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## **Learning Too Simply Be**

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My first director in a high school production once said, “acting is not acting, it’s being.” That comment has stuck with me till this very day and it’s something I take seriously. This art form that is theater is a special and unique one in that it is a lived experience by not only the audience but the actors as well. Theatre has always been the medium of performance in which we can view real life being played out in real time. Its origins stem from the sole purpose of “reflecting society back unto itself.” This is what I want to impart upon my students, through techniques, that by just “being” on stage they can encourage thought and change.

The number one thing I want a student to take away in my acting class isn’t necessarily the product, but rather the journey and discoveries while getting there. My class structure is to ensure there is much time for work and play. As well as reiterating the value of table work. Very great things can happen from having detailed specific conversations about certain moments. In doing this detailed work conversations may arise that could be difficult to talk about given the subject matter however it’s our job to interpret it without bias. The greatest actors know and understand why that character walks the way they do. Even if how they walk is unsavory. Empathy and compassion are huge assets when it comes to “being.”

Another important aspect I want to touch upon with students is freeing their bodies from physical tendencies. Coming from a rather movement-based background myself training in Feldenkrais, Viewpoints, and Laban Efforts I have found how invaluable it is to be as connected with your body as possible. The goal is for students to be able to notice when they are gesturing out of a physical habit and be able to pinpoint it so that they can actively choose to use it or not. This very thing is something I still find trouble with, and frankly something I wish I had pointed out to me much sooner in my acting journey. I want students to feel as if their body isn’t getting in the way of their success. Along with certain movement techniques to help improve gesture life, I also strive to invite them to find new ways to prepare their bodies for the work. In my experience some of my best work is when I could give myself a full thirty-to-forty-five-minute warmup. My students will learn not only what I do to get myself to a neutral state but be encouraged to find new ways that work for them.

Along with specializing in movement I have also spent a lot of my theater career performing in the genre of musical theater. My first Broadway show was at eight years old, I saw *Beauty and the Beast*, and to say I was hooked would be an understatement. I want to share my passion for musicals with like-minded students, and serve as a mentor/coach to them. My goal as a musical theater professor is to always remind my students about the given circumstances and story you’re telling. Students often fall into the trap of focusing too much on the technicalities of making sure that every note is in place instead of putting their attention to their objective. In my own work I’ve found reconnecting with your objective is a great place to start to help vocal blocks.

Thankfully in my time in graduate school I've started to hone my ideal structure of an Acting Through Song course. The number one focus of this specific class for me is character building. That must come first and work in tandem with your vocal production to achieve the most nuanced performance possible. I will expect students to come up with scores that elaborate on what the given circumstances are as well as certain beats and intentions they not only want to convey but also align with the composer. Not only in the song, but in the scene before as well. Student's actor homework will be done in such a way that when they're performing, they should be able to live and breathe in the scene. Students walk away feeling like a better actor-singer rather than one over the other.

Another unique approach I utilize in all my classrooms is Doctor Tawnya Pettiford-Wates' methodology Ritual Poetic Drama. This is a method that requires an actor to go back through one's life experience to fetch things they might have left along the way. Specifically, I'm referring to the idea of culture and ancestry, which are both integral in informing us of our artistic selves. How does one move forward if they don't know where they've been? My hope in exploring this methodology with my students is that it gets them to ask those tough questions. Tough questions we often have to ask of the characters we play. I want them to feel safe and free to find a light in them that they're dimming on purpose, or a light being dimmed by societal constructs.

A side goal I've found is to help foster ensemble, community, and inclusion. This can be a very exposing vulnerable thing for young students. First and foremost, there needs to be a space established that everyone's fears, thoughts, and worries are valid. They are valid and also shared with the group. In our world we're taught the only problems of the world that matter are my own and I simply don't have time for anyone else's tribulations. What if we all changed that mindset and decided that it was ok to reach your arm behind you to help a stranger as well as accept help when needed. How much farther could this goal post called life be moved if we did?

I've always led with compassion and understanding. It's the same way I lead my classes and help them push boundaries and challenge the world they live in with their art. In my teaching I hope to foster the next generation of not just actors, but genuinely good-hearted empathetic members of society.