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THE FIVE SENSES: FUNDAMENTALS IN ACTING TRAINING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MFA

Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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BFA Theatre Performance, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

MFA Theatre Pedagogy, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2023

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Richmond, Virginia

December 2023

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- The 11 Students in Fundamentals of Theatre, 2018, Section 004: For taking this journey with me and their willingness to play.
- The Faculty and Staff at Virginia Commonwealth University: For their undying support and patience with me through this process.
- Josh Chenard: For showing me how to teach with love and be curious.
- Dr. Aaron Anderson: For his poetics, his style, and leading me to the finish line.
- Dr. Keith Kirk: For modeling strength and consistency in the classroom. And his offer of bail money (if it ever came to that).
- Dr. Jesse Njus: For believing in me as a writer and helping me develop ideas.
- Kerrigan Sullivan: For the opportunities to work and continue teaching actors.
- Marisa Guida: For her guidance, enthusiasm, and spirit at VCU School of Business.
- Dorie Barton: For helping me begin this process and believing it was worth writing.
- Dylan: My son. My hero. My greatest teacher. And the light of my life.
- Robert "Bob" Skalleberg: For saving my life.
- My Parents: For continuing to believe in me and support me in every way possible.

Nothing without you.

ABSTRACT

THE FIVE SENSES: FUNDAMENTALS IN ACTING TRAINING

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The following is presented as a tool for new acting teachers, students and potentially parents. It identifies and explores the fundamental lessons that I believe are necessary inside a beginning acting studio, inspired by that which I believe is necessary when raising a young child. Rather than focusing on one particular technique, system or method - I purpose a set of qualities that can be fostered in the classroom and developed in the training of new actors. It encourages those in a position of influence to consider a shift in their approach. Suggesting practices that release teachers and students from measurable outcomes and learning objectives,

and instead leads them toward a sense of agency, community, space, purpose and wonder inside of their training. And in their life as well.

This thesis exploration follows my path as an actor, a parent and a teacher. First, I will describe my experiences as a young actor and the teaching methods that fostered confusion, competition and a lack of connection. Then I will describe how I worked to become an available, secure and consistent parent. The lessons I learned and how they changed me as a person, as well as an artist. In the body of the text, I will discuss how I translated these discoveries into a teaching philosophy, and applied these principles in the classroom. I will recount the ways in which I attempted to develop these fundamentals in our work, and share some of the exercises I created. And finally, I will offer some actual feedback presented by the students in my first Fundamentals of Performance Class, in 2018.

VITA

Landon Albert Nagel was born on January 29, 1982, in Easton, Maryland and is an American citizen. He graduated from James River High School, Midlothian, Virginia in 2000. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre Performance from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), School of the Arts in 2008. After years as a professional actor and becoming a single father, Landon returned to VCU School of the Arts in order to transition into education. In the winter of 2023, he received a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy with a concentration in Acting and Directing. He is currently a professor of acting, theatre, and communication at VCU and Brightpoint Community College.

THE FIVE SENSES: FUNDAMENTALS IN ACTING TRAINING

"Acting is the life of the human soul receiving its birth through art."

Richard Boleslavsky, Acting: The First Six Lessons

BEGINNING

After some years as a student, an actor, a teacher, a coach, a single father, a hopeless romantic, and more than a few years of weekly therapy - having no agenda and absolutely nothing figured out - I would like to present a piece of pedagogy that might assist teachers, as well as students of acting and theatre performance. I would like to help those of you trying to teach others how to walk and talk at the same time, while other people are watching. And primarily those teachers, or students, who have limited time in the studio during their first semester of training. As the body of this work is inspired primarily by my collection of life experience - the paths I've tread, the roles I've played (both on and off stage), my endless education as a student "of the human soul" - my hope is that this long collection of words might also offer assistance to teachers and students of any discipline. And possibly even parents. And, more specifically, single parents.

I will do my level best to focus these writing efforts towards enhancing, possibly clarifying, and ultimately contributing to the synthesis of secure, satisfying, and sustainable acting training. An approach to the Fundamentals of Acting that will meet the needs of the modern learner, one with flexibility that might shift dependent on the circumstances or climate of the classroom (both literally and figuratively). A teaching system that neither accepts, nor denies, any one acting or performance technique. And does not claim to be a technique at all. In fact, the shift here is not necessarily focused on “the what” - the content, the technique, the method, the learning activities, the work, the product. The target I am most interested in inside of this pedagogical exploration concerns “the how”. This interest in how we deliver acting training has fascinated me since the beginning of my graduate study. And as I have continued to “unpack” these thoughts and beliefs - I begin to uncover my constant connection and lifelong journey to teaching styles. To the teaching models I experienced in my life. The modalities I was instructed with. The approaches that felt secure, warm and offered belonging- meeting my needs to be seen and heard - and ultimately helped me grow. As well as the approaches I couldn’t trust, or those that seemed unavailable to me, out of reach. Or those classes that forced me to ask hard questions and where I exhibited resistance. And how this resistance was handled. I have learned from each and every one of them. I consider myself a lucky student due to the immeasurable amount of help I’ve had in my training and in this world.

Teachers, guides, mentors, coaches, mothers, fathers, friends, strangers, and so many people have all contributed to what I have learned and will attempt to intertwine into my acting training philosophy.

The philosophy presented herein is more a set of guideposts, or encouragements, for the classroom. To be considered by both the teacher and students. Designed to troubleshoot some of the difficulties new actors, and perhaps older actors may experience. Concepts and atmospheres created in the classroom that lead to security, community, and presence. Creating a sense of belonging. Allowing the students to not only partake in fundamental acting, voice and movement lessons - developing a personal technique, but also preparing new artists for a lifetime in the world of performance and theatre arts. A training and development of the mind, body, and spirit that primarily assists the actor to believe in themselves, find their voice, connect to their bodies, and deliver their hearts to the audience.

Relying heavily upon a mixture of methods from some of our greatest acting practitioners, personal mentors, and the unique experience I have had raising my son - I created a beginning acting studio of my own. To my delight, in the process of attempting this, I found my voice as a teacher, connected to my body, and delivered my heart to the students. By trusting what I had to offer was enough, and teaching

this class from a personal perspective - I made fascinating discoveries that have crafted my philosophy and style of teaching. The following is account of my experience around teaching this class, and the five components that shaped our work together, leading the entire ensemble to improvement and success. I would like to point out - this proposal and thesis exploration has been inspired, more than tested. Whereas the cultivation of many of these philosophies stretch as far back as I can remember - the product of many trials and tribulations- the initial application of these curiosities began in the Fall of 2018.

Assignment

Just prior to my third year of graduate school, at Virginia Commonwealth University, I was asked to teach "Fundamentals of Performance" - the beginning acting class for the BFA performance majors. This was a prerequisite course to Acting 1 - and the place where the first year students receive their only exposure to Acting, Voice, and Movement. Lasting only one semester. Given this assignment, I was thrilled to receive the opportunity to teach a section of my own - but ultimately left feeling as if I had no idea how to do it. Because I had never done it. This was my first acting class as a teacher. Over the years, I had been a guest artist in local schools for a day or two, or a few hours, and I had taught two sections of public speaking at that point in my graduate studies- but I had never taught an acting ensemble in my life. And I had

certainly never been anyone's first collegiate acting teacher before - I will never forget mine. As the seeming significance of this new role grew, I considered the word "Fundamentals"- the depth and weight of this concept - and further questioned myself and doubted my abilities.

A couple weeks prior to the start of the class, I attended a brief meeting with the chair of the department, as well as two other faculty members teaching sections of Fundamentals of Performance (one an associate professor, and the other an adjunct). Coincidentally, this was a new course in 2018, inside of a brand-new curriculum, with no syllabus or pre-existing schedule of any kind. In fact, the previous first-year actors had attended Acting 1 for an entire year, and these year-long sections did not include the student's only exposure to Voice and Movement for the Actor. The task before us, inside the new curriculum, was to introduce the students to acting, voice and movement, in one semester. In the studio only twice a week, for 80 minute sessions. Less than 3 hours a week. During the meeting, we discussed a structured, yet flexible syllabus with a handful of required course objectives and learning outcomes for all the first-year actors - and not much more. Admirably, my mentors left the style and approach to achieve the course objectives entirely up to me. As long as the learning objectives and outcomes were met inside of the course, no one was concerned with how I got the students there.

The task was mine and mine alone. I started to consider all of my acting training and professional theatrical productions I had been a part of. Considering the many lessons I had learned- the good and the bad. I looked around at the students in the program, as well as the university as a whole - those I had observed and the handful I had instructed in public speaking. I reflected on my path as a student of acting, a student of life - missed opportunities and achievements, triumphs and traumas. I remembered my old teachers, directors, and colleagues - uncovering forgotten notebooks and scripts. I observed the teachers close to me - those teaching me, those I assisted, and those inside my graduate cohort. I was attempting to pinpoint what was either effective, or ineffective about their style and approach. I thought about the life lessons introduced by my therapist - who had guided me through the previous three years in weekly psychotherapy and substance abuse counseling. I reflected back to the lessons he taught me and the wisdom he provided concerning grief work, emotional intelligence, personal security, self-agency, attachments, projection, repetition compulsion, the importance of consistency and "play" inside of parenting and intimate relationships. As well as alcohol and drug dependence, withdraw, recovery, and faith. He helped me learned so much about myself. He modeled these qualities and life lessons. And as a result, not only did he save my life, he helped me to parent my only child through an estranged relationship with his

mother. Most of all, I thought about my 4-year-old little boy Dylan- the greatest teacher in my life. I thought back to the first year of his life. And how I was a stranger to him at one point inside that year. And then earned his trust back.

Context

To put this in some context: Dylan's mother and I met when we were both struggling with substance abuse. As I've heard it said, "water met at its own level" and we came together when we were both very sick - physically sick and sick at heart. And just two weeks after meeting one another we were faced with the decision of a pregnancy.

We were never a couple, but we were going to be parents. I spent the next 9 months preparing for a journey like no other. I did all could to clean my life up, clean myself up and welcome a child into the world. I attended meetings, got clean and sober, and met with a counselor weekly. I deep cleaned my home, my car and acquired all the "stuff" a baby needs. I took classes on child care, infant massage, CPR and even attended a class called "Daddy Boot Camp". I read books, looked at articles and talked with other parents to learn what to expect. And then I had to put faith in the universe and trust that if I was present, consistent, and simply listened - I would know what to do. After his birth, I was with my son Dylan for the first 100 days of his life. His mother and her family allowed me to live in their home, and spend time with him for many hours everyday. Our connection was like none other I had experienced in my

life. But after the first 100 days, in order for me to ensure a consistent and stable relationship with him, it was necessary for me to separate from these circumstances, and seek legal rights to be with my son. After a number of months away from Dylan, I remember the heart-wrenching task of earning my son's trust (earning it back), by providing comfort and security to an 8-month-old. To whom I had become a stranger. Imagine being a teething and anxious baby boy, separated from your mother, and hanging out with a stranger called "Dada", in a strange new place, two hours, two times a week. Again, I had to put my faith in the universe. Continue to show up. And be present, consistent and listen. And it worked.

Connection

After reflecting on this - I made the connection. "Two hours, two times a week". This was only a few more minutes a week than I would enjoy with the 11 actors in my class. I started to consider how I had provided comfort and security for my son, earning his trust years ago. The ground work that this laid for him, and for or us as family. The fundamentals that we defined together, and have continued to build upon. I considered where the ground plan has led us, and our lives together today. The sole physical and legal custody I have earned, the care I have been able to provide for him, and the healthy and secure relationship we have together. I considered the tactics I used to make this happen. The importance I placed on security and

consistency. Modeling responsive rather than reactionary behavior. The importance placed on healthy communication and interaction - the use of a non shame-based language. The expansion of imagination and play. The attention I paid to providing a safe space. A reliance on the community around us, and the village I called upon to help me raise him. The purposeful and intentional ways in which I would teach him to move through this unpredictable and often terrifying world. And the sense of wonder and magic that I tried to foster in his life, allowing him to believe in what dreams may come. Could these tactics, or techniques work in the classroom? Wherein first year acting students are struggling with trust- trusting themselves, trusting each other, and trusting me. Doing all they can to get things "right", and not look silly, or fall, or fail in the process. Of course these tactics could work.

Creation

Finally, I began to trust myself. I let go of the doubt and decided to teach this class from my experience, from my heart. I asked myself - what are we really teaching these students to do? And the answer was simple. We are asking them to walk and talk at the same time, while other people are watching. We are asking them to trust that they will not fall. And if they do fall (or fail), to trust that they can get back up. That they can always try again. And in fact, that the struggle is essential. I decided to frame the class in accordance with some of the principles of early child hood

development, offering a safe space where the students in the studio would be certain that they would be seen and heard. Assuring them that their voices and their point of view were all valid and worthy of attention. Creating a space where they could be comfortable expressing themselves without fear of shame or judgment, and move closer to artistic freedom and empowerment. With all of this in mind, I found it necessary to subtly shift our course objectives - reframing the fundamentals of performance in my studio by focusing less on the typical techniques and methodologies of acting training and practitioners. And leaning into an experiential and authentic studio training, that allowed the actors the security and freedom to trust themselves and discover innovative inspiration from within. To be clear - I didn't throw out the ideas of Stanislavsky or the other great systems or methods of acting education. In fact they were all considered as a springboard in my lessons, and many of them will be referenced and quoted in the following pages. I just found it necessary - given the task before me and such limited time with these actors - to let go of measurable outcomes. To think in broader terms in order help the students reach the "learning objectives". I considered what I wished the beginning of my acting training (and perhaps my childhood) had looked like. Or felt like. I asked myself what concepts I had begun to grasp, and foster in my son's life. And more importantly - how we got there. I attempted to narrow these lessons down and make sure I was offering the students my best efforts to instill these qualities in the training.

Fundamentals

Paying homage to one of my favorite practitioners, Richard Boleslavsky and his definition of the tools necessary for “emotion makers” in his book, *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, “Such scales are your five senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. They will be the key of your creation...”, I have narrowed my Acting Fundamentals down to a list of five. With the same name, but a different meaning. An exploration through another list of human “senses”, that can be developed with daily exercise and practice. In my first acting class, and all the others that have followed between then and finishing this thesis exploration, I have tried to make my aim developing these qualities “or senses” in my students. And each time I have worked to foster these concepts in my students, the required learning objectives have been achieved. The five senses I have targeted and applied in the classroom, in order to enhance acting training for both teacher and student are as follows:

Sense of Agency

Sense of Community

Sense of Space

Sense of Purpose

Sense of Wonder

MIDDLE

1. Sense of Agency

"If ninety percent of your time went into BEING. Learning how to BE, finding out who you are and what makes you function, and ten per cent went into your "system", your technique or whatever you call it. That would be a proper proportion. The craft of acting can be taught to an idiot in six months...the main thing is not an acting problem. It's a living problem. What you can't allow yourself to feel out there, you won't allow yourself to feel here on stage."

Eric Morris, *No Acting Please*

Acting is about making choices. Having a point of view. Having a sense of yourself, and the world around you. Responding authentically. Behaving truthfully.

Experiencing emotions that are connected to action, propelling us towards our desires. The same can be said for life. Life is about all of these choices as well. I believe the reason acting training can be difficult when we are young, or just starting out, is due to an inability to make choices. To trust any choice that we have in our mind, or impulse we feel in our body. Even one choice. To commit to an action and express it entirely. This sense of security in oneself and agency in one's actions is

necessary. In life and in acting. In my experience, the difficulty I see inside many young actors is a lack of belief in themselves. A diminished sense of themselves. And it is hard to experience this as a teacher. Because I believe they have everything they need inside of them to make wildly entertaining, captivating choices. The ability to play like children - attack problems and solve them. But they have lost it somewhere. They are insecure. Lacking agency.

The concept and cultivation of a "sense of agency" is the most important of these fundamentals, the first amongst the list, and will set the tone for the achievement of the remainder because it addresses the *living problem*. The problem Eric Morris has described so specifically in his text, *No Acting, Please*. His philosophy of Being rather than Acting, invests deeply into self-exploration and self-discovery, with exercises such as, "I Allow, I Permit, I Accept, Personal Inventory and Double Exposure". Exercises to combat possible insecurities or acting habits an actor may begin their training with, or be experiencing during the class - the task at hand. Exercises that help actors identify and work from a state of security within themselves, giving them the opportunity to simply be. Allowing the actors to feel in control and take ownership of their work, in order to develop a sense of agency, or what Morris calls "the natural process of responding to life. The process [of] stimulus-effect-response-expression". These exercises are wonderful. But how can we as teachers assist our

students in the development of a sense of agency in the classroom experience? In our daily work? What can we do to foster this quality and give our students the ability to trust themselves and become better problem-solvers?

A sense of agency assists actors, onstage and off, in trusting themselves enough to perform clear and active choices, directed towards solving a conflict, or achieving an objective. In his article on the *Fundamentals of Acting*, Richard Boleslavsky states, "it is merely necessary to think of life as an unbroken sequence of two different kinds of steps...Problem steps and Action Steps...The first step is for the actor to understand what the problem is that confronts him. Then the spark of will pushes him toward dynamic action...to precipitate himself intensely into the action which the situation requires, [then] he will have achieved the perfect technique of acting." With this problem-solving ability at their command - with a sense of agency - actors have the opportunity to achieve "the perfect technique of acting." Without this ability, without attention paid to providing an atmosphere that fosters this essential quality, a child - an acting student, a person - might lack the development of self-awareness, self-control, self-esteem, self-care and self-love.

In my early training (and admittedly throughout my life) I found myself operating from a place of fear and competition. And though I was talented, I was deeply insecure.

Often shut off from the ensemble - or at least feeling that way. Shut off from my higher self. My true self. My artistic self. Shamefully comparing myself to others. This was my living problem. And it found its way into the acting studio. I also saw it in many of the young actors around me years ago. I still see it still today, and figured it would be present in my first class as a teacher. I had to figure out a way to combat this for my students. To give them a sense that they were in control. That they did not need to compete. Or compare. And could make decisions without fear of judgment or of the consequences. Positive or negative. I also needed to instill in them a sense of responsibility and accountability for themselves and their work.

A "sense of agency" is defined in a number of ways, as it has its place in neuroscience and psychiatry, psychological theory, early childhood development, the sociology and psychology of adults, and beyond. For the purpose of this pedagogical exploration, I will simply scratch the surface of this concept of "agency", looking at what is immediately relevant, and connects with the fundamental practices inside methods of acting training. The parallels between developing a sense of agency in life and inside a beginning acting studio.

Again, my point of view on this concept comes from years of personal experience, during which I functioned without a sense of agency - experiencing the "living

problem". Constantly finding myself dealing with difficult consequences for actions I had taken with little consideration of the results my actions might produce. Close to five years ago, having finally reached an emotional and spiritual bottom, in the midst of yet another combination of troubling circumstances, feeling hopeless and helpless, wishing for the end - I sought help. I needed to find a new way. If not for myself, for my son - who (at the time) would be arriving in a few short months. At first, I merely wanted to get better, so I could have a chance at being a presence in my soon-arriving child's life. But as I sat with my therapist - once a week, for one hour - I learned more about myself than ever before. No other therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist, substance abuse counselor, sponsor, acting teacher, director, or family member has taught me more about myself than this man. For the first time in my life, someone recognized that I had an extraordinarily low self-esteem, and an inordinate amount of anxiety. This was something I had often failed to recognize because of my gregarious personality, coupled with many talents and abilities that I possess. Simply put - I have a terribly strong offense, to hide my lack of defense. I have often, if not always, been labeled (or cast as) an overly confident, powerful character - a leader - or at least the loudest person in the room. But finally, someone was truly seeing me, hearing me, and responding to me - rather than reacting and telling me what I should do differently.

This counselor helped me differentiate which thoughts in my head and feeling states I was experiencing were real, and which may have been distorted. He validated the thoughts and the feelings I had, but helped me find perspective on them. He encouraged me to find the space between some of these thoughts and feelings and live there. But most importantly - he showed me that if someone is consistent, encouraging and secure, and speaks with a non shame-based language - for one hour, once a week - then they could make an impact. Forever change a life for the better. Even save a life. As I learned more, realizing that much of my behavior was a result of my upbringing, or what I had been taught - I became motivated to learn how I might prevent the same difficulties for my son. How I might teach him differently and offer him an different experience. I was determined to provide him with a better opportunity at self-security, self-agency, and self-acceptance. Throughout my work with my counselor and other help groups I was involved in, I was not only introduced to the concepts of a security, self-agency, and self-care, but I was also encouraged to read more deeply into the subjects, and given some methods to practice this behavior for myself, as well as model the behavior for my son.

As it happens, my further investigation into self-agency and the practicing of these principles - its potency in early-childhood development and its connection to acting training - has transpired during my graduate studies in the pedagogy of acting

performance. I have examined and practiced the teaching of children from two perspectives, and the parallels are staggering. This led me to consider a sense of agency as a primary and necessary fundamental in my acting class. The foundation, or path, that would lead us to the remaining four fundamentals.

In early childhood development, self- agency- or competency- is best developed by providing security and encouragement. Best-selling author and parenting authority, John Rosemond, states that “all parents need to do is provide the growing child with a stimulating environment and a variety of interesting experiences that together will enable the growth of competency behaviors”. In his book, *Making the Terrible Twos Terrific*, Rosemond identifies the significance of competency(agency), and provides parents specific behaviors to foster security and encouragement - leading to a competent child - a self-reliant child, with a sense of agency. The behaviors Rosemond suggests to parents in order for them to provide an adequate level of security and encouragement to “bring out the best” in young children, can be used by a teacher in an acting studio, or any classroom. This is a necessary step to establish the best possible learning environment. Parents (and teachers) should offer a safe place to play, with as many “opportunities to express curiosities”, encourage a variety of activities, talk to your child, play with your child, shut off technology, provide consistency through repetition and routine, respond to the needs of the child, while

maintaining healthy boundaries, and refrain from shaming them for any emotions they may experience. This is what I set out to do with my son. And this is now my teaching philosophy. It is how I interact and respond in the acting studio. And in all the other classes I teach.

From day one, I assured the students that I was there to listen to them, to give them my attention - where others may not have. I told them I would learn more from them than they would ever learn from me. Presenting myself as an equal - a student, the same as them. I tried to meet them where they were by revealing what I didn't know, my insecurities and fears. I also shared my joy and overwhelming gratitude in response to the opportunity to teach them and their willingness to participate in this experiment. When I planned each lesson, developed an exercise, or created an assignment, I tried to find some way of promoting a sense of agency inside the work. I was deeply satisfied to witness the outcome. As the weeks went by, my students transformed into more competent, more defined versions of themselves. I could see how the presence of security and encouragement gave the actors an ability to become more creatively independent and authentic as artist. As people. I still see some of my students around school today. They look taller, their eyes are brighter, and they have a quiet sense of confidence and empowerment. With a healthy dose of humility. They have agency.

2. Sense of Community

"The actor must also have a sense of responsibility toward his fellow actors. A theatre where an individual "star" is the center of attention is not art, Stanislavski felt, but a deviation from it. Theatre cannot depend on one person: it is an ensemble, and it is disrupted when actors have different habits of techniques and no common training. Such actors interfere with instead of helping each other."

Sonia Moore, Training an Actor

Theatre and performance is about people. It is about community. It can never be a solo venture. Even in solo performance, impulses have to come from something or someone outside of the actor performing, and it must take place in front of someone watching. It cannot happen in vacuum; without an audience. Inside the fundamentals of all theatre practitioners and master teachers is a sense of ensemble - a reliance on the partner, or the group. A need for concentration on and observation of those around the actor. A vested interest in the community the actor lives in; plays in. While establishing an atmosphere of security in the studio, in order to foster agency in my students, I also wanted to create a strong sense of community by developing an ensemble within our work.

I thought back to a discussion inside one of my Pedagogy of Acting classes the previous year. My graduate classmates and I were working with our professor to create a list of what we considered to be essential lessons inside the first year of acting training - defining the fundamentals. This was an exercise designed to help us design and write a class syllabus, or develop curriculum - with clear learning outcomes and course objectives for beginning acting training. That day our pedagogical focus and discussion was on the "what". "What" are we teaching these students? "What" do they need to learn? As a group, we suggested potential lessons/skills from our individual lists - the skills we felt a first year acting student should acquire - and the professor wrote them on the board. The cohort offered suggestions for learning objectives inside the first year acting studio such as, "trust", "listening", "relaxation", "development of a personal warm-up", "monologue/scene work", and others. All necessary elements of the first semester. However, the one learning objective, or fundamental, that was on everyone's list was a sense of ensemble - a sense of community. We all agreed that actors must recognize that their individual strengths will only prosper when they serve to strengthen and fortify the group.

The question then becomes, "how"? "How" do we instill a sense of ensemble and community in an acting studio? How do we foster an atmosphere of mutual support

between company members? Where each player's strengths are valued and celebrated equally? Ensuring that no one company member becomes the individual "star", or center of attention, as Sonia Moore's has interpreted Stanislavski's expert point of view on the ensemble. It was difficult to rely on the methods used with my newborn and young child, as I had done with a sense of security and a sense of agency. Like most 4 years old, he continues to believe he is the center of attention, and lacks a true understanding of community at this point in his life. Without this direct source material, I had to rely on alternate experiences in my training - companies and communities I had been a part of. I thought back to some of the ensemble work I had done as an acting student in the past. What was effective and what was less effective. One of the most effective forms of this concept was modeled during one of my graduate acting assistantships.

In my graduate training, I had the great fortune of working with Josh Chenard in a number of capacities - as his student of both graduate acting and directing classes, his assistant in undergraduate Michael Chekhov Acting and Movement Techniques and Catherine Fitzmaurice Vocal Techniques, and as an actor in his directorial productions of *Desire Under the Elms*, *A Doll's House*, and *Three Musketeers*. I believe his Michael Chekhov training, and his deep appreciation for human expression, has given him the ability to effectively and authentically teach with love.

He embodies and practices the philosophies of Michael Chekhov's ensemble and the sense of community his exercises attempt to create in his inspiring text, *To the Actor*. According to Michael Chekhov, "the creative ensemble consists of individuals and must never be considered by me as an impersonal mass. I appreciate the individual existence of each and every one present in this room and in my mind they do not lose their identity."

At the top of each of Josh's studio classes, he has a ritualized "check in". I observed slight differences to his ritual - given the different groups of students and subject matter, in the different classes - but each "check-in" included his "appreciation of the individual existence of each and every one present". At the top of each class, whether on yoga mats in his Chekov studio, or zafu pillows in Fitzmaurice, he would greet everyone with a warm hello, and share a part of himself. Revealing openly and honestly how his day might be going, a struggle he might be experiencing, something he was looking forward to, the work he was excited to introduce us to, or what he had eaten for breakfast. (And then what he had wished he had eaten for breakfast) Communicating authentically, with an open heart. Unafraid of vulnerability. Next, he would take five to ten minutes to calmly, sincerely ask each student how they were doing that day. Open and ready to field any questions, or possibly listen to the challenges and/or celebrations they might be experiencing. He listened to the replies

with absolute attention. At times, he would offer a response, and other times he would simply listen - a sensitive ear. Whereas this works wonders in creating a sense of security and agency, I felt it also fostered a sense of community, and strengthened the ensemble. The ritual gave each student assurance that they mattered, individually. And yet without them, the ensemble would not be the same. Above all, it was a way of communicating that could and can be carried out from the studio, and practiced in life. He modeled a form of communication and connection that the students could adopt in their own acting and artistic careers- within the community. A way of listening that most likely transcended what the students may have found in their previous life experiences. Either with other teachers, or even their parents. An equal amount of attention, on each student, from an equal platform - demonstrating that each member of the ensemble has the right to be seen and heard - fostering an atmosphere of support. A sense of community.

In order to foster a sense of community in our Fundamentals of Performance class - in addition to this "check in" - I wanted the students to operate as an ensemble as often as possible. From the start, if possible. But not by some of the typical means and methods I had experienced as a student. I wanted to find a way to develop an authentic sense of community in my class, different from acting games and typical trust exercises. I wanted them to take ownership of a communal ritual as an ensemble

- prior to group exercises, or the class assessments of monologue presentations, or speech and movement presentations. I find in these planned performances, students are presenting individually prepared work. Some students will always be more prepared than others. And a division and comparisons will always be found. The ensemble exercises that I had taken part in as a student had frequently cultivated an air of competition in the room, or created a divide in preparation and performance. As a result, it was difficult to celebrate the company as a whole; as a unit. To let go of expectations. Drop the desire to impress anyone, or "get it right".

I wanted to experiment with a method that might move the class away from this structure, or at least around it. Incorporating a parenting technique, I was aiming for the ensemble to discover itself through "free play". I wanted the students to freely and openly perform as a group in order to feel united, to feel a sense of belonging, a sense of community. Ideally, a community of friends who would become an acting company. With no expectations of themselves, or the other players in the group, as well as detachment from any desired result. The aim, or objective, would simply be the joy of belonging. Being a part of. As Michael Chekhov writes in his text *To The Actor* - "Only artists united by true sympathy into an improvising ensemble can know the joy of unselfish, common, creation." (*Chekov: to the actor*).

In order to do this, we used poetry. Or that is where we started, and it immediately became our ritual that would carry on for the rest of the semester. For our first meeting, I prepared multiple copies of the first part of a three-part poem. *Aristotle*, by Billy Collins. On our first day (and for all class sessions to follow), as each student entered, I gave them a copy of what would later become the "daily words". We would begin in each class with some form of text - performed, staged, and spoken together. Any preparation was comparable to a cold-reading, which served to maintain equal expectations in terms of performance, fostered the "free play" in the room, as well as challenged the actors to think on their feet and ultimately prepared them for auditions in the future. At our first meeting - with no introductions of any kind, no review of the syllabus, or "first day" business - I handed the students their text, and gave them all a few simple instructions to bring their voice to the poem. Individually, and yet together. Simply asking them to find their own space in the room, and to fill the studio with a line from the text, as they felt the impulse to take the floor. After the first line was heard, the next actor would begin the next line of the poem, and so on. They began. Their level of listening was remarkable. The give and take was breathtaking. They were sharing the text with one another, hoping for everyone in the company to succeed.

Five minutes into class, into our journey together - the students had performed their first improvised ensemble vocal piece, initiated their relationship as a company, and moved me to tears. I thanked the group from the bottom of my heart. We would continue with this ritual each day as I tried to connect the "daily words" to the lessons we might cover. We filled the space with words from many different authors - Mary Oliver, Shel Silverstein, William Shakespeare, Dr. Seuss, Maya Angelou, Harold Pinter, Henry David Thoreau and more. We started by simply speaking the words in to the space. And later the ritual progressed to walking and talking, or finding partners and even devising small scenes with the texts. But more than this, the ritual developed this group of eleven students into a company of actors. A community of artists.

I also wanted the students to take part and be aware of the community of the entire University. The BFA students at VCU School of the Arts rarely deviate from classes at the theatre studios. They even have to wear all black to their performance classes. And this can lead to them not being a part of the university community as a whole. I wanted to combat this problem as well. Inside the first few weeks, I assigned pairs, or groups of three students in the class to take small homework field trips in order to interact with the facilities and resources offered to them at the school. A "living syllabus" review, if you will. I had students visit the library, the gym, the student wellness center, the dining hall, local professional theaters, etcetera. I wanted them to

interact with the people working there, ask as many questions as possible, and bring back whatever evidence and additional resources they could gather. I also had them take particular note of their interactions and we even re-created some of the scenes in the classroom. This was a wonderful exploration into the community and it also set the stage for our next fundamental learning goal. The students observed non-actors and were able to look at how effective or ineffective their body language and presence was during the interactions. They gauged these interactions in terms of their "scene partners" response to the room, and the room's response to them. They evaluated their connection and understanding of their surroundings. Their sense of space. This is our next fundamental.

3. Sense of Space

"Knowing that this process had something to do with energy, I began to recognize the different types of energy that a human being can learn to harness: energy of the body, the breath, the voice, the mind, the heart, and the spirit. We all give out energy and by listening we all receive energy. Give and take. What I discovered was that it wasn't a miracle that students found their presence, it was a tragedy that they had lost it in the first place."

Patsy Rodenburg, *The Second Circle*

I am using the teaching fundamental of a sense of space to umbrella quite of few concepts that share one common thread: "Presence". Now that the students have experienced security, have begun to gain a sense of agency, and looked outward toward their community - they need a sense of their personal presence in the space. As well as an understanding of their power over the space. They need to feel a sense of what their individual presence contributes to the space they occupy - physically, vocally, and energetically. How their unique and individual shape and energy can affect the atmosphere and the other people in the space with them. They need this awareness at all times, everywhere they go. In the acting studio. In the audition room. On the stage. On camera. On a date. At a job interview. Everywhere.

I can speak to extensive experiences where I have diminished myself in a space because I felt unworthy of being seen and heard. Auditions where I have seemingly “apologized for my existence”, gone up on my lines, or lost my voice because I think I am not the right shape, or size, or age, or sound, or whatever, for the role. Countless moments in life, and on stage, where I have failed to fully concentrate because I did not believe I deserved to be in a space. Acting, voice and movement classes where I judged my work, felt “less than” and lost connection - my sense of presence. I did not want that to happen to the students in my class.

I would like to propose that the teaching of the fundamental quality of a Sense of Space may be more necessary than ever before. Look around and you will see hundreds of people with their heads down, staring at a phone, with no sense of the space around them or their proximity to others - a void atmosphere. It stands to reason that young actors today will struggle with this fundamental principle. And because of this, students should be equipped with a stronger sense of their personal presence, and a deeper understanding of their power and place in a performance space. The question is - how do we do this? How do we as teachers provide a place where students will take the risks of moving into (or back to) a place wherein they feel secure enough to occupy the space they take up? To see themselves as equals?

As I said before - how do we create a space where they feel safe to trust us as teachers and make mistakes. To take risks. To drop defense mechanisms, or tensions, or "tricks", and be fully present and authentic? Telling students about it and discussing the concept is one thing. But what can we actually do to cultivate this sense of space? To foster presence in the students?

What Rodenburg is suggesting in the quote above is that we all innately have "presence" - an understanding of the space around us and the effect we can have on the space and those in it with us. Our ability to harness "energy of the body, the breath, the voice, the mind, the heart and the spirit." I know this to be true because I have watched my son Dylan operate for years with a full sense of freedom and authenticity. When playing with me or other children, Dylan doesn't diminish himself in body, mind or spirit. He is not self-conscious or vain. He simply uses everything inside of him to achieve his objective. I learn more about acting, or being present, from my son each and every day. Watching the ways in which he physically, emotionally and intellectually expresses himself in order to get his needs met is fascinating. He lives for the moment, curiously seeking the next possible discovery. Though his concentration might not last long - being only four years old - it is absolute. When Dylan concentrates, his mind, body and spirit are engaged entirely

on the activity at hand and whomever else may be present. The other players in the game. He is actively focused on his partner and their responses.

I would like to think this is because he knows he is in a safe space, with a secure person. He is with what psychologist Donald Winnicott would refer to as a “good enough mother”. Or parent? The theory is from the 50’s. In any case, when he is with me, Dylan is consistently in a space and with a person that “nurtures his physical and emotional needs”. This is what makes him free and nurtures growth. And I believe this can be cultivated in a classroom by consistency and security in terms of the physical space, emotional availability of the teacher, and the use of a non shame-based language. This was my goal in the studio. (Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*)

First, I tried to consider the physical space of the studio. In the same way someone might “nest” with young children. I considered how best to create a space that fostered comfort and creativity. The smallish room we were assigned was in the basement of the performing arts center. With no windows. Fluorescent lights. I hate fluorescent lighting and I think it is harmful to the creative process. So I brought in lights I purchased from a thrift store and used them in order to create a warmer, more inviting space in the room. The fluorescents were never turned on. I also made sure to move all the chairs and desks that were in the room completely out of the way. We

never sat in chairs or at a desk at any time. When we worked as a group it was always in a circle. Usually seated on the floor.

I also had to consider my Sense of Space, my presence- the energy I transmitted and the way in which I would approach my role of "teacher". (As I think the energy some teachers transmit can be more "harmful" than florescent lighting. And I didn't want to do that.) This is a tough needle to thread. Because as the leader I wanted to maintain boundaries and security for all students attending the class -take on some authoritative role. But I also wanted to create an environment of equality and openness. To operate in what Patsy Rodenburg describes as the second circle energy in her invaluable book, *The Second Circle: Using Positive Energy for Success in Every Situation*. "In Second Circle, your energy is focused. It moves out toward the object of your attention, touches it, and then receives energy back from it. You are living a two way street - you give to and are responsive with that energy, reacting and communicating freely. You are in the moment - in the so called 'zone' - and moment to moment you give and take." I tried to embody and live in this Second Circle presence at all times with the students in the space. And in result, this helped me remain emotionally available and responsive to their needs throughout the work. And I have never felt more connected to a group of people as I did with than with these actors.

I continued to think about my parenting style and the experiences I had with my son. What I had done to foster a sense of “allowance” and “space” for him to be himself, while meeting his needs and keeping him safe. It is not often easy to know what do to as a parent. What to do on the playground with other children. What to do if some kid knocks your kid down, or snatches his toy. Or what to do if your child starts crying and screaming in a crowded audience. Or how to handle it when they start to act out at a public restaurant. What’s the right thing? How do we respond? Looking at and learning about parenting styles - I had come to believe in the model of “good enough parenting”. Wherein we are not perfect. In fact, we are far from it. We don’t always respond correctly. But we do all we can to meet the child’s needs, and provide them with a safe space to learn and grow. Allow them to struggle. To help them learn how to soothe themselves. And if we make a mistake - we clean it up promptly.

Much to my delight, in the research for this thesis I have found that Stephen Wangh, in his book *The Heart of Teaching: Empowering Students in the Performing Arts* he describes the “good enough teacher”. Wangh writes, “good enough teachers must create a space in which students can express whatever they need to express as creative artists without fear that they will be punished or reprimanded for doing so.” I believe modeling this energetic and spacial awareness of a “good enough teacher”

manifests not only in my physicality, but my choice of language when interacting with the students. I did all I could to speak to them and interact with them as an equal. A colleague. I tweaked my language and tried not to talk to them from any place of authority. And when talking about their work, I made sure to stay away from words like "good" or "bad", "right" or "wrong". Trading them for words like "effective" or "less effective". During monologue and scene performances, without judgement or shame, I tried to offer each of my students an understanding of the energy their typical body language expressed, as well as the messages they send with their vocal choices and placement. Offering an option to change their body posture or adjust their vocal production, in order to harness a different energy, send a different message. I wanted to make them aware of their vocal power as well as their vocal sensitivity. Help them to identify the unique and unmatched shape they offer to the space (to the world), and illustrate the physical, emotional and mental impact they can make inside any given environment.

Furthermore, in terms of actual movement in the space (because remember - this was there only introduction to movement as well) I tried to demonstrate to my students their ability to measure proximity to the world around them. Their spatial relationship to people, objects, environments - everything they encounter as they move through any given day. Cultivating a way to respond authentically, perhaps dynamically, to the

energetic shifts produced during interactions. In their acting work, and in life.

Individually and with the ensemble.

Fundamentally, my students were inexperienced with a sense of their bodies in space.

A practiced acting teacher might label many of them as “blocked”, or “not in their

body”. The number of times I have heard an actor cast aside because someone

believes their “not in their body”... it makes me angry. I have to ask - then who’s body

are they in? A better question is : How can we help them find a way into their body?

Or around this “block”? Perhaps the body will follow if we target another path for the

actor to concentrate on. My hope was to begin developing a curiosity inside of them.

To assist them in finding out what their bodies could do and the shapes they might

discover. And I could think of no better way to do this than... dancing.

Dancing became the second part of our daily class ritual - music and movement. This

ritual, as with many of the exercises we explored, is not original. It’s dancing together.

A ritual as old as time. But we danced and moved to music consistently throughout

the semester with complete abandon. It was a cherished practice. And I learned later

in the semester (and the some semesters beyond our work together) these 11 actors

continued to join one another to dance weekly at one of the actor-rented joint houses

on Thursday nights. I was so overwhelmed to hear of the connection and community

they had formed. And how they continued our ritual in other spaces. This was the goal. This was the ultimate purpose of the exercise. And that is the next sense I would like to explore. A sense of purpose.

4. Sense of Purpose

“Whatever you do onstage must be done in such a way as to make an impression.”

Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*

My main purpose in the classroom is to make an impression. And to leave an impression. I think its safe to say that making an impression and having a purpose-filled life is a dying art these days. I do the best I can as a teacher by listening and responding, authentically. With as little judgment as possible. Being present with purpose. Being vulnerable with purpose. Being intentional. When experiencing all emotions in front of my students, alongside them - towards this purpose- I trust I am making an impression in their lives. Not by performing, or acting in any way. Not by lording over them and acting superior like some of the teachers I have studied under, or heard about. But by doing everything in my power to experience the class, contribute to the environment around me, find my purpose there, respond to the students, my “partners in the scene”, and make them more important than me. To recognize what they have to offer. Remaining humble and teachable. And see what might happen. Dropping whatever authority I may have over them, and treating them as equals. Speaking to them as equals, while maintaining boundaries.

The purpose of all of this is to make an impression on them, and do all I can to transfer this type of behavior and practice to them. To change the rhythm they may have experienced with other teachers, or adults in their life. People of authority who may have failed to truly see them and hear them. Providing them with a purpose to this work that goes deeper than an exercise, or a method - and possibly taps into their soul. Giving them something that will last, and assist them well after the class is over. Letting go of learning objectives when necessary and teach them how to live.

Introducing them to what Boleslavsky called "the third kind of education, the education and training of the human soul - the most important factor of dramatic action. An actor cannot exist without a soul developed enough to be able to accomplish, at the first command of the will, every action and change stipulated. In other words, the actor must have a soul capable of living through any situation demanded by the author. There is no great actor without such a soul." (Boleslavsky, *Acting: The First Six Lessons*) When the aim is "the education and training of the human soul", everything we do as actors, as people, as teachers, holds a purpose. All that we experience is another opportunity, or necessary exercise, to develop our soul. It then becomes our purpose to observe ourselves and other people. To take risks. Fail. And then try again. I believe this creates lifelong students of acting. It creates an opportunity for my students to continue with the training after the our time together.

And perhaps find a purpose in all they do. The process of modeling this for my students began with my first experiences with my child.

In my sons infancy and when I was reunited with him, after a few months away inside of his first year, everything I did held a purpose. I needed to make a lasting impression on him in a very limited amount of time. I wanted him to know that he was safe with me and meet his needs - whatever they might be. It was difficult because of the situation. Things with his mother, and custody issues were difficult. I was full of resentment, anger and a healthy dose of fear. I often questioned my choices and was self-conscious. Much like a new actor. Or a new teacher. But I could not let this get in the way. I had to focus on the higher purpose. The purpose was to let Dylan know that he had a father in his life. Someone he could count on and that would be there for him. So I had to put my focus on him and make him more important than anything I was dealing with.

I was deliberate in my preparation for all of his visits. And the key was consistency. I thought of all the things he might need. Packed his baby bag. Set up his changing station. Laid out toys and activities. Planned meals and provided snacks. As the time we spent together expanded, I planned different outings and places to visit and took great care in providing him a secure place to spend his nights with me. And each

time we communicated, I tried to be as open and honest with him as possible. Of course, he was just learning the language - but I had wanted to be a consistent source of honesty for him. I also wanted to be sure not to just be a "fun parent" - give him everything he wanted, do everything for him, and prevent him from growth. I needed to be a part of his learning process in order to make an impression as a parent. Being careful not to overdo it and make all growth manageable and achievable. I read books and learned that this was the most effective way to influence behavior in a child. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "as a parent, you must try to expose your child to challenges that will help him discover his abilities and achieve success while simultaneously preventing him from encountering obstacles or tasks likely to lead to too great a series of frustrations or defeats." (*Caring for Your Baby and Young Child*, Shelov and Altmann). I wholeheartedly believe in this for parents and children. And I also think it is something to consider when it comes to acting training.

Many times in life, and in acting training I have found myself in "too great a series of frustrations and defeats". I have found myself lacking purpose. Wondering "what's the point to all of this?" I was disconnected during exercises in acting, voice and movement classes. Sometimes I felt like my process and growth as an actor actually moved backwards. As I learned new acting methods, I think I lost some of my

instincts. My natural abilities were less available to me. I was in my head and lost. And often times my teachers dismissed me. I often found myself questioning the purpose of the training, even the task at hand. It was rare that teachers would explain what we were doing, or why we were doing it. Even rarer was the explanation as to how to do it. I know there is "method in this madness" for many teachers, but I try to approach classroom exercises differently.

I try to be as purposeful and intentional as possible during the class. I try to provide as much of an explanation of the exercises as possible for my students. So they have a clear idea of the objective. I am honest and open about the obstacles that may arise inside the work, and encourage the students to strive for acceptance of these obstacles. Helping them to move through them, or around them. I also strive to offer or connect a life lesson to all that we do in the studio. I empathize with the students and where they are coming from. I do all I can to engage them in the work. I imagine acting training has got to be harder than ever for students today. At a time when people can go "viral" and become overnight sensations without ever having stepped inside an acting studio - who cares anything for acting training? Why would my students spend time on concentration and sense memory exercises? Or personal and public observation? Devoting hours of each day to developing their acting intellect, in addition to their physical instruments - through vocal and movement

training? Who cares to educate their souls anymore when influencers can have a million followers and AI can create human behavior and take the place of artists? When the business of theatre is primarily concerned with who you know, what you look like, and what number of tickets you might sell, and it's a virtually impossible to make a living at this profession - who cares anything for pushing through personal barriers to see what they might uncover? To discover what you might have to offer. Why would my students strive to find vulnerability, and dedicate their lives to revealing themselves through artistic expression and the telling of stories. I try to show them why. I try to make them believe there is value in these lessons. That's my higher purpose in the classroom.

For an audience, for my students, for my son - I try to give them a purpose to working at things that may be difficult. I encourage them to enjoy the journey and let go of the finished product. When introducing them to "transferable skills" - required material and methods of training, I strive to focus more on what Stephen Wangh calls "meta lessons". "Beyond these "transferable skills", there are other, even larger, ramifications and corollaries to what -and how- we teach. For many of our lesson bespeak educational and ethical Values; not values as concepts or commandments, but as practical ways of living and working. Values such as Experimentation, Safety and Risk-Taking, how to live in the moment, the importance of Rule-breaking, the

ability to “shine as children do, and the ability to withstand - perhaps even enjoy - making mistakes.” (*The Heart of Teaching: Empowering Students in the Performing Arts*, Wangh).

I know practical methods, systems and technique are necessary for development. But at the start, I think it is a fundamental imperative to instill a sense of intention to the work that connects to the soul of the students. In the classroom, my hope was my students exploring these “meta-lessons” described by Wangh. And by doing so, develop a sense of purpose - perhaps even higher purpose - to the training. And future training. When we looked at exercises and assignments, monologues and scene work, I ask the students to bring authenticity before precision. I was looking more for an experience, rather than a performance.

I try to bring this sense of purpose to all my classes - not just acting. Business students learning public speaking and presentation skills, as well as those attending introduction to theater. I want to make the experience different than what they have experienced before. Make the class about more than a grade. I want to help them grow. I want them to leave me ready “to make an impression”. To be unforgettable at their next interview or audition. Or on their next date. Be the one to open a dialogue with their parents. Or - if anything - at least start to take notice of that which is around

them, know that the potential is there, and begin to connect to and remember more of what they experience. Bring meaning to all the meetings of life. Once they dedicate that sort of purpose and intention to what they are experiencing, I expect they will most certainly become more captivating and unforgettable. More able to make an impression. And more open to Wonder - the last of the five fundamentals.

5. Sense of Wonder

"I am talking about the practicality of dreams. I am talking about order, about system. I am talking about harnessing dreams - conscious and unconscious dreams - all useful - all necessary - all obedient - all coming at your call. All parts in that beautiful state or your nature that you call "experience"."

Richard Boleslavsky, *Acting: The First Six Lessons*

I think all students have everything they need inside of them in order to succeed. Every part they will ever play is already within them. The trick, and our job as teachers, is helping them get out of the way. To help them believe in dreams, and harness them. To dare them to make bold choices. And play in an experiential way. Rather than a technical way. To offer their audience and themselves a chance at an authentic moment. Maybe a stream of authentic moments. To help them travel the long journey from their head to their heart. For as Sanford Meisner states in his invaluable text, *On Acting*, "all good acting comes from the heart - as it were - and there is no mentality in it." The last fundamental lesson, or quality, that I attempted to bring to my classroom, to the actors, was a Sense of Wonder. A sense of magic. That is what theatre offers to the world, and so it should be present as often as possible in the studio. The craft of acting asks us to endow so many things with magic. To

suspend disbelief. To use our imagination and get back to the nature of play. To “shine like children”.

I owe most of my ability to recognize, find and cultivate wonder in my life to my child. My son Dylan and I have had countless moments of magic over our years together. And this was not always the easiest thing to do when dealing with the stress of custody battles, and overwhelming circumstances constantly present in our relationship. But I trusted the process. Let go and tried to be present and open when I was with him. Thankfully, when you are open and available to a child - magic arises without much work. And the ways in which a child will suspend their disbelief, makes them the perfect teachers for acting professors. But how do we translate this to an acting process? How can we find this in the classroom? How do we make the heart and wonder the target? When we have a schedule to keep, students that might be late or absent, and have required learning outcomes, assignments, and assessments to contend with. What can we do for our students in order to keep their spirit, imagination and curiosity available for the next discovery? To keep them engaged in the work?

My answer is to stay curious ourselves. To stay open and alive. Trust our instincts and throw the schedule out, if necessary. To teach from our hearts, just as we our asking

our students to operate from theirs. To be fascinated and enthusiastic every step of the way. To be the fullest extensions of ourselves and take risks. And, at all costs, to keep a sense of humor in the room. In his biographical book, *The Path of The Actor*, Michael Chekhov states that "humor can be learnt. And in drama schools there should be a class where humor is taught." I agree, and spent a lot of my time laughing at myself, and at life with my students. Because I also absolutely agree with what else Chekhov writes on the subject inside of the same text. "An actor (and indeed an artist of any kind) who can only look at himself and at life seriously will hardly be able to be a good, or at any rate an interesting, artist. It is remarkable that people who can laugh immediately recognize one another, they understand one another from the first syllable and they often become friends."

It's no secret that humor and laughter can be contagious. But it seems to take on an even stronger power when working with actors. And children for that matter. It is a tie that binds. We found this humor in our studio and I was thrilled to learn that so many of the students in this first class (and many that have followed) formed strong friendships, that lasted throughout their time in school and beyond. And beyond friendship they have supported each other's work. Because it is contagious, wonder can also be a powerful tool in terms of atmosphere in the class. It can assist a teacher on those days when not all the actors are working. I can remember those days as an

actor in training. Some days were grueling when all we did was watch scene work or monologue rehearsals involving other members of the company. If a teacher can model and establish a sense of fascination and wonder in all the work that takes place in the studio, giving everyone the opportunity to make magic, then actors not directly involved will be more inclined to observe and look for teaching moments. This supports the work of everyone in the room and fosters an atmosphere of possibility. When we worked monologues and scenes in our studio, I felt as though we were all working together. And I felt as though each member of the ensemble was interested in the learning from one another.

And to further foster the sense of wonder - there were some days we threw the schedule out and explored the unknown. I trusted all the ideas that were inspired by my heart, and the actors responded in kind. We took the class outside of the studio. Got out of the basement. And looked for the wonder all around us. I wanted them to be aware that it was available in so many places and interactions, if they took the time to seek it out. I wanted them to understand that this is the job of actors. To be adventurous and curious. And live fully everyday. I regretted not doing that when I was a young actor in my training. I wanted to show them that they had other options and could choose to participate in life. We took a field trip to the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University. We took a picture in front of

a large neon sign there that read, "You Belong Here". We supported local theatre and all went to see *The Laramie Project* together at the Richmond Triangle Players. We yawped together – I had always love the scene in *Dead Poet's Society* where Mr Keating asks all his students to yawp and then kick a soccer ball. And we re-created that scene. I printed out some yawp-like lines from Shakespeare and each actor chose a line that spoke them, shouted it across the school compass as they kicked the ball as hard as they could. It felt better than the movie. And one day when we learned it was snowing outside (somehow from the basement) we all ran outside and played in the snow. And finally around Christmas, before the semester ended, we went by a couple of classes meeting in the basement during our time period, and sang Christmas carols and handed out candy. We sang with our hearts and had the time of our lives. And I will never forget the magic we found together. It was truly wonderful.

At the end of all things the students gave me a wonderful gift and proved my efforts worked.

Well, maybe they didn't prove that anything I did "worked".

But they assured me it was worth it.

FROM THE STUDENTS

At the end of our semester. On the last day. My first 11 acting students presented me with a gift they made together. It was a scrapbook dedicated to me and the company we created. With pictures of them, pictures of me, memories from our time together, excerpts from the poetry we shared, and quotes from the classroom. It also included a short note of reflection and gratitude from each of them. And it speaks to the fundamentals they help me to discover and define as we moved through the journey. This was the greatest gift I have ever received. And as they all expected (and one of them had even bet money on) it moved me to tears. The following is what they shared:

Student 1: Thank you for a fantastic first semester of acting. Thank you for encouraging me to be messy and ugly and unrefined. Thank you for reminding us all that the important part is our part - what we control. We're entitled to nothing. And all we can do is be captivating.

Student 2: Thank you for helping me find my voice. You created such a safe, caring environment that I was able to make numerous self-discoveries this semester. You're

an amazing teacher! I've learned so many new things, both about acting and existing, from you and your class. Thank you for everything this semester.

Student 3: To be honest, I was terrified coming into my first acting class. I didn't feel that I was good enough, but I wanted to be good enough so bad. Being in your class, and hearing you speak so beautifully about Dylan, I knew I had nothing to fear. You revitalized my hope and passion for my acting future, and reminded me how much I need to have faith in myself. Thank you so much for everything.

Student 4: My year in your class evolved me as an actor and a person. You've taught me techniques that I will cherish for the rest of my career and life lessons that I'll remember for life. I'm so happy I met you. Forget me not.

Student 5: Words cannot express the amount of gratitude I have for the work, stress, and joy you poured into this class. I have gained so many gifts through this journey, the gift of knowledge, the gift of friendship, and a whole new energy of positivity.

Student 6: This class has done way more for me than I thought an acting class could. You put so much of yourself in acting, so therefore you've got to be okay with letting go and trusting yourself. When I walked into our first class, I couldn't do that. You've

helped me more than I ever thought you could, these classmates have helped me more than I thought they could, and I'll be forever grateful. Thank you for everything.

Student 7: I'm never really sure of what to write in these things. I just really want to say/write thank you for being the best teacher ever. I've learned so much in this class and I've made some wonderful friends thanks to you. You helped teach us the meaning of ensemble. You helped me get out of my head and play the truth of the scene. I don't have to always be funny. You've helped us not be ashamed of who we are and that its okay to bring our personal emotions into our class. I think I'm done. I made a bet with someone that you will cry, so please do that. I'm kinda broke.

Student 8: Thank you for helping me realize I have a right to be here and that I belong. Thank you for reminding us to enjoy each other and play. Have no doubt we'll all be in the audience to see you show. "Be so good they can't ignore you".

I want to sincerely thank you for the experience, knowledge but also passion that you've given me. I know that your job was to teach us but you have certainly gone above and beyond that by giving us a place to simply be ourselves and learn how to love those people. That is so important for everyone. Most of all, you've brought us all together and been an amazing presence for us to be around. Thank you for a place "where things make sense."

Student 9: *Thank you for a wonderful semester! I've had a great time each and every class, even on the days I've just laid on the floor. It's been an amazing safe space for all of us. #004Ever.*

Student 10: *(his reflection was a picture he had drawn because he was late or missing from the reflection portion of the scrapbooking)*

Student 11: *I want to sincerely thank you for the experience, knowledge but also passion that you've given me. I know that your job was to teach us but you have certainly gone above and beyond that by giving us a place to simply be ourselves and learn how to love those people. That is so important for everyone. Most of all, you've brought us all together and been an amazing presence for us to be around. Thank you for a place "where things make sense."*

END

“Don’t be an actor, be a human being who works off what exists under imaginary circumstances. Don’t give a performance. Let the performance give you. ”

Sanford Meisner, *On Acting*

As I come to the end of this thesis exploration, and type the words and reflections shared by my students, I feel I accomplished something. But I am not exactly sure how to measure it. I know I can defend it. And I believe in it. And I keep attempting to repeat it. But that’s not possible. I realize I got lucky with these actors. Its been many years since this exploration, and I have yet to find this kind of total connection with the students and the work. What I do know worked (and will continue to work) is my approach to the role I played as “teacher”. And I know that a slight shift in language and energy, a re-framing of the power dynamics, made all the difference. As Meisner urges artists in acting training not to be actors, I tried not to be a teacher - in the typical sense of the word. I merely assisted the students. I approached this class “as a human being who worked off what existed in my students”. I did everything in my power to meet the needs of the of the students, to give them my attention, a kind of spiritual concentration, and merely respond to what happened next.

I trusted it would work because it was how I approached parenting my young child. And I believe it can work for other parents of young children. Shift the language. Re-frame the power dynamics. And see what happens. Many parents consider their children to be “theirs”. And they believe this demands respect and power over them. No matter how they might treat their children, they believe they are entitled to having their expectations met by their kids simply because they are parents. Because they say so. And I am living proof this does not work. My parents are still waiting. Instead, I try to shift this language and turn the legacy around. I do not say my son Dylan is “mine”. Instead, I say “I am his”. And I act accordingly. I show up. I am open and honest. I try to be good to him. Good enough. And when I am not, I admit it and I fix it. And this shift has created a relationship and a family dynamic that is different than the one I experienced. And different than most I see around me on a daily basis. My son is living proof that this approach works. He exceeds my expectations constantly. He is kind and helpful to others. He tries his best to be his best. He believes in magic. And he knows that he is enough.

I believe this is what teachers can do for students. And sometimes it is up to the teacher to do it. Because no one else will. We might be the only hope they have to develop a sense of agency, community, space, purpose, and wonder. But no one

need subscribe to my list. Or name anything the way I have tried to name things here. I would just like to encourage all teachers, parents and people to think about what qualities they would like to see developed in those they have influence over. To consider what really matters in terms of a sense of their education and growth. And be curious to the many paths that might help them reach these destinations. To trust that what you have learned or unlearned along the way could be all you need to make a start. To be open and willing to tweak language, adjusting the energy and shift the narrative.

I hope that is what I did for these actors. This class (and all that have followed) was not "mine". The class belonged to them. If anything, it was ours. And what we discovered and achieved- we found together. And it happened somewhat effortlessly. All I had to do was my part: I showed up. I was open and honest. I tried to be good to them. Good enough. And when I wasn't, I admitted it and fixed it. This led the students to trust me and grow as people , as artists, right before my eyes. It led them to take pride and ownership in their work, and the work of their peers. They appreciated and supported the ensemble, leaving competition for another place and time. They found a higher purpose in the training, and the struggles along the way. And they experienced the wonder inside the journey. Things made sense.

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