

**Prof. Dr. Jurij Alschitz**

## **A New Face of the Theatre Teacher**

### **Programme Outline**

We see a radical revision of the role of theatre in the context of new culture and, moreover, the role of culture in the new millennium, at the new stage of civilization. This discussion has become obvious today. But any discussion should start with education. It is education that, in the third millennium, becomes the litmus test, the indicator of general health of the culture and, naturally, its theatre. On the one hand, crisis of the theatre finds its clearest manifestation in education; on the other hand, it is the education in drama schools that can provide the tools for overcoming the crisis. Those who understand this today will be the winners tomorrow.

The most important crisis manifestation at drama schools is the conflict between the actual need for the types of actors and directors who would be capable of engaging the new mentality, and the inability of theatre education to produce artists who could meet this new requirement. The goal of this Programme is to alleviate

the conflict, even if to some extent, and build a new relationship between theatre education and the theatre as such.

The focus of the Programme is on the education and development (*formation, Bildung*) of the teacher, the artistic unit around whom a school can emerge, and around which, in turn, a theatre can emerge. A change effected in the teacher will lead to a change in the school which will lead to a change in the theatre

The Programme is primarily based on objective concepts, expounded by contemporary philosophers, educators, theatre directors and actors on education, and the important spiritual mission the theatre is assuming in the coming age. At the same time, the Programme is as much a result of my own subjective forecasts and my own significant practical, theoretical and research experience with a great variety of theatrical and educational cultures of the world. And finally, this Programme was created with faith and hope that, in spite of flaws and imperfections common to first efforts of its kind, it will enable my colleagues to further develop and complete it, or reject it and create a new one in its place - and this sustained collaborative effort will be beneficial for the theatre.

## CHANGE OF MINDSET

Through history, a 'school' has essentially meant a certain way of thinking. However, the school of the third millennium has a new connotation. It is no longer one limited area of knowledge, nor one and only path to achievement, one system and one view, but an expanded sphere of knowledge with unlimited numbers of paths and links. Today's school is a continuum of space and time, within which every student and teacher can freely determine limitless possibilities for their intellectual pursuits, an endless way of creating one's own knowledge paradigms.

Admittedly, in spite of the calendar, the current 21st century school is still the school of the twentieth century, the school that still belongs with the time and mentality of that past century of destruction. For this reason, it is not the change in technologies the theatre teacher is to use, nor the change of the educational system, that the Programme sees as its primary goal, but a change in teacher's mind setting, from destructive mentality to the creative one. New mindset is at the core of school and theatre progress. Without it, any current methodological systems, any acting techniques would be superimposed on outdated consciousness. Will it make sense if a caveman were

equipped with laser technology? Effecting change in the mind of the teacher and his students is the most challenging and the most urgent task of the Programme. It should precede, or go hand-in-hand with, changes in methods and techniques. This link cannot be interrupted.

Change in mind and attitude is by no means an easy task. The school and its theatre are still in the vise of the past era of destruction, where any transition to the new was invariably through ruin (revolutions, wars, acts of terror) that shaped destructive mentality in man. The era of dogmas and dictatorships is still alive in our heads. In fact, the horrendous twentieth century is not letting us go. The era of destructive intelligence is over, but the old mentality persists, creating problems we have to face. Destructive, conflict-prone mentality that dominates most theatre education methods and systems, and thus affects the practical work of most teachers, actors and directors, limits the universe of knowledge about the theatre. The massive layer of destructive mind set prevents the theatre from moving forward, from discovering new forms and meanings. Are the actor, the director, and the teacher ready to change their attitudes? Is the theatre as a whole ready to recognize the advent of a new era? Is it ready for

critical revision of inherited knowledge? I am afraid not.

It is my firm belief that no reform of theatre school methodology can be productive alone. The old destructive mentality will no longer produce a qualitative leap, no matter how wonderful the proposed methods and systems may be. It is the mindset of the teacher and that of the student that have to be changed first. Only changed consciousness of the teacher, the student, the actor and the director will change the theatre. In keeping with its mission and its purported role, the theatre must create a new mindset, or at least reflect the challenges of contemporary life and time, rather than lag behind cultural progress.

Destructive mentality should not only be understood as aggressiveness and intolerance. Destructive mentality can only have a fragmentary, two-dimensional view of life. It cannot view life as a whole. This kind of vision results in curtailed perception of the richness of life. That is why destructive mentality is not in touch with the new time, new scientific discoveries, and new technologies, as well as contemporary philosophical and religious thinking.

## CREATIVE MINDSET

One of the ways to overcome the crisis in theatre education, in my view, is through re-positioning the focus from actual education to development (*formation, Bildung*) of actors and directors. This should be creative development, that is, development through creativity. The curricula of all world schools are dominated by the informational component, leaving practically no time for creativity and exploration. Creativity as the true goal of education cannot be fully realized through the knowledge paradigm alone. The system works for performers, but not for creators. Yet contemporary theatre expects the school to produce theatre artists, not just trained performers; in other words, it needs the professionals, who, in addition to extensive, deep, and varied knowledge, are also capable of creative mind and independent discovery of unlimited theatrical knowledge paradigms. Based on this expectation, the Programme sees its educational process as creative collaboration, rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge, re-cycling of secondary experience or, more specifically, the sum of existing skills. Only creative mind, creative process and the act of creative discovery can result in live knowledge. This transfer of active

knowledge is not only from teacher to student or from student to teacher, but also from knowledge as such to those who have discovered it. The Programme's basic concept is that the school is for the teachers and for the students alike. The relationship among all participants in the educational process thus changes essentially: it should (and must) function as co-creation between the teacher and the student, the school and the theatre. The heuristic and creative nature of the process is a feature of the genuinely new outlook. An act of creation fuelled by creative consciousness and the multidimensional concept opens up all human data acquisition gates to absorb new processes, which may even appear incomprehensible at the time. The artist is free to think in a spheric, multidimensional fashion as creative perception itself is spheric and multidimensional, rather than flat and unidirectional, and that is the most important outcome of change outlook.

Today's education should not be seen as direct transfer of cultural experience from one generation to another. Instead, it is a collaborative creation of a sphere of new culture. The coming era will be oriented to creative acts. It will be the era of creativity. The new century calls for a creative individual who can

derive new experience from the mass of accumulated knowledge, but discard universal models and patterns to which the past century was oriented. The new time calls for unique discovery instead of standardized solutions. It is not an obedient performer, but a creator, an individual with creative mentality and a drive to create, not destroy, who will be happy in the new theatre. According to V.I. Vernadsky, "Man's creative work begins to dominate on-going evolution of the Earth". Creative work is the ultimate product of creative mentality.

## **SPHERICAL EDUCATION**

We are moving towards a new holistic realization of ourselves, our knowledge and the world we live in. The new era in the history of mankind is the era of synthesis where various manifestations of human activity merge into one big picture of human existence, and scattered granules of knowledge fall into place in the universal world order. Knowledge specific to one discipline flows freely into a different discipline where it can amend existing views or create a new science. Knowledge is no longer accumulated in closed spaces or along predetermined paths - it is now contained in a universal sphere. Euclidian geometry has been replaced by the geometry of Lobachevsky.

The lightning speed of changes in science and technology makes it virtually impossible to stay abreast and digest, accept or reject the news in real time. We are witnessing the fall of age-old truths. Science is making discoveries that it would not have believed in yesterday. The life cycle of knowledge - its birth, maturation and death - has shortened to the flight of an electron. But this has had no effect on the theatre - it lives, as it were, in a different chronology. Its population reminds me of the inhabitants of Plato's cave who make judgments of the world of contemporary science based on random shadows, reflected on the wall.

Isn't it odd, or even shameful, that, alongside dramatic discoveries in science, medicine, communications, computer technology, or automation, the theatre increasingly manufactures products that are remarkably outdated, both in language and mentality, and not in any way connected to contemporary world outlook. The theatre and its school, far from anticipating the shifts, are lagging catastrophically behind the time they live in. The use of diverse hi-tech gadgets cannot hide poverty of thinking.

The Pavlovian dog influenced Stanislavsky's views of the theatre. Did Dolly, the ewe, have the

same effect on the theatre? Is the topic of cloning really so far away from our art? Have Albert Einstein's relativity theory, Norbert Wiener's cybernetics, or Steve Jobs' life story changed anything at all in the theatre's mindset? This cannot go on. The theatre as such cannot be examined apart from the overall progress of our civilization. The theatre is an integral part of the world so its development follows the same universal laws - and this is the essence of spherical mentality. Spherical mentality is an expanded vision, capable of identifying, processing and assessing all living processes, all new developments in science, technology and art, from the standpoint of the most up-to-date ideas and discoveries, and using those to contribute to growing theatre knowledge. It is for this reason that the Programme for developing future teachers of the theatre is spherical, rather than linear, in its structure.

Following nearly 30 years of teaching theatre, I have to admit that knowledge cannot be transferred. It is acquired through discovery, with a lively, mobile, ever-changing environment being an important contributing factor. K. Stanislavsky, whose Method has been used for decades, both skilfully and otherwise, all over the world, demanded that the teachers revise and update their devices, techniques and knowledge systems

every three years. I don't agree with him here - every artistic day should bring new knowledge to the school. Instead of recycling something practiced by others, one has to make new discoveries of their own. This is not to say, by any means, that today's discovery should reject a discovery made yesterday. However, mere preservation of traditional knowledge leaves the school without a perspective. Staying in the same place is dangerous for knowledge acquisition. One has to march on, which is easier on flat surface, and more complicated inside a spherical space. The latter requires that decisions should be taken at every step and independent options should be selected; it offers unlimited numbers of paths and links, which warrants unending progress of knowledge to new discoveries.

The Programme introduces the concept of World Theatre as one common sphere of knowledge. The theatre is one entity that has absorbed numerous cultures and precious features of their constituent ethnicities. The theatrical teacher should be well versed in the global perspective of theatre development, comprehend the changes that are taking place, and value the diversity as well as common trends. That is to say, the art of ancient ritual and shamanism is not a closed space: it tends to relate to *Theatre of the Absurd*, *Nob Theatre*,

theatre systems of Brecht or Stanislavsky. The contemporary actor should be ready to recognize and use a variety of information platforms, and move between operating systems, like he or she would move between Android and iOS or Windows.

Realizing the importance of the spherical principle, the Programme plans to incorporate writings of scientists and scholars on contemporary models of the universe, and the new concept of man as a physical energy information substance. In addition to conventional theatre concepts that must be updated, theatre vocabulary will include the *Big Bang*, *Contracting and Expanding Universe*, *Cosmic Intelligence*, *Laws of Ethical Living*, *Energy Information Fields*, *Fractal Geometry* and others. In other words, contemporary pursuits of philosophers, psychologists, artists, scientists, and spiritual thinkers will be used to develop spherical mentality and thus contribute to new theories and new methods in the education of actors and directors. The teacher of theatre developed by the Programme will not be a complete and final system of scientific views and practical actions. The teacher will be a spherical vision artist: open, creative and capable of digesting and appraising theatre and education processes based on synthesis of knowledge as a whole. The teacher

must have a cognitive point of view where even a simple assignment or exercise could be presented in the context of unified world knowledge, rather than a drill of isolated skills and habits. It is quite obvious that spherical education of the teacher should also incorporate the best achievements of the world's educational experience.

## **SCHOOL OF DIALOGUE**

The dialogue principle is the key to the artistic concept of the Programme. It is the Programme's philosophy and basic condition of co-existence of all subjects involved in the educational process, where the student is seen as a partner, rather than an object of the teacher's goal-oriented actions, to be controlled through external stimuli, good techniques, great teachers' method systems, accepted standards, norms and authority reference. Educational co-operation, based on equality of the teacher and the student, in terms of their artistic values, is of utmost importance, which is only possible when rooted in the philosophy of dialogue. A school for the teacher as well as the student is the essence of the Programme's new world outlook. That is why dialogue is the cornerstone of the whole methodology aiming to educate a teacher of the theatre.

Dialogue presupposes acceptance of an opinion that may be different from one's own, of another world view, language, logics, culture, communication habits, etc., including the acceptance of another theatre, another theatrical system, another trend, another idea of the theatre as such, without any attempts to re-educate, re-train or prevail. Drama school dialogue prevents the teacher from imposing on the student's spiritual world and affirms other people's freedom of opinion, without sermons, biased assessments or self-indulgence.

We see theatre school dialogue as communication among many unique creative personalities. It is not lecturing, nor is it an argument as to who is right and who is not, or who knows and who does not. Instead, it is an exploration and discovery of universal higher values and meanings of the theatre. Educational dialogue is not based on conflict and opposition. An artist recognizes another artist as a unique value creator, who is entitled to his or her own opinion regarding the theatre. Dialogue is the form of communication among the artists, the co-existence of the teacher and the student at school, and that of the actor and the director at the theatre.

Dialogue is, essentially, dialogical mentality, the meeting of one artistic universe with another. This kind of meeting is not only achieved through verbal communication. In this Programme, dialogue signifies joint practice, joint training exercises, joint lessons and joint creative work. The development of dialogical mentality is to follow several paths:

1. Dialogue of world cultures. Dialogue as communication between individuals representing their cultures.
2. High-level dialogue between culture and science, philosophies, religions, etc.
3. Dialogue among world theatres.
4. Dialogue among the founders of theatrical systems: Konstantin Stanislavsky, Bertolt Brecht, Mikhail Chekhov, Antoine Artaud and others.
5. Dialogue among major cultural images, such as Oedipus, Hamlet, Don Quixote, Konstantin Treplev, Ivan Karamazov, the creations of great playwrights.
6. Everyday dialogue between students and teachers, students and students, teachers and teachers.
7. Dialogue with oneself: basic communication with oneself, one's mind, or one's theatre. Dialogical mentality as path to self-improvement.

The development of dialogue mentality in theatre teachers is conditioned on freedom from authority figures, dogmas, public opinion, politics, religion, etc. for all dialogue participants. Freedom, however, is not viewed as permissiveness; its boundaries are clearly delineated by the Programme. Following this principle, the future teacher shall be able to take the responsibility and to guide the students' free search. In this Programme, dialogue as a way of thinking and as an educational philosophy is the principal type of pedagogical communication, in keeping with the 21st century's demands to education.

## **5. TRAINING AS PATH TO THE THEATER**

The Programme believes that training exercises are an essential element of professional education for theatre actors. No theatre teacher and no theatre school can claim legitimacy without training they developed themselves. The training is known to start at school. Unfortunately, it tends to end there too, which is totally wrong. Training is an exercise path designed to last through the actor's entire life, and it has a broader range of goals, and more versatile ones, than those contained within the school framework. The fact that long-existing



links between school and theatre, studio and stage, or exercise and performance, had been ruptured was detrimental to theatre development. Thinking of tomorrow, I cannot imagine the life of a theatre equipped with diverse methodology, but without a continuous training process to examine and analyse the stage arts. I am sure that ongoing training will be an important part of future theatre models, like it was in the theatres of Stanislavsky, Brecht, Grotowski, Vassiliev and others.

The spiritual development of an actor presupposes, in the first place, that the future actor goes through a process of cleansing by purging instincts and biases of everyday life and moves on to a creative, artistic existence. It is not the teacher who starts the training, but the student himself. The student comes to school with a question, and the teacher's mission is to develop and prolong training so it could serve the student through his or her entire creative life. The school is in fact part of the student's life-long training. The school is primarily a kind of asceticism practices by students and teachers alike. Asceticism (*Askein* literally means "to exercise rigorously" in Greek) can be practiced for a variety of purposes: cleanse inner self, strengthen physical body, expand human consciousness, improve speech,

release creative powers, etc., its primary goal being the control of the actor's spiritual powers. Exercises teach the skill of controlling oneself in order to achieve the best possible result. Exercises are a path to the discovery of the actor's own potential, that is, the ideal to which the actor should strive. Not only does exercise let the actor master an inventory of skills in school settings, it also sets the actor free as a person.

School training is always a laboratory for both the student and the teacher. It witnesses the birth of new creative ideas, new styles and new techniques. Through exercise, both the teacher and the students are equally engaged in moving towards discovery. When a discovery is thus made, exercise becomes an artistic event. Training can involve a group or an individual. There are several types of training, based on its direction and goals.

*Regular training* aims to prepare the student's psychological and physical circuits for the new rules of existence on stage. It is an adjustment of the student's faculties, everyday instincts and reflexes to the reality of the theatre.

*Laboratory training* explores new approaches to training and new methods. It is the discovery of

previously unknown techniques, constant enrichment of professional skills and devices, and a search for a new artistic language.

*Thematic training* is immersion into a specific educational topic. Selected exercises introduce the student to a scope of aesthetic, philosophical, social, ethical, stylistic and genre-related issues raised by a given topic.

*Structural training* is a study of a concrete scene, where the exercise pays attention to its various aspects, such as structure, composition, meaning, conflict, vectors of energy, etc.

'It is not the actor who makes the exercise, it is the exercise that makes the actor' is training's golden rule of the Programme.

The Programme's ultimate goal is to make it possible for every teacher to create, in the course of the study, his or her own training that would reflect the teacher's own creative and pedagogical personality, rather than make use of other people's exercises, no matter how good, but, perhaps, not aligned with artistic views of this teacher and his students. This newly-developed training should always introduce elements of change, depending on student's progress and personality.

The Programme aims to establish training as a view of the theatre as a whole. Exercise as education, exercise as methodology of analysis and understanding of the role, exercise as an actor's rehearsal path and, finally, as a way of acting. Theatre at large is a great exercise. Owing to this approach, contemporary stage will see plays as exercises, where the actor is not only performing, presenting or experiencing, but is also exercising. This is the guarantee of a live, unpredictable theatre that is explorative, rather than declarative. For this reason, training is not only a remarkable tool of education, but also an important conceptual goal of the Programme.

## **SCHOOL OF ETHICS**

"Begin with yourself" is the primary tenet of pedagogy, and it applies to ethics in the first place as education's most challenging ingredient. Ethics is the cornerstone of this Programme. Although it concludes the list of the Programme's vectors, it is the point where the end meets the beginning. This is the condition without which the Programme cannot be a success. The Programme is continuously addressing it in its every activity, exercise and lecture. Ethics imparts superior meaning to the vocation of a teacher of the theatre.

Ethics is the source and the goal of the Programme, its energy and its law.

Any set of ethical rules must be in keeping with the spirit of its time. However, one has to admit that we live in a time where ethical rules no longer work. In the absence of continuous change, ethics becomes routine. There certainly are general standards in the understanding of ethical behaviours, but they are so unstable as to fail in crises. We have witnessed it in the life of our school and our theatre.

Begin with yourself! It must be hard to live and judge life based on laws established by others. But it is even harder to live and have to decide what is ethical and what is not. It is a hard task to establish ethical laws of one's own and follow them, yet that is where theatre education has to start. Ethics has become a personal matter in today's school. There is no governess to point a finger to what is good and what is bad. There is no unquestionable authority. The teacher is no longer an example of virtue, however good and moral he or she may be. Everyone is looking for their own path, their own beliefs and their own ethical principles. Today's ethics is personal responsibility. Nevertheless, it is the teacher's responsibility to create the sphere of ethical principles, while the student is free to

create his or her own ethics within the outlined sphere.

Begin with yourself! The theatre teacher chooses his own ethics. This may sound as responsibility before God, or before the Superior Intelligence, before Life, or before Art he serves. This is his own choice. Unless this choice is made, education loses its foundation and its goal. For this reason, one of the Programme's responsibilities is to create conditions and settings, where its students will develop their own individual rules of ethical behaviour. The Programme shall, day in and day out, develop the domain of individual ethical principles of any future teacher so that he or she could make their own choices and decide what is worthy and what is not. Independently created individual ethical rules are therefore hundreds of times more useful than ready-made advice. Yet even personally developed ethical rules should not become a dogma for the teacher.

It is also a responsibility of the Programme to shelter future teachers from extraneous vulgar and cynical influences that may have destructive effects on their spiritual structure. Even seemingly insignificant aggression can be destructive for the teacher's godly gift. The danger is in that such a teacher will inadvertently bring the bacillus of destruction to his

student actors in class, and the actors, from stage, will impart an amplified message of aggression to the subconscious of the audience. The theatre-goers will take this aggression outside, into the streets, and the cycle will repeat itself.

Only a teacher with a minimum of subconscious aggression can and should be in communication with the students, which is an indispensable ethical rule of the Programme.

It is my absolute conviction that ethics of the theatre begins at school. It is the best possible protection of today's theatre from overwhelming pragmatism, commercialization and spiritual death, yet it is this ethical knowledge that the school is missing the most. My analysis of theatres and schools the world over suggests that the spiritual potential, accumulated by theatre generations of Edward Gordon Craig, Jean Vilar, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook and many other great artists, has been fully used up. The theatre is approaching a line beyond which it is either spiritual regeneration or degeneration. For this reason, ethics is not just a slogan (like Stanislavsky's words, "Love art in yourself, not yourself in art", are often perceived), but an urgent necessity.

The art of theatre teacher begins with it.

\* \* \* \* \*

I believe the crisis we have experienced in the recent years is primarily due to basic inability of our political, social, educational and other systems to find solutions for unconventional problems. It is this inability that points to low standards of our collective mentality. The advent of automated systems and methods has made man's creative initiative redundant. Conventional educational programmes are unlikely to undergo any radical changes; therefore alternative educational programmes are gaining in importance. I am sure they will be a major influence on the educational tradition.

In order to develop and realize the above-described Programme as an innovative system of scientific views and practical steps, concerted efforts are needed from contemporary scholars and practitioners, educators, philosophers and masters of the theatre, who enjoy higher levels of creative mentality. I am sure world theatre has plenty of talent to offer.

*March 2014*  
*Translated by Irina Holmes*