

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

*“Passion for your work is a little bit of discovery, followed by a lot of development,
and then a lifetime of deepening.”*

– Angela Duckworth

I am a queer theatre artist and educator whose expertise spans the areas of Acting, Voice, and Improvisation. I received my M.F.A. in Acting from the University of California, Irvine, recognized among the top 10 graduate Acting programs in the country. I now teach and direct full-time in the Acting Department of the American Musical and Dramatic Academy (AMDA) in NYC. The following values fundamentally define and fuel my approach to working with theatre students at the college level.

TRUST STIMULATES GROWTH

“It turns out that trust is in fact earned in the smallest of moments. It is earned not through heroic deeds, or even highly visible actions, but through paying attention, listening, and gestures of genuine care and connection.”

– Brené Brown

From day one of each semester, the way in which I communicate with my students informs them that they are respected, seen, and belong in my class. I value my intuition for navigating the duality of teaching: commanding a classroom with a strong guiding force and high standards, while simultaneously affording students the space to stumble, highlighting the essential relationship between failure and growth. Non-verbal exercises such as mirroring with a partner, passing sounds around the circle, and exploring the Space via their senses get students present, playful, and “out of their head” while developing a powerful sense of ensemble. A semester in my class yields countless moments of laughter and delight, as well as moments of visceral intensity that bring the group to the edge of their seats. In my Acting, Voice, and Improv classes, truthfulness is prioritized as the goal of the work and the gamut of human experience is considered territory worth exploring.

Most vital of all in the establishment of trust with students is unwavering honesty and respect. My clear, kind, and direct approach to feedback teaches my students that their worthiness is never in question. When a student succeeds, I bring awareness to the specific facets of that experience: pointing to how well they listened, how freely they played, how surprising and compelling their choices were, or how powerfully they shared their voice. When a scene falls flat, I specifically investigate that “failure” with the student and the group, framing that experience, not as a setback, but as an invaluable step toward a new skill becoming instinctual. Making my students feel heard and respected is my utmost priority, achieved by speaking to them as full-dimensional human beings, holding space for difficult conversations when needed, and modeling the playfulness and dedication to craft that I aim to inspire in each of them.

GROWTH REQUIRES RISK

"To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest."

- Pema Chödrön.

I establish an empowering space of learning where students may experience a relieving sense of permission to venture into new creative territory and bring their whole, authentic selves to the work at hand. Fear and perfectionism short-circuit the creative impulses that propel a student beyond their zone of comfort. In order for lasting and transformational growth to take place, it is my responsibility to consistently foster an environment that promotes curiosity and risk-taking and negates any concept of "perfection."

Exploring oneself this deeply in a group environment can threaten the Ego and activate the body's instinctual fight-or-flight response. "The mind is reluctant to embrace deep change, and will play devious games to maintain the status quo" (Linklater 59). In order for the body to feel safe and present enough to fully receive the lessons embedded in a new experience, established trust must be felt and the student's autonomy centered in every exercise. Each time a student 1) experiences something new and vulnerable in the public eye of their trusted classmates, and 2) discovers afterwards that they have, in fact, survived, the body takes a step toward befriending the Unknown. With purposeful investigation, personalized guidance, and a supportive environment for risk-taking, the student gradually unburdens themselves of the mental blocks and physical habits that hinder authentic and impactful expression both onstage and in life.

AN EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM IS AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

"I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions: a movement against and beyond boundaries.

It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom."

- bell hooks

It is my responsibility to teach the exact students in front of me, compassionately guiding them with both equity and awareness. At the beginning of each semester, preferred names and pronouns are shared. I model the willingness to freely express one's full identity by introducing myself first and including my non-binary gender pronouns. While being a visibly genderqueer teacher does solicit occasional conversations with LGBTQ+ students seeking insight and affirmation, I have found that my visibility itself is powerfully influential in establishing a tone of trust, safety, and belonging in the learning environment. I promote communication and value 1-on-1 conferences in which individual needs and concerns can be expressed. At AMDA, I have always offered varied channels of communication (written, audio, or video recording) via the learning platform Canvas, allowing students to access support in the way best-suited to their circumstances and neurotype.

As a white and able-bodied person of privilege, I prioritize my continued education and growth as an ally. I take advantage of every equity, diversity and allyship training that AMDA offers its faculty, and the Black and LGBTQ+ students in my classrooms are perpetually heightening my awareness of my personal biases and advancing my pedagogy. I do not hesitate to initiate challenging and compassionate

conversations with my colleagues and supervisors during this critical moment in which theatre training programs everywhere are deeply questioning and at last decolonizing antiquated methods and harmful curriculum. Practicing vulnerability is proving more vital than ever as institutions lean into the discomfort of dismantling biased systems of oppression that have been baked into educational spaces for generations.

THE TEACHER MUST MODEL WHAT THEY WANT TO INSPIRE

“Setting an example is not the main means of influencing others, it is the only means.”

– Albert Einstein

I ask my students to do incredibly vulnerable and deeply human things such as breathe, connect, listen, let go, trust, play, commit, and bring their whole selves into the room. These messages are primarily relayed by my commitment to model these qualities as I teach and simply expect students to follow my lead in their own brilliant way. I often facilitate exercises alongside the group, demonstrating the willingness to jump into new experiences and diminishing rigidity in the perceived hierarchy between teacher and student. Much like the Actor, the Teacher must prepare thoroughly, thoughtfully, and intentionally, and then show up willing to work with whatever might happen that day. Teaching a diverse population in a pandemic era wrought with political turmoil has demanded a readiness on my part to meet my students exactly where they are and flexibly manage myriad heightened emotions.

Voice and Acting exercises, rooted in the neuroscience that has proven “we are not thinking machines. We are feeling machines that think” (Damasio), reconnects the student with their body-mind. Students are very often surprised by what happens in their body as exercises take effect, habitual tensions release, and emotional energy is finally able to move. It requires ultimate presence and vulnerability on my part to safely hold space for the spontaneous breakthroughs and cathartic experiences that introduce a student to new territory as a human and artist. I am equipped with the practical tools and sharp intuition to safely guide students home to their bodies and beyond the bounds of what’s familiar.

THE WORLD NEEDS ARTISTS

“Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.”

– William Shakespeare

Education is not simply the relaying of information, but the “lighting of a fire” that has the potential to burn brightly through an entire lifetime of artistry, contribution, and community-building. In teaching Acting, Voice, and Improvisation, I prime the student for not only a rewarding path as a professional performer, but for every moment of life in which bold action is needed and discomfort is present: a life of service. An actor is trained to become an Olympian in vulnerability, the essential quality of all who hope to do brave good in the world. Successful theatre artists speak up, tell stories, collaborate, anticipate, innovate, advocate and bring their whole hearts to their work. An education in theatre equips a young person to venture boldly into the world and improve it with their unique gifts and unarmored selves.

Works Cited

Antonio Damasio. *Descartes' Error*. HarperCollins, 1994.

Kristin Linklater. *Freeing the Natural Voice*. Drama Publishers, 2006.