

Matthew C. Williams
TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

In my first year of Graduate school, I took a lighting design course from Broadway lighting designer, Justin Townsend. On the first day of class, he stuck a pencil through a crumpled piece of paper, placed it on a table, and asked, "What do you see?" We proceeded to answer this question for an entire hour. The goal was to observe, receive and interpret, in every way possible, what we were looking at, and to find the countless hidden images in that paper. I feel that my teaching philosophy follows the same principles. My goal as a professor of theater is to acknowledge, embrace, and interpret the ideas of my students and then find creative methods to expand their ideas into new discoveries. When I teach, I focus on the student. It is from his or her personal story, ideas, and intellect that I anchor my pedagogical approach. Driven by curiosity, I also aspire to keep growing as an educator, artist, and individual.

It is my objective as a theater educator to motivate and empower my students so that they will be practically equipped to work in the dramatic arts. I feel that keeping students actively engaged, and giving them agency to fully participate in the exchange of information, is an important motivator. I like to plant an impulse, whether it be in acting, dance, analysis or design, and then allow the students to explore that impulse for themselves. Once they transform the impulse into an idea, I incite them to actively transform it into a tangible, solid result. Anne Bogart says, "You cannot (as a director) create results. You can only create conditions in which something might happen." It is also important for me to make my instruction relevant to the students. By tailoring material or exercises to individual students, be it with a book, video, news article, anecdote or personal coaching, I seek to connect them to an idea in a personal and meaningful way. Everyone receives information differently and it's my responsibility to discover what works for each person in my classroom. Once students find personal meaning in their work, they become naturally self-motivated and advance forward in their thinking. I regularly encourage my students to be self-starting artists. I also find that by engaging in the cultural and social interests of my students, I am better positioned to make a connection with them in the classroom. It is important to me to be "plugged in" to their concerns and passions so as to better serve them as a teacher.

The tools I use in the studio and the classroom to achieve my goals as a teacher are many and varied. My instructional approach is that of a "renaissance person", leaving none of the humanities untouched. In the exploration of a character or play, I lead my student actors through exercises in movement, fine arts and improvisation. Dance is a staple teaching mechanism of mine in the classroom. I have been a choreographer and dance instructor for twenty years and my impulse to move is strong. Meaningful drama comes from the pursuit of a "want", and to activate this "want" we must use action verbs because action requires movement. In conjunction with this, I use a wide range of music to inspire the physical exploration of a scene or character. With over two decades of music research, I have collected a



broad and diverse playlist. The use of visual arts is another key component in my pedagogical approach to theater. My in-class character analysis often translates into student-generated poetry, expressionistic paintings, collages and digital photography. The use of improvised scenarios is another tool I often lean on in rehearsal. Oftentimes, the most authentic interactions on the stage are born out of spontaneous moments. I use improvisation in a variety of manners and styles that include character-based modes, movement and dance methods, and invented styles to aid in the exploration of a dramatic moment. Finally, I summon my experience as an actor when I teach and direct theater students. Having had the same shared experience, I am well equipped to communicate with them in a language that they understand.

My teaching tools are not only physical but psychological as well. I recognize the importance of a relaxed and inclusive environment as one that is necessary for mental focus. I use humor, pathos and passion when I teach, and I seek to put my students at ease in order to gain their confidence. Once I've been granted their trust, I value and honor it to the end. It is, after all, trust that allows an actor to tap into the vulnerability that is required to create authentic and meaningful work.

William Ball wrote, "In the creative process, we seek to encourage the intuitive brain. We have to let intuition know that it will be trusted at every moment, and that whenever intuition feeds us something, we are going to repeat it and use it, no matter what our critical faculties think." Finally, the careful selection of course and production material is paramount to my process as an educator and director. I diligently search for plays, musicals, books, videos and essays that are of the utmost in content quality and are relevant to the needs of the students. I am profoundly influenced by the work of pioneering theater artists such as Cheryl Crawford, Elia Kazan, Agnes De Mille, Peter Brook, Jaques d'Amboise, Donald McKayle and William Ball. I am continually inspired by contemporary directors and educators such as Anne Bogart, Diane Paulus, and my directorial MFA advisor, Thomas Bullard. I draw heavily on the teachings and findings of these artists as I develop and produce my own ideas and methods in the classroom and on the stage.



There are a variety of ways in which I measure my success as a teacher. The primary clues that show that I have succeeded will come from the students themselves. If I see them working with joy, I know that I have done something right. I work most effectively as an artist and an educator when I'm having fun. I find that laughter has a magical power in the classroom and can help break down mental barriers and open the minds of students and teachers alike. I find that another show of proof that I am succeeding as a teacher is when I am learning with my students. I am constantly surprised and delighted when a student offers a new perspective or theory which had not occurred to me. This kind of role reversal is proof that ideas are advancing forward in the classroom. I have also been told that as a director and educator I have an ability to draw new things out of student actors and designers that they had not previously exhibited or even acknowledged in themselves. I find no greater thrill than when students reveal to me

results they'd never before experienced. It is this point of conception of a latent skill or new ability that I especially savor as an educator and director. Over the years I have encountered many former students who have affirmed that they continue to value my teaching and mentorship as they pursue their careers. Such affirmations are like stamps of approval on my career path choice as a theater educator.

My intentions as a teacher and theater-maker go beyond satisfying the syllabus. We live in a moment in time where the paradigm of theater-making is shifting. The source of story and content is now stemming from a greater diversity of artist. Additionally, the makers of theater represent a broader spectrum of people. My interest lies at the nexus of new voices and proven theatrical doctrine. I've spent my tenure as a graduate student at Brooklyn College, one of America's most ethnically diverse universities. I've found that when artists from different backgrounds assemble and collaborate, the



depth of their work reflects a wider breadth of a collective experience. As a result, this process generates theater that penetrates a spiritual and social boundary that other, less culturally ambitious theater does not. Darwin concluded that genetic diversity serves as a way for populations to adapt to changing environments. We in the theater must adapt and realize that our environment is changing. If it does not do so by itself, then we must act to make it so.

I feel most at home in an academic environment where new ideas are being invented and existing theories being discovered for the first time. I thrive on the constant influx of new information and am naturally driven to achieve a greater understanding of the world and our humanity. Furthermore, I have gained a great deal of patience over time, and I understand the value of repetition and the importance of traditional forms. My passion for learning continues to drive me to the classroom where the best way for me to grow as an artist is to teach.