

William Coleman's Teaching Philosophy

The best moments in a classroom or in a rehearsal space come from following the rules of improv; they come from active listening, meaningful failure, and a spirit of shared discovery.

I believe my work as a teacher and as a director is to create conditions by which students can more fully embody such moments, and in so doing, find their authentic voices, their best expressions, even as they allow audiences to more fully inhabit a vital theatrical experience.

Such work begins by building a culture of trust. We cannot collaborate if we cannot trust one another, if we are not listening to one another, if we are not able to fail meaningfully ("fail better," as Samuel Beckett says).

And so, in my classes, we regularly play improv games. Drawn from my experience at The Second City Players' Workshop and Conservatory in Chicago, we play short-form games and, when time allows, practice long form improv. This work unifies the students. To advance a scene or story, one must clearly understand what one's partner has imagined, and then build meaningfully upon it. This is the essence of improv's famed first rule: "Yes, and." That phrase is a staple in our class discussions and in our script work, linking students' ideas to one another, even as they link the speakers of those ideas.

Such meaningful play also keeps us laughing. It gives us a shared memory of invented bits and jokes to which we make callbacks throughout the year.

Because of the shared work above, when disagreements in class or in rehearsal arise--as they must, if our learning is taking us beyond what we already know--those disagreements are of a more foundational, more meaningful nature, for (because we have learned to listen) they are not based upon assumption or misunderstanding. And because such disagreements occur within a culture of laughter, respect, and trust, students (and the teacher) are more apt to grow from the experience.

Within this culture of trust, students are also more apt to make meaningful discoveries about the play at hand, for such discovery is an extension of the spirit of "yes and." Once we have learned to listen to one another, we can listen to the play's language more closely.

In class, we read aloud. We become so attuned to the text that we can feel its rhythms rise and fall, push and pull, such as when the witches' trochees unnervingly reverse our pulse in the opening lines of *Macbeth*.

As we listen, we picture each image. We look for patterns of antithesis and congruence, as when

Lady Macbeth unconsciously echoes her husband's imagery, uttered a world away, about stars hiding their fires (she wants heaven not to "peep through the blanket of the dark"), and finds that, at the moment that she chimes, her husband, as though summoned, appears before her.

Knowing that words are often rooted in concrete images (Macbeth's utterance of "incarnadine," for instance, evokes "flesh"), we look up etymologies so that we can envision what the author—and the character—might be seeing. We likewise envision each metaphor, each allusion. Cicely Berry, a director and vocal coach at the Royal Shakespeare Company, once wrote that "Characters live where they find their images." To more fully inhabit a character, we try to see from their point of view.

Once we've come to an understanding of the text, born of close attention, we can meaningfully enter the realm of interpretation. This is the "and" part of the "yes and" process. The practice of improv teaches us that we can bring the whole of ourselves to a scene. There is no knowledge too specialized, no experience too specific, that it cannot be incorporated into the making of a great improv scene.

"Never be afraid of an author," Anton Chekhov once told an actor in one of his plays. "An actor is a free artist. You must create an image different from the author's. When the two images—the author's and the actor's—fuse into one, then an artistic work is created."

In my classes and in my rehearsals, students learn to become free artists, able to blend their unique imaginations with their deep understanding of the text. This work of interpretation is not easy. This is, in part, why we've built our culture of trust, why we've laughed together so much in class. In rehearsals, students need to feel free to follow impulses, try new things, fail. Improv has taught them that an unfinished idea can be completed by a scene partner or that the best moment might be on the far side of seven seemingly false starts.

Ultimately, the students discover the play together, as they do in an improv scene. They are guided by the animating principles of improv and by the vision of the director, a vision that itself is guided by the same rules of play.

The result of such collaboration is unlike anything I have experienced. I have stood in mute wonder in a classroom or on a stage, beholding a moment of dramatic discovery made by a student who felt free to explore. I have laughed so hard at what students invented in a comic scene that we had to take a break. "There are always certain moments in rehearsals," Arthur Miller wrote, "moments of such wonder that the memory of them serves to further entrap all who witness them into this most insecure of all professions." I have been joyfully entrapped for years now, and know of no better fate.

For the result of theatrical collaboration has never been more necessary. Theatre is a space of rich connectivity and vital confrontation. It expands our felt awareness of others' experiences, and clarifies our understanding of the forces at work within our own experiences and within the social, economic, and political structures that we live within. As multifaceted as any art, theatre is entertaining; it is challenging; it is revelatory. It is an engine of compassion and a reservoir of deep joy.

My spirit of improvisation allows me to help students create moments of theatrical power. It allows me to unify students while encouraging their unique perspectives. It allows me to be alert to the opportunities for meaningful jokes, constructive silliness, and unifying laughter. It allows me to meet students where they are, and to bring them together, even as we attend to the play before us.

A classroom or a stage is a space where disparate elements live in creative dynamism. It is where a group of individuals can bring the whole of themselves to a scene, and in so doing, come to discover their individual, distinct, powerful, and necessary voices.