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Teaching Philosophy

A successful theatre artist has to have vision. They must be able to pick and analyze a project, identify and develop ideas about the project, and research and communicate those ideas while working with a team. They must then be able to execute their vision and be able to render or present their ideas. They must have the practical skills needed to build what they conceptualize. They must be able to work within the given resources. Completing all these tasks, balancing all of these elements, is challenging for any artist, but especially for students.

My job as an educator is to share my knowledge and experiences and use them to guide students through the process. I impart theory, techniques, and skills that will help them, and then I allow them to try, to experience the reality of making theatre. I am there to push them, support them, and help them correct their course when mistakes occur. My goal is to help them find their voice, share it as effectively as possible, and deliver on all their wonderful plans

Theatre making consists of many components that can all be classified into two over-arching categories, vision and execution. When a piece has a strong vision and is thoughtfully and skillfully executed, magic can occur. Theatre education is about combining theory and technique, thought and action, feeling and analysis so that students have every opportunity to make magic.

Every creative endeavor should begin with a vision; a reason for being and an idea about how to express that reason. Identifying and developing the vision for a piece can be challenging. It requires analysis and research. It requires collaboration and communication. It requires empathy, curiosity, and an open mind. Students in the performing arts must learn to question and engage in the world around them if they hope to discover and share a meaningful vision in their work.

Another way of discussing a student's vision is to talk about their creative voice. In order to discover and amplify their creative voice, I must learn about the students, and many times, they need to learn about themselves as well. The best way I have found to learn anything is to ask questions, and this is what I do with my students. "What do you hope to get from this course?" "What is your experience with theatre...dance...art...performance...design?" "How do you think the performing arts fit into the world?" "How do you fit into the world?" "What do you feel are your strengths and weaknesses?" "What would you like your relationship with art to be?" These questions yield vital information that allows the student and myself to focus

their training and communicate about their goals and world views which in turn affects their work.

Once we begin working on pieces, whether in the classroom or actual production, I ask more questions. “What do you think this piece is saying?” “What do you respond to?” “How is this similar to your experience?” “How is it different?” The student has to be able to identify the story, understand the characters and relationships, and select the themes they want to highlight. These questions are accompanied by exercises in script analysis, research, and theory which serve to ground them in the time, place, situation, and meaning of a particular project. When they are well grounded in the world of the piece, they are better able to decide what their goal for the production is, to identify their vision.

The most important question I ask students as they develop their vision is “why?” “Why this piece?” “Why right now?” “Why this element?” “Why this look?” “Why?” forces all of us to clarify our goals and to identify the heart of our choices. This is essential in theatre because theatre can be and do so many things. A production that is trying to highlight social issues in the script will be very different than the one focusing on the slap-stick physical comedy. Neither approach is right or wrong, but a choice needs to be made and then supported. Asking “why” teaches a student to identify, edit, and justify their vision of a piece.

Collaboration and communication are also important aspects in defining and building a student’s vision of a piece. They must be able to work together to build a piece. They must be able to articulate their ideas clearly with both words and images. They must be able to support their work when it is challenged or questioned. To foster that particular skill, I utilize class critiques, with the understanding that only constructive critique will be accepted. The students discuss, analyze, and question one another’s design choices, and this allows the designer the opportunity to practice responding professionally and confidently to others reactions to their work.

The vision component is comprised of understanding one’s self, one’s world, and the piece of work they are engaged with. Students should be investigating and discovering what they want to share with an audience and the most effective ways to share it. The goal of all my questions and exercises during this phase is to get them to think about the big picture and tap into their creative impulses, while also imparting the theory and knowledge that will help them better understand and interact with a piece.

The other category in theatre education is execution. A person or team can have an amazing idea, but if they are unable to actualize it, it languishes or fails. It never reaches an audience. This area of education consists of many practical skills and requires patience and practice. Students learn to render designs, budget time, money and manpower, create organized paperwork, and literally build the thing they have designed. In costumes, this includes learning to pattern, sew, fit, and maintain costumes. Some students excel in the hands-nature of this work. Others are intimidated.

I constantly remind myself of what it was like when I started my training. My renderings were blocky, unrealistic sketches, my seams were uneven, and I had no idea how to make a pattern. I added to my skills day by day and strengthened them year by year thanks to good teachers and a lot of practice. I approach every student with that memory of myself. I work with students of all skill levels. Some have been sewing for years and want to go into costuming as a career. Some need a humanities class to graduate and have never seen a play or held a needle. Regardless of their interest or skill level, I present the skills in a clear and organized way. I provide demonstration, instruction, diagrams, videos, and any other supportive materials that might help. I make them practice. I show them my tricks. I explain why I do things the way I do. I acknowledge they will make mistakes, but require that they correct the mistake hoping it will keep them from repeating the mistake again.

One of the most useful things I do is ask them to explain a task to me. I use this technique most frequently at the beginning of their training. For example, we will be sitting together at the sewing machine, and I have demonstrated how to thread it a few times. The student says, “what do I do again?” My response is, “What do you remember?” It forces them to think about what they have learned, to reinforce the information, and gives them ownership of the knowledge. It does require a lot of time and patience on my part, but that is why I am there. I am a facilitator of knowledge. Once they get it, they will have the skill for the rest of their life.

Sometimes students think the skills they are learning won't translate outside of theatre. One of my primary goals is to show them how all knowledge is interrelated and transferable. Theatre education focuses on critical thinking, analysis, artistic appreciation, communication, and community engagement. It requires organization, innovation, and the ability to work within resources. These skills are desirable in any number of fields. I once had a student majoring in Bio-Chemistry take my History of Dress course. She came to me and said something like, “I had a grad school interview last week, and when I picked what to wear I thought about our conversation from class about what clothing says about us. I hadn't thought about that before.” Those are the type of realizations I hope all my students have.

Execution goes beyond just obtaining the skills needed to do a task or complete a job. It involves doing the job. In terms of theatre education this means MAKING theatre. Experiential learning gives students an understanding of their craft that no amount of theory or conceptualization can replace. It is only by doing that they are able to understand how the pieces become a whole and are able to test their vision. When working on a project, students learn the realities of resource management. They learn problem solving. They learn to take risks. They learn to appreciate success and to bounce back from failure. It is essential for the student to experience the reality of their field, and they become stronger artists from the experience.

As an artist and an educator, I am always concerned with vision and execution. There are many things to learn during a student's training. In fact, they will continue to learn and grow throughout their lives and career. If they should leave their program with a curiosity about the world, a desire to create and collaborate, the ability

to analyze, research, and communicate ideas, and the practical techniques and skills needed to execute their plans, their education will be a success.