

Artistic Philosophy as Teacher and Director

Geoffrey Arndt

Students in my classroom are artists from the first day. Rather than beginning in a corrective manner or creating a competitive atmosphere, I begin stating that our work will build up what we already bring to the table and **unite** us. I employ games adapted freely from Augusto Boal's Games for Actors and Non-Actors to discover the necessity of working together to solve critical problems. Boal's work also represents the active disruption of the division between audience and performer. This places the actors into the role of **advocates** for their character. As Boal devised his methods working with oppressed communities, his exercises are ideal for all experience levels. I adapt his work to challenge students in each class, whether I am teaching playwriting, acting, directing, or devising. Pairing this with Michael Chekhov's psycho-physical exercises, students use universal images, personal stories, and improvisation to collaborate with each other. Using Chekhov's tools as a means of exploring character choices, my classes emphasize the connection between mind, body, and spirit. This engenders **empathy** for their characters without creating a psychological binding where the actor or director is unable to let go of the characters; instead, we are inspired to be **empowering artists** and use our abilities to help others by not being overwhelmed by them. I use the "ing" in empowering quite specifically to show the students the power of language to affect the way we see our circumstances.

I teach with **triplicity**, meaning that I teach tools and concepts in three's; we warm up and learn a tool, we improvise with the tool, then we apply it to a critical problem/scene work. This allows students the freedom to struggle with and experiment with specific acting tools. Creating breakout spaces in the classroom, students go through guided rehearsals using the tool, then we have working preview presentations of their work, along with actor/audience feedback that I moderate and model through reasoned examples from the preview. I ask the students to focus their critiques on observation and investigate why the actors made the choices that they made. Highlighting what we think we know as an audience/actor offers the actor performing insight into how their work is being received; feedback also ensures that the audience/actor be an active part of the performance. This provides for student equity by vesting each actor in their instincts and opinions.

As a director, **symbology** and **imagery** are crucial to my communication with my design team, actors, and audience. Joseph Campbell said, "it has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward." Our shared humanity is exposed and experienced best with live storytelling, and through the dialogue between story and "reader." In a recent production of The Neverending Story I directed, the central question was how to engage the audience in the same way that our protagonist is being engaged throughout the play. The main character, Bastian, finds, reads, then becomes a part of the Neverending Story book. By the end of the play, Bastian is in the world of the story and the message is that he has the power to shape that world. Progressively, throughout the production, we found ways to slowly involve the audience and make them a part of the story, from lighting effects to actors and puppets moving through the audience, to direct address. At the beginning of each directing process, I find

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the heart of the story and express it through a motivating symbol or image. An example of this is my motivating image in Phantom of the Opera; the Phantom is an innovator, and he is a man way ahead of his time; this is one of the reasons he is ostracized from the plays contemporary culture of façade and frivolity. So, the image I chose was the broken inner workings of the music box that was so coveted in the play. This led to our production utilizing the technical aspects of Steampunk, as though the entire show were produced inside a Victorian music box. While some characters were the porcelain figures that dance around some music boxes, others were the clanging cymbal monkeys, and the Phantom was represented by the gears that were both sleek and mechanical. His mask was not a representation of his weakness and self-pity but a bold statement of identity. This deconstruction of the traditional Phantom's look, and the overall production's presentation took audience members by surprise and opened up dialogue about the Phantom's psychological state and the disparity between Raoul and Phantom, as well as provided our Christine with a more meaningful choice to make by the end; does she choose a life of invention and adventure or a comfortable life of wealth and prestige.

Using these motivating images, I **reimagine** recognizable stories and tell them through a new lens. This has proven, time and again, to be a process that actors find refreshing and rigorous in their call to stretch as artists. I also believe in collaborative blocking; after active scene, physicalized scene analysis, I stipulate boundaries for the actors then allow them the time and motivation to create blocking with their scene partners. This creates a **synthesis of spirit** that drives the actors forward because the ideas were generated by them and finessed by me; artistic freedom and confidence are foremost. This method of directing allows me to communicate the authentic heart of the story's narrative, gives the actors clarity of purpose, and creates a contemporary production that sends the audience away with the sensation that they have made meaningful connections to their own lives.

I asked one of my former students, who had started booking national musical tours upon receiving his BFA, if he'd return to speak with my current students. He said that the best part of my teaching is that I get students to "be uniquely themselves and embrace their personal gifts." I think that what he was touching upon is my goal to create an authentic working environment where artists are confronted with creative, real-world challenges and trained to use a variety of tools to come up with solutions that they can own. Over my years of working in the theatre, I have learned that our best work comes from personal connections to our work and to each other. I seek to mentor and foster artistic bravery through exploring **community, curiosity, and transformation** with student/artists. My classroom and rehearsal hall become expansive learning laboratories that give the freedom for growth and the means to carry their confidence and inner strength into life.