

Teaching Philosophy

The first lesson I ever learned as an artist was to ask, “what story are we telling?” This came from my childhood teacher and first audience member, my mother. She was a special education teacher, carpenter, seamstress, tarot card reader, and arts advocate. Essential in her question were the lessons to question the story we are telling and embrace that “we” are telling it as artists and audience. Once we have begun to explore the “what” and the “we,” figure out the “how” of telling that story. So, if that means that we climb on the furniture, put on that dress, and embellish our hair with a well-worn shirt, or lie upside down and tell the story with the shadows on the ceiling, that playful curiosity has stayed with me. I carry that into the classroom and rehearsal spaces in which I work.

Creating a Caring, Curious, and Empowering Environment

I begin each course with a shared experience; I give each student an object, piece of fabric, or an image and ask the question, “how can we use this inspiration in front of us to create a performance?” I invite the students to find a partner and switch objects and do the exercise again with their partner’s object. Then, the partners share their ideas, and we open it to a large discussion about the objects and our theoretical performances. After this shared experience, we are primed to create community guidelines for our work in the classroom. I invite the students to imagine a strong triangle; at the top point is “self” and at the other points are “others” and “our space.” Then, we brainstorm strategies so we can actively be **aware** and check-in with each of these areas daily, how we can demonstrate **care** for each of these areas, and how we might **repair** these areas if a boundary is crossed. After we create our community guidelines, we move on to goals and artistic questions. I encourage students to articulate in writing and/or verbally what their goals are, as I will share mine in the syllabus and in conversation. Goals are introduced as a personal part of their journey, rather than as the end of a process. Emphasis is placed on creating pathways by exploring the possible connections and support systems in their world. No artist should feel alone or unseen, so I am both teacher and audience.

Methods and Structure in the Classroom

I believe in cross-training, so I employ concepts of multiple artists in my teaching of performance, directing, and devising. While I introduce students to masters of our industry, I believe in arming young artists with tools, providing space and witness to play with those tools, then a format to present those tools in action. By exploring Boal’s Forum Theatre and games for actors and non-actors, we explore the relationship between audience and performer and the power dynamics involved in storytelling models. Boal believed that the audience needed to be motivated to revolution and that theatre had the ability to raise the audience to a cause. By employing Michael Chekhov’s many tools for the artist, we can go through a process of triplicity. For example, I would introduce the Archetypal Gestures of Push and Pull and invite the artists to embody these gestures and their polarity. Then, we would improvise short scenes using this tool to deepen their

*“I don't believe people are looking for the meaning of life as much as they are looking for the experience of being alive.”
Joseph Campbell*

connections to self and others. Then, we would apply these tools to a text or current project. In choosing material to explore, I have learned that providing options for students gives them ownership over their work experience. So, instead of choosing a set of texts for the class, I will invite students to question what story they are interested in telling them provide them texts that can guide them toward transformation. This means that students are not limited in roles that they might “fit” in when working in my classroom. Chekhov’s work is about total transformation into the character by way of the imagination, and Boal’s theories center on the transformation of the audience by way of empowerment. These are just two examples of ways in which I engage a group of artists to explore their own creative individuality. Self-reflection, as well as group flyback sessions lead to discussions of how we make artistic choices and where we can take those choices further. The measure of student success is in finding methods that fit them and make their work have a sense of ease, wholeness, form, and beauty. A clear connection between Boal and Chekhov is their insistence of teaching people for the benefit of the future. This overarching goal helps refine my process and grounds me when the lower ego wants to take over.

Whether my students become life-long artists or life-long patrons of the arts, they know the power inherent in the arts to change the world for the better as they have been changed by the arts. Storytelling is in our DNA, and for some, it is buried as deep as the memories of childhood. As an artistic mentor, I seek to unlock those memories, that hidden DNA, and bring it to the surface to enliven the artist to tell their stories and awaken their communities.