

# Choosing an Acting Class

by Stephen Book part 3

Once you have decided to try out a class stay alert to signs that this class is worth your time and money. You can try out a class either through observing it as an auditor, or if auditing is not allowed, by signing up and participating. Here are suggestions as to what signs are important to notice.

## **Environment**

The environment of the class includes the physical plant, ambience, and integrity. The physical plant is the most obvious and unambiguous item to observe.

If you are looking for a class that provides the most opportunities for your experiential learning versus sitting and watching others work most of the time than the size of the classroom should not be a tiny theater with a tiny stage and audience seats attached to the floor or a room with a small platform-type of stage at one end. If the space is large and flexible enough for the entire group to be up and working during group exercises or larger cast improv it is the perfect size.

Of course the physical space should be clean and private. Any class where non-members freely move in and out of the class for any reason is cause for concern that the teacher is not respecting the class's primary process.

### **Ambience**

The number of actors in the class is another unambiguous signal as to the nature of the class. In a large class structured only around scene study the larger the group the more you will have to wait for your turn. As I have pointed out in a previous article, classes in which you don't work in every class are to be avoided.

It's also easy to notice if there is an attitude of professionalism from the class members or is it flake city? Do class members have consistent attendance, or do they drop in and out casually? Do class members focus on the work at hand or do they keep their eyes glued to their smart phones?

Is there a great chasm between the experience and abilities of the class members? Better classes have a basic consistency between the students' abilities.

How are new members handled? When someone new is added to the class does the rest of the group tune out as remedial work is addressed to catch the

new ones up? Are new members added frequently? Do members quit frequently?

Pay special attention to the mood and tone of a class. There should be a fun atmosphere and not one of stress and fear.

When a teacher is harsh and critical you will find fear, stress, and cliques. Cliques create feelings of exclusion for everyone else and inauthentic co-dependency for the clique members.

See if there are unequal relationships between the teacher and different students. Be wary of a class that has teacher's "pets" and "patsies."

Does the teacher allow auditing? Professional actors live with judgment and rejection every day that they pursue their careers. When they choose to develop their abilities in a class or workshop, they should feel free to work, play, explore, and take risks in an environment that is uniquely free of judgment or disapproval. An observer in a class corrupts this environment.

Regardless of the good intentions or kindheartedness of the observer, judgment is inherent in the act of observing. Is this work good? Is this a class I want to join? Is the teacher any good? How do I stack up against the students?

These are the observer's issues, and they may be overt, subtle, or invisible, but they totally affect the regular group members, creating pressure and inauthenticity in response to judgment.

“Uh-oh, we'd better be good tonight because Teacher has a guest watching.”  
Or, “I'll make the safe choice in this exercise because I don't want to look like a fool to that handsome/pretty/important observer.”

No one gains from observers being present except the observers themselves. The actors, who have made the commitment of time, intention, struggle, emotions, and money, gain nothing but contamination of their space. Whenever I advise actors on choosing a new teacher, I tell them, “Try to audit all the classes you are considering, and be wary of any teacher who allows you to do so.”

Teachers who do not allow auditing will usually offer their own version of a substitute process, such as, free seminars, showcase classes, or at the very least a personal interview with the prospective student. In addition, the prospective student should seek out current and former students of the teacher and get their opinions and description of the class. You can always evaluate a class after joining it. Except for the few teachers who require you to sign up for a year or two, this would mean joining for a month or two and evaluating as you participate.

## **Integrity**

Determine if the class you are considering has integrity or is it a breeding ground for lies, hype, denial, manipulation, or any kind of inauthentic behavior. Authenticity is crucial to the actor's growth and to group integrity.

Notice group discussions and those between individual actors and the teacher. Some actors, like some civilians, often create personal dramas, which are usually inauthentic. It is a wise teacher who recognizes manipulation, avoidance, exaggeration, and false humility, all frequently seen acting-class behaviors, and avoids being drawn into the drama while assisting the actor to see things as they are and not as the actor thinks they are.

Dealing with this is a delicate issue for the teacher and the class. It is a good sign when you see the teacher, while remaining supportive, create a boundary that keeps him or her from being coddling or manipulated.

It is a bad sign when you see the teacher being co-dependent to a student's drama. There is a difference between being supportive and participating in a lie. It is part of the acting teacher's job to create an honest environment and continually remind the students of the importance of honesty while being a primary exemplar of it.

There are frequently warning signs alerting you to the integrity of a class even before you walk in the door. Look at the class's website or advertising. Is it full of exaggerated hype? What is the tone of the class administration? Is the contact person only concerned with making a sale?

### **Master Class**

Consider the use of the word 'master' in master class or master teacher.

Master teachers are renowned masters of their craft who are guest teaching a class or a short series of classes, e.g., Meryl Streep, Maria Callas, Daniel Day-Lewis, Paul Simon, Yo-Yo Ma, Edward Albee.

It's presumptuous to call oneself a master teacher or to label a class a master class when the class consists of one hardly working actor teaching other hardly working actors.

Actors and teachers involved in these so-called master classes, labeled as such by the teacher, know that it is a lie. And they never speak about the lie or think about it. It's like having an elephant in the room that no one ever speaks about, i.e., all are in denial.

It says a great deal about an acting class when its' formation is built on a lie.

The teacher has initiated a lie to attract students. The students want to

participate in that lie so they can refer to their class, especially on their resumes, as a master class. Do you want to be in that acting class?

Elia Kazan, the great director and one of the founders of The Actors Studio, said in his autobiography, “When I hear the phrase, “master class,” I want to vomit.”

### **Conclusion**

Whatever class you are considering, regardless of the technique being taught, should be evaluated in two areas: 1. Experiential learning, i.e., you are on the floor working in every class. The class spends a minimal amount of time in critiques, discussions, or lectures. 2. Authenticity. There should be no bull shit on any level.

Find a class with these two components in place and you have probably found an effective acting class, one that you will be excited about attending.