, looking like she was contracting from her core—trying to disappear and run away internally. It was the best I had seen anyone dance it yet.

After reading the journals that night, I could see that what I had suspected in rehearsal was true—most of the dancers said they had a difficult time carrying the feeling of contraction into the dance phrase. I decided I would attempt this exact exercise again in the next workshop, but add an element of Chekhov that I hadn't thought about yet: the element of "tempo." Perhaps if I gave the dancers a tempo at which to perform each exercise, it would help create different sensations and feelings for them, and help me find the quality of movement I was looking for as well. The contraction exercise in the following workshop with a quick tempo was a success.

Another turning point was after the third workshop when I read a journal that said, “When I first started imagining the ice in my chest I got a really sad sensation, and my eyes got a little watery.” This dancer was able to use an image of ice to create a bodily sensation, that resulted in the production of tears without anything else necessary. The dancer did not need to rehash a terrible experience that happened in childhood, or think about sad things—the emotion arose from an image. This is what the Chekhov work is about. Sometimes the dancers talked about the psychological changes they felt from the exercises, and sometimes they talked about the difference they noticed in their bodies. One student explained, “I feel like the ‘Quality of Movement’ exercises really changed the way I was moving, but not really the way I felt.” This showed me that the Chekhov method can be used to alter your inner energy causing you to move differently, without changing your emotional state. Since dance does not always require emotion, this suggests that the method could still be useful for a dancer who doesn’t need to emote.

I began to see the journal entries go from, “I had a hard time . . .” or “it was really challenging for me to feel . . .,” to “I felt like I was floating,” “I felt more of a controlled floppiness,” “I found the sun easier to keep while dancing Joy than expansion,” and “The image of the butterfly trying to escape my chest gave this feeling of anxiousness that will help me in the fear phrases.” It took about three workshops for the dancers to stop thinking so much, and start feeling, and about three workshops for me to start noticing a difference in their performance.

The final moments of revelation happened after the acting rehearsals were completed. A dance that was at first difficult to understand and follow, was now much clearer. In performance, the audience seemed to understand the story, laughing out loud at joyful moments, even chuckling at moments I didn’t think would get a laugh, like when the dancers were slow-motion fighting (using Chekhov’s quality of “moulding”), and one decides they’ve had enough and

leaves the group. During one show, I noticed how effective my lead dancer performed “Anger.” Every twisted, ugly gesture was fully embodied and committed to. After the concert, when I commented on the performance, the dancer replied, “It felt good. I really pictured the razor blades in my eyes this time and it helped so much.” I made it a point to ask the other dancers if they held on to any of the exercises during their performance as well. What they said surprised me. Before they went on stage every night, they stood in a circle and did the Chekhov imaginary “Ball Toss” exercise backstage, and then they all did “Expansion and Contraction” exercises on stage before the curtain lifted. My lead Joy character stated, “I tried to picture the sun in my chest for most of the joy part as well.” No matter what challenges they faced in the rehearsals, the training seemed to resonate with them enough to use the exercises on their own during performance time, without any influence or encouragement from me.

### **Chapter 3: Results and Conclusions**

Due to choreographic time constraints of making a piece for the fall quarter graduate dance concert, I was unable to accomplish as much as I would have liked to with my dancers during our rehearsals. The Michael Chekhov technique is not something that can be mastered in five hours, which is the total amount of time I spent coaching my dancers in the method. Chekhov says we must actively practice this type of conscious work to strengthen our imagination, because only through the use of imagery and imagination can the artist truly transform (To the Actor, 33). When I was taught the Chekhov technique in New York City, I studied it for seven hours a day, five days a week, for four weeks. It took me until the third week

to feel confident in the method. Despite this, within the short time I worked with my dancers, I saw the vast improvement the Chekhov technique had in their performance of my piece.

As a dance insider, I believe I was able to make decisions and try new methods when teaching acting to dancers that other acting teachers may not have tried. Acting coaches trained to teach actors might not realize the resistance dancers may have to speak lines of text, or to improvise character work, because these are things dancers are rarely asked to do. I believe that a “Michael Chekhov Acting Class for Dancers” should be a different class than a Chekhov class for actors, as should any acting class for dancers offered in a college program. Unless we are trying to teach dancers how they can cross over into the field of acting, we should be finding ways to alter acting techniques to best fit their needs. These needs include the ability to be expressive, to initiate movement from internal energy, to radiate, to fulfill movement, and to enhance performance quality. Of all the acting and dance techniques I have studied, Michael Chekhov’s seems to be the best method to fit those needs.

To further my research, I have considered what a semester-long acting course for dancers based on the Chekhov technique would look like. To begin, students would read Lorin Johnson’s article, “More Than Skin Deep: The Enduring Practice of Ballet in Universities,” as well as Suzanne Bennett’s article, “The Dancer of the Future: Michael Chekhov in Cross-Training Practice.” These articles convey to students that professionals have noticed there is something missing in dancer training that could be addressed through acting. They will also be asked to read the *Backstage* article, “What Acting Skills do you Want to See in Your Dancers?” by Simi Horwitz, which contains quotes from many famous choreographers about why acting is important.

In the course, dance majors would explore the same exercises I taught in my rehearsals, as well as exercises I didn't get the chance to touch upon, such as "Sensations," "Atmosphere," and "Physical Gesture." Physical Gesture would only be used for those roles that require character portrayal. Students would investigate this Chekhov exercise by choosing a character from either their favorite musical or ballet, then creating a gesture for that role. By creating their own gestures, and making choices based on what they believe best suits their character, dancers can gain empowerment in knowing how to find authentic character portrayal when asked to do so.

To give students time to understand the use of every exercise, they would repeat each one in multiple class meetings. Building on concepts, and altering images and stories helps build and strengthen imagination in the brain. Along with the Chekhov exercises, I would teach different dance phrases every other week, and choose certain exercises to help dancers fulfill the movement in those phrases. The dances I bring to class would range in style so the students could apply the methods to various dance forms, including musical theatre, ballet, modern, commercial, and contemporary dance.

Some dance improvisation is necessary in this course because Chekhov believes improvisation is an important part of becoming a successful artist. He states, "[An actor's] compelling desire and highest aim . . . can be achieved only by means of free *improvisation*" (To The Actor 35). Only once the pedestrian adaptation of the Chekhov exercise has been accomplished would improvisation be explored. I attempted to explore improvisation with my dancers during our sessions, but I noticed that they resorted to what they were used to doing or were more comfortable doing when they improvised. When asked to radiate sunlight and warmth from their head space, and allow that to initiate and lead their movement, for example, I could

tell by their heavy, contemporary movement that they were not fully committed to the imagery. Because dancers are so used to improvising in certain ways, I would like to introduce this concept later in the semester so that they could use the exercises to explore new sensations and internal feelings first through pedestrian movement like walking or sitting. Having them practice the technique without the added stress of, “How do I make this look good?” is an important step for dancers, one they often do not have time to explore when learning choreography.

Towards the end of the semester, dancers would bring in their own choreographic phrases from other classes or rehearsals, and explore the movement using different Chekhov techniques they have learned. They would make choices on which techniques to use for their final performance of the phrase for the class. If they did not have pre-set choreography to work on, they could choreograph a short piece on themselves using different aspects of the method. This allows students to apply the technique in their own way, and to bring their own expressivity to choreography, as they are often asked to do. Throughout the process, journals would be kept to record discoveries, challenges, and progress they notice throughout the course.

My hope for this semester-long acting class for dancers is to empower them to dance fully and confidently by giving them specific tools on *how* they can achieve this. As many choreographers and dance educators have stated, in today’s world, dancers are being asked to perform a variety of styles, and although some require no emotional effort, all styles require dancers to be expressive or radiate energy to an audience when they step on a stage. No matter the dance form, they need to be prepared to feel confident to approach as many dance styles as possible upon graduation. Training in the Michael Chekhov method creates openness and expressive vulnerability in dancers that can be transferred to any style of dance. It also allows them to find their own artistry and bring their own voice to someone else’s movement, allowing

them to fill it with their own meaning and purpose so that they may become the “movement poets” they are so often expected to be.

The Chekhov method could be used to create change in the dance world as well. A common topic of discussion amongst choreographers and dance educators today is the way competition dance, social media, and televised dance shows, such as “So You Think You Can Dance,” are affecting the dance field. There seems to be an emphasis in the commercial realm on “tricks” and showy lifts, with a lack of depth or meaning behind them. Having dancers train in expressivity and individual artistry through a method like Chekhov’s could place more emphasis on finding the message behind the movement, which is something that can sometimes be lacking these days.

Not only does acting training empower dancers to make choices that can fill choreography with meaning, but it can also contribute to changes in the dance field as a whole. It is sometimes believed that dance choreographers hold all the power and make all the decisions in dance making, but oftentimes the dancers are asked to collaborate and bring ideas to the choreographer to aid in the creation process. If more dancers and choreographers were trained in this method, we would have choreographers who could better articulate the qualities of movement they’d like to see from their dancers, and dancers who would have the tools to give them confidence to make choices. In this way, more collaboration and artistry between dancers and choreographers could develop in the studio. With more collaboration comes more choreographic innovation, and with more innovation, the dance field can only improve.



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## **Appendix: Supplementary File**

The supplementary file, “Mel Lastrina ‘Outside In’ Lecture-Demonstration,” includes a link to a video recording of my thesis lecture-demonstration I gave at the University of California, Irvine on April 24, 2018. This video also includes the recording of my piece, *Outside In*, which debuted on December 7, 2017 at the Claire Trevor Theatre.

[Mel Lastrina "Outside In" Lecture-Demonstration YouTube](#)