

Philosophy of Teaching

Tommy Foster

The most important lesson I encounter, in both the classroom and life, is to show up: fully present in each moment with positive expectation and a sense of curiosity about what will happen without attachment to the outcome or the result. On day one, I establish a safe and sacred space in which to work where there is mutual respect and room for both growth and failure. My work has also been greatly influenced by my study of the Alexander Technique as both a student and a teacher-in-training. I spend much of my time encouraging students to undo, release unnecessary tension, and in turn discover viscerally that they are, in fact, enough — both physically and spiritually. We all have those voices in our head that tell us we aren't enough, that we aren't acceptable and that we are in danger of losing what is ours. These ideas are so incredibly detrimental in the classroom, in the audition room, and in life. I teach my students to acknowledge these thoughts and to let them go.

I also strive to instill a strong sense of discipline in my students. We respect time. We respect rehearsal. We respect the space. And we respect each other. Excellence and professionalism are standard. The work of the theatre, the work of teaching, and the art of collaboration are sacred. Only by showing up, being present, and bringing our whole self to the work can we find a true meeting of the minds. I believe that good theatre comes from the sharing of one's self in the work. I encourage students to remove their walls and allow themselves be truly vulnerable.

The two disciplines I specialize in are Musical Theatre Performance and Shakespeare. I've found that these two disciplines are far more intertwined than they may appear to be as they both use heightened states of reality. Singing and speaking in verse are as far from natural speech as one can get. Both have specific boundaries as identified by meter, notes, and rhythm. Both disciplines ask us to find a sense of truth and honesty while communicating ideas through sustained pitch or lengthy passages of complex language.

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In addition, I believe that performance in any medium is a full-body activity. While I teach students to have a full and imaginative inner life, my work concurrently centers on the idea that our mental, spiritual, and physical worlds are inextricably linked. For as much focus as I place on personalization and vulnerability, I also explore the photo negative of internalization by using the movement exercises of Jacques LeCoq. I use Neutral Mask to bring awareness to unnecessary tension and habitual physical patterns. I use Character Mask to teach full body engagement and physical size. And finally I use Clown to open the heart center and find the universal truths of humanity that lie within each of us. I also use this work to help us understand that we are all the same. By exploring and acknowledging our differences with specificity, we find the universal — the common experience. Inclusion of all people — all races, genders, physical abilities or disabilities — is the crux of the very work we do as artists. Everyone has a place at the table and everyone has a place in my classroom. I have an unquenchable thirst for unity and equality. I work tirelessly to ensure that every student feels accepted for who they are while pushing them to expand into everything they can be. I am incredibly conscious of the power differentials that exist in the classroom and use inclusive and supportive language to maintain that balance so that students feel they have autonomy and safety within the teacher-student relationship. Without that safety, students cannot thrive, let alone learn.

These principles, combined with a relentless investigation of the text, are the cornerstone of everything I teach. The poet Rumi once stated “You are a ruby embedded in granite. How long will you pretend it isn’t so?” In short, I believe it is my job to help students discover this so that they can shine, radiate, and excel.