

Philosophy of Teaching

I love teaching. And learning. I have always been drawn to the process of knowledge, information and, hopefully, wisdom, moving dynamically between teachers and students in planned, but mysterious, ways.

I have taught a wide range of theatrical subjects—Acting (all levels), Acting Comedy, Acting Styles, Adaptation of Literature, Audition Techniques, Directing, Performance of Literature, Playwriting, Shakespeare and more. But no matter what aspect of theatre I am teaching, my primary fascination and focus is how I can help every theatre artist truly bring themselves to the work.

The question I continually ask myself: How can I help my students build bold bridges and meaningful connections between the reality of their own lives and the fictional reality of the character they are playing, the story they are telling, or the world they are inhabiting? I believe the most worthwhile thing we have to offer The Theatre is our own flawed, remarkable, complicated selves. That is where I start... and the touchstone to which I continually return. In between, I try to positively, passionately, and effectively offer as many tools and techniques as I can to help actors pretend better; directors help other people pretend better; playwrights create unique and engaging pretend worlds; and designers to create the best possible worlds for all the others to pretend in.

I find theatre artists (and aspiring theatre artists) endlessly fascinating and worthy of our highest respect. It is a fraught life, and I admire those who are brave enough to undertake it. The affection and respect I have for aspiring theatre artists is reflected every day in every class I teach. I believe that when theatre artists know themselves well and are willing to put that self-knowledge (as well as any other knowledge they possess) into the work... extraordinary things can happen. Even for beginners, I have seen time and time again how grounding the work in their own essential truth can make it stronger and more effective.

While this pursuit is at the core of what I do, there are a number of core beliefs that underlie my teaching. Here are some of the fundamental principles and values that guide me as a teacher:

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I believe in Courage, Curiosity and Generosity.

These attributes are essential for theatre artists. I (imperfectly) try to model these behaviors, and strongly encourage them in my students. How they are manifested varies widely depending on specific circumstances, but they're required in all disciplines and at all levels. Without these attributes I believe aspiring artists will find a life in the theatre a struggle.

I am Straightforward.

I am not emotionally manipulative or passive aggressive. I attempt to never play any kind of mind games with my students. I've witnessed this type of teaching, and I believe it is destructive. While it is clearly difficult to be an excellent actor, director, playwright or designer, the jobs themselves are actually pretty straightforward and relatively simple. I try not to over complicate things.

I believe in Honesty & Integrity.

I try to say what I mean, and mean what I say. I try to answer questions truthfully, without evasion or obfuscation. I am not brutally honest, but I believe that being supportively transparent with students is a sign of respect. I offer encouragement and criticism as it is warranted, and point out the positive whenever possible. As a responsible teacher, I am doing my best every day in the classroom to model integrity and honesty. While I am certainly careful to not offer more "honesty" than a student can currently handle, I believe that if your students can trust your word, you have the possibility of creating an environment where they can be playful, bold, creative and effective.

I believe in Rigor.

Acting is hard to do well. Professional theatre is a very difficult profession. Far too much theatre doesn't live up to our hopes or expectations. I am constantly encouraging my students to develop the capacity to work harder, look deeper, engage more fully, spend more energy, etc. etc. The truth is, the best actors I know are also the hardest workers. Rigor and perseverance are invaluable.

Truth is Just About Everything.

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I am mildly obsessed with Wonder and Amazement.

I speak about Wonder and Amazement nearly every day in nearly every class. A capacity for wonder is essential for an artist. Amazement, awe, astonishment (to use just a few of its names...) sits at the heart of what makes theatre powerful and worthwhile for me. In this—as in so many things—Shakespeare is my teacher and my guide. Every Shakespeare play is filled with amazement... and I think this must be matched by all of us as theatre practitioners and teachers.

In conclusion... Theatre is relatively simple. We are all just playing an almost absurdly detailed game of “pretend”. I try to teach— with rigor, integrity and kindness—ways to pretend better. Ways to pretend that build from each of our own truths... and lead others toward their own truths. That’s about it.

I believe in Kindness & Encouragement.

Even as I believe in honesty and rigor, I also believe in the remarkable power and efficacy of kindness and encouragement. I practice what I call “radical watering”, lavishing support upon a student who is struggling in the sincere hope that it will help them to grow. I believe that genuine kindness and encouragement can help produce a safe, creative environment where students have the greatest chance of growing, learning and achieving their goals.

Actually, actually.

With actors in particular, my shorthand name for all of this is “*actually, actually*”. This is my way of saying, in various ways... no, stop a moment, listen fully, think deeply, how would you actually, actually respond in this or that given situation? What truth can you offer to this moment or character or scene or design from the fullest, richest, most complicated places inside yourself? These key questions sit at the center of nearly everything I do and believe in as a teacher.