

Rebecca Goodheart

Teaching Philosophy

An actor needs the body of an athlete, the mind of a scholar, the curiosity of a child, and the soul of a Poet.

– Laurence Olivier

The training of an actor holds challenges and paradoxes that come from the art form itself. Theater in its execution is ephemeral, existing in “the doing” of a specific creative moment with a specific audience that can never be exactly repeated. As such the development of an actor is like that of an athlete or a musician relying on precision, physicality, and technique. However, it also calls on thousands of years of human development and artistic traditions made from the stuff of thought, ritual, literature, and mythology. As such, an actor must educate herself in theatrical traditions, philosophy, history, psychology, and other art forms. What’s more, the actor’s instrument is the actor herself, and so perhaps the most fundamental part of any training is the journey to self awareness and liberation from vocal, physical and psychological limitations, so that there is freedom to shift into other skins, other voices. All of this means that each actor’s growth is a deeply personal, subjective, and nuanced path.

I believe, as a teacher, I have the responsibility not only to offer instruction, but to guide each actor’s individual search for authentic expression with respect for person and art. I must both model and foster an actor’s path: the rigor and discipline of the elite athlete, musician or dancer; an insatiable curiosity for the rich traditions of this art form and others as well as literature, history and human development; a commitment and daily practice of self-exploration and self-care; and an artistic accountability to myself, the profession and the world we live in.

These are lofty expectations that like the ‘magic of theater’ have practical underpinnings. How practically do I do this in the classroom? I teach experientially, giving students a physical and/or emotional experience which they then observe in themselves and reflect on, giving them ownership of each skill or awareness. While lessons are grounded pedagogically, the objective aspects are not discussed until students have an embodied experience and have begun to process it for themselves. These lessons create a foundation for the students own artistic exploration. They are the creators, the authors of their own path, and the classroom is a lab where both basic skills are learned and immediately put to practice. I, as the teacher, am the guide, the coach, the Sherpa. I have walked a path and so have some wisdom, but it is in service to their individual artistic journey. That said the best guides also inspire, challenge, and demand their charge to venture into as yet uncharted territory and adventures sometimes unimaginable to the traveler himself.

I listen deeply to both what my students are and are not saying, shaping their experience accordingly. I encourage and model an approach of ‘serious play,’ looking for what is calling to them and the joyous pursuit of communicating that with precision. I encourage dialog with students outside of class, and create strong mentoring relationships with many. Finally, almost all of my teaching looks to integrate the actor’s thought, body and voice with an author’s intent (which is sometimes the student themselves) through the sound and structures of text.

This commitment to the whole actor has come from thirty years working with some of the world’s most extraordinary teachers in a surprising breadth of approaches. I was lucky enough, while an undergraduate, to build a solid foundation in Stanislavski’s methods from Stella Adler, the grand dame of a bygone theater. Ryszard Cyslak gave me a different kind of foundation in physical theater which I built upon during two years training and touring with B Stanley, a disciple of Eugenia Barba. However, in 1992

Tina Packer became my mentor and most profound influence, and from her and the company, I have absorbed the working methodologies of Shakespeare & Company including the power of personal connection, the primacy of text and the wealth of influence its sounds and structure have on the actor, the value of working in multiple disciplines simultaneously, the commitment to the complexities of thought and humanity, and the importance of the actor/audience relationship. Ralph Cohen at the American Shakespeare Center opened to me the world of rhetoric and Elizabethan practices. And finally, Kristin Linklater and her work has become the practical grounding for all of my work. I believe hers is perhaps the most effective foundation for an actor, the best way to recondition our inherent connection of thought-feeling-impulse to voice.

Every actor -- every human -- has a voice capable of huge variation and incredible nuance, able to communicate the full gamut of human emotions and complexities of thought. Yet often, our authentic voices are distorted through tension, inhibition and our own survival instincts: our throat closes, we hold our breath, we 'get in our heads', we push. Kristin Linklater's approach works to restore the connection between our creative impulses and our voices, opening a deeper awareness of our body, and producing a voice shaped by intellect but not controlled by it. The result is a voice that is transparent, a voice that reveals, rather than describing, the speaker's unique inner world. We hear the person, not the voice. This integration of mind and body, thought and feeling, is our birthright... and, I believe, a fundamental necessity for all actors.

However, to have a free and flexible instrument is not enough, and my teaching reflects the constant return to the telling of stories and performing of plays. Classical texts, particularly those of William Shakespeare, can be transformational to an actor's training. This does not necessarily mean to perform a "classical cannon" in traditional "classical style." To train with Shakespeare's language, however, an actor has the opportunity to shift sensibilities from a modern world of sub-text and linguistic obfuscation where character and story live between the words, to one in which the play's humanity and story lie in the actor's embodiment of the language. In this world, actors work to change their visceral relationship to language, sensitizing their body-mind to sounds and linguistic patterns in such a way that they can allow the language to change/shape their rhythms and thus, their psychologies. This in turn, will allow the character's (really Shakespeare's) thought-rhythm-psychologies to show up through the actor. When they do this, the language can play the actor, take them over, and propel them into a psychological and emotional reality that communicates onstage. While one of many ways to play Shakespeare for a modern audience, this approach has long lasting benefits in the training of an actor; it continues the connection between mind, body and creative impulse and gives them a sensitivity to the rhythms and thought process of any playwright from any age.

“Each one of us has a voice that’s capable of freely expressing the wide gamut of emotions and the most subtlest of thoughts. So often though, we don’t experience this. When working on a piece of text, the emotions don’t come, or they get trapped in the throat, or we “get in our head.” The voice work of Kristin Linklater, known as Freeing The Natural Voice, aims to restore the connection of our creative impulses to our voice – which is our birthright. The result is a voice that is transparent, a voice that reveals, rather than merely describes, the speaker’s own unique inner world.