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# Choosing an Acting Class

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by Stephen Book part 2

In the last article I wrote about the difference between traditional scene study classes and classes that emphasize more experiential training.

Whatever kind of class you are considering you should evaluate how critiques are handled.

When a scene, exercise, or improv ends, the participants' experience is not complete until there is a follow-up acknowledgment and/or discussion of their work. In a traditional acting class this process is called the critique, in which the class and/or the teacher give opinions of the participants' work and judge how well they solved the problem that the teacher may have wanted them to address, or the problem they have set out for themselves to address.

In better classes the critique does not rely solely on authoritarian judgment but opens doors for further growth in solving the designated problems or challenges. The critique should not only complete the experience, but also provide the participants with insights into areas of their acting that may be improved and point the way toward making that improvement.

In the best kind of class, if the teacher sees the place for improvement, he or she does not tell it to the participants. He or she presents particular exercises that address the problem area and/or in the critique, asks questions that if answered truthfully, will allow the participant to arrive at any necessary insight him or herself.

Here is an example of the questions and answers that would be appropriate where insight is necessary. Let's say the participants are doing an improv where the problem they are working on is staying in constant conflict with each other. When the improv is over:

Teacher: Joe, did you stay focused on solving the problem throughout the improv?

Joe: Yes.

Teacher: Class, do you agree?

Class: No.

Teacher: Joe, what was the acting focus?

Joe: To keep the conflict issue taut and always pull it.

Teacher: Did you do that?

Joe: Yes, I did. Definitely. I was always pulling on the conflict issue, except when Lisa dropped the glass of milk and she started to cry and I went to help her. I was always pulling the conflict issue!

Teacher: Joe, isn't there a contradiction in what you just said?

Joe: No. Every moment I was focused on pulling the conflict issue except when she was cry—I was...except...she was crying... No! I didn't keep the conflict issue taut and I definitely didn't pull on it during the beat when she cried. I dropped the conflict issue when I was helping her. I wasn't always on the acting focus.

Teacher: Class, do you agree?

Class? Yes.

Teacher: Thanks, Joe. Next.

The teacher knew that Joe had dropped the conflict issue, but instead of telling him, the teacher led Joe to the insight so that the insight would be Joe's and not the teacher's. However simple or profound the insight may be, it is better taken and more meaningful if it comes from the actor himself.

This approach also assists the actor to trust his or her own resources and be less dependent on the teacher. Eventually the actor learns how to conduct his own non-judgmental follow-up.

How many times after an unsuccessful audition has an actor wasted an opportunity for learning? Which is more productive, to leave an audition saying to yourself, "Boy, did I louse that up," or to lead yourself through questions and answers to an insight which shows you where you went off?

In a successful acting class the teacher continuously reminds the actors that the only time they "fail" at something is when they don't learn from it.

Paying attention to how the teacher handles the critique is always a great indicator of the teacher's efficacy at being an educator or coach and not a judge.

When the teacher is judgmental, actors frequently feel their egos attacked and respond with their own individual defensive styles instead of being open to further learning. Perhaps this is why you have not liked your previous class.

Critiques may be infused with judgment and authoritarianism in attitude as well as content. The critic's words often carry a sense of frustration (anger) or patronization (disrespect) or admiration (love).

If the criticism communicates anger or disrespect, the actor's body tenses up in an armoring posture. The actor becomes a closed system and is unable to benefit from the teacher's expertise (!). If the criticism communicates love, the actor feels relaxed and happy, and there is nothing wrong with that.

However, with a critical teacher, the class sees that sometimes they will be loved and sometimes punched. The actors quickly ask themselves, "What do I have to do to get the love and not the punch?"

That is the end of productive learning in the class. The actors enter an approval/disapproval relationship with the teacher and the only thing really learned is the dynamic of bribery.

Anything that unnecessarily heightens the teacher's power is to be avoided. Some teachers thrive on that power and exploit it to elicit unhealthy

dependency. It is said that this was the case with Strasberg and his extremely talented student, Marilyn Monroe.

In the question-and-answer follow-up described earlier, Joe returns to his seat thinking, “Of course. I totally dropped the conflict issue when I saw her cry and I helped her. I got it!” His response is positive, appropriate, and productive. His ego hasn’t been attacked, he’s still open to learning, and while he may be a little disappointed that he dropped the conflict issue, he is excited by the clarity of the insight and enthusiastic about trying it again. When Joe next needs to sustain a conflict beat, either in class or career, he is not likely to drop the conflict issue.

After work on a scene or exercise has been completed an effective teacher moves on to the next exercise or scene. Some teachers lose sight of this and initiate group discussions that become information or personal experience sharing sessions. These dampen energy, put everyone into the head, and take away from participation time where true experiential learning occurs. If you notice this happening you have another opportunity for evaluating whether this teacher and class is best for you.

In the next article I will be discussing other features of acting classes available for evaluation.