

# Choosing an Acting Class

by Stephen Book part 1

Are you considering a new acting class? Are you happy with the one you are in? Is it serving your needs? You know that in the past you have not liked certain classes and liked others and you usually know why, but have you ever considered what might be best or the most effective for you?

## **Be Wary**

Whatever the teacher's preferred specialty, e.g., Stanislavsky, Michael Chekhov, Strasberg, Meisner, Adler, Hagen, Spolin, Johnstone, Improvisation Technique, or their own, the actor should consider avoiding any class that practices either or both of the two most destructive aspects of American actor training: (1) Learning through watching and listening instead of doing. Acting is the only performing art in America where students spend most of their class time sitting and watching others work. (2) The "guru" teacher who pontificates or rants while the students spend still more time sitting and listening.

The actor is an artist and all artists have their instruments through which they make and communicate their art. Musicians have their violins, trumpets, and guitars. Painters have their canvas, brushes, and paints. The actor's instrument

is his or her body. What other artist has his or her body as their instrument? A dancer.

Both actors and dancers pursue training and, even after they are working professionals, continue classes to expand their instruments and to stay sharp. The difference is dancers spend most of their class time actually dancing while actors spend most of their class time sitting and watching others act.

### **Importance of Experiential Learning**

The technique of anything the body does, like acting, dancing, playing music, painting, sculpting, singing, or mime, is best learned by doing it.

You didn't learn to ride a bike by watching others ride or by listening to a lecture on the theory of bike riding. You were out there on a bike with someone running alongside and coaching you. You also know that if you don't ride a bike again until you're sixty, after just a couple of wobbly moments you'll be riding perfectly well.

Whenever you do learn something by doing it, you have learned it for life. The doing is in the body and will always be there. You think anybody ever forgets how to swim? It's called *kinesthetic memory*. What the body learns experientially it never forgets.

You might study with a teacher, who uses a lot of class time to talk and is fascinating to listen to, and he may be a great director in improving individual scenes, but if you are not in those scenes you are not learning how to do the work. You are only being informed about the work and you will forget what you were informed about.

### **Scene Study**

The most common form of an American acting class employs traditional ‘scene study.’ These kinds of classes rely to a great extent on *reactive* teaching. Work is prepared outside of class and then presented in class. The teacher and the class react to, or critique, the work and then the teacher redirects or coaches the work in order to improve the acting in the scene.

For instance, let’s say the teacher sees that a particular scene is lacking in subtext work. The teacher reacts to what he sees and makes subtext the subject of his criticism. He takes the happenstance opportunity of this particular scene to address the subject of subtext.

The students who are not in the scene are informed about subtext as a tool of the craft, but because they are only watching, they are not learning how to do subtext as a performing skill. If this were a dance class, would you be learning how to do kicks by watching someone else learning and practicing them? Of course not.

Also consider, that while the actors in the scene are being redirected to include subtext, and therefore are learning about subtext experientially, what they are learning is mostly limited to the scene they are working on. They may not be learning the skill of doing subtext with a methodology to facilitate its use in other scenes requiring subtext. In addition, they may not be learning how to recognize when other scenes require subtext.

The next day, on a TV drama series, one of them may have a scene to perform that also requires subtext work. If that scene doesn't greatly resemble the scene she was working on in class, there is a strong possibility that she will miss it in the TV scene. How effective was the class for her in learning subtext?

The traditional scene study class is valuable when you are doing the scene. You are getting practice at preparing, rehearsing, performing, being directed or coached, and learning the particulars of one specific scene.

On the other hand, this class is not providing an opportunity for all the students to learn all the skills and tools in a practical fashion, one that increases self-sufficiency, as well as the knowledge of when to use that tool or skill.

Scene study classes are aptly named. You are studying one scene at a time.

And only the cast of the scene is getting any experiential learning. The rest of

the class is observing the scene and receiving information for the brain but no practice for the body. You might notice this when considering a new class.

### **Experiential Curriculum**

There are classes that provide *all* the students an opportunity to experientially learn acting skills through their participation in multiple exercises or improv in addition to scenes. In this kind of class, everyone works in every class and whenever the actor is watching others work, he is seeing how the others address the same challenge he has just addressed or will be addressing when he goes up next. In a class like this the rest of the group is always involved with the actors working on the floor. The exercises or improv, not the happenstance needs of a particular scene, or the reactions of the teacher or coach, facilitate the learning.

Everyone experientially learns the particular skill instead of just being informed about it. Everyone learns how to do kicks. An additional goody is that this approach increases the actor's dependence on herself and diminishes her dependence on the teacher. Increasing self-sufficiency should be a goal of any acting class

Self-sufficiency is the meaning of technique. There are teachers who understand that their role is to facilitate the actor's journey toward self-sufficiency by coaching and providing the curriculum of the technique, e.g., subtext, conflict, emotional access, emotional range, emotional controls for

intensity changes, character physicality, character behavior, problems, actions, attitudes, vocal production and range, in-the-moment, purpose of scene, and much more depending on the teacher's preferred technique.

When evaluating a class pay attention to whether or not you are learning the skills of the craft by doing them.

Academy Award-winning actor Richard Dreyfuss's response to a question from a student about the difficulty of a career in show business was, "Act your brains out. The more you act, the better you get. It's not a secret. It's true. Whether you're a violinist or an actor." To take an acting class where you don't "act your brains out" in every class is self-limiting.

In the next article we will consider how different classes handle critiques.