

Teaching acting is something of a paradox. We are (or at least strive to be) community builders who create the conditions - open, collaborative, brave yet safe spaces where students feel seen and heard - that allow them to take real risks and be vulnerable in their work. It is very social and outward, student focused work. We want to be dynamic, to inspire and be catalysts of and for their growth. At the same time, if we are to be fully present “in the room” for them, we must constantly dig deeply inside ourselves. We have to be quiet inside, to clear the channel to receive their work, digest it and respond to it clearly with our diagnostic and artistic eyes. Our intention is always to foster understanding and growth - both in that moment in the classroom and, over successive moments, into the artists we believe they ultimately can become.

This tension between public and private we experience in teaching - a paradox that is at the heart of acting as well - is both thrilling and harrowing. It can also be overwhelming and even quite lonely at times. How do we know if we are truly being of use? How do we know if we are actually reaching our students? How do we know if we are always bringing the best of ourselves to work each day? Are we even the right humans to be doing this in the first place? And where do we go to expand our pedagogy and, more importantly, our sense of what is possible in the classroom? These were the nagging questions in my teaching journey that led me to apply for the TDP Ron Van Lieu Fellowship.

I had stumbled into teaching several years ago as an actor and had been surviving on intuition, instinct and the kindness and generosity of my colleagues. Ron was my teacher many years ago at NYU, and I craved the insight, clarity and growth I felt in his class in my teaching work. My two weeks on the seventh floor at Manhattan School of Music were both reifying and revelatory. I was part of a cohort of 16 incredibly singular, passionate, generous and talented actor-educators who were hungry to learn. The array of voices, stories and perspectives - personally and pedagogically - in our “company” was exhilarating and profoundly inspiring. The collaborative energy that blossomed in the room was contagious and restorative. I learned so much from them, both individually and collectively, and feel like I’ve gained a community that I will be able to lean on, grow with and give back to as I continue on my teaching journey.

Our instructors - Hugh, Danielle, Peter, Fay, Kathleen, Welker and Damian - were extraordinary. I could go on and on (and on) about each one of them - their generosity (the theme of our two weeks, really), their sense of play, their deep listening, their specificity, their mastery of craft/pedagogy and their amazing ability to communicate that mastery with eloquent simplicity, precision and a teaspoon of juju - but that’s for another time. What was remarkable to me was that even though they were coming at acting training (and acting TEACHER training) from their own lenses, the universality of the principles they espoused shone brilliantly through. Since we finished, I find myself continually muttering things to myself I heard on the seventh floor. They’ve started bleeding into each other so that I’m not even sure which one of these amazing humans said the thing I’m muttering. They might be about the necessity of doing rather than talking about doing, and that every opportunity to perform and/or teach is an opportunity to practice. They could be about embracing the inherent grace and potential for miraculous discovery that can only come with continuous and “glorious failure”. They might center around the wisdom and expressive power that is waiting - literally, begging - to be unlocked in the body

in service of character and story, or the simple gift we give to our students when we tell them, “I don’t actually know - what do YOU think?” And so on ... And so on.

Now that my cohort and I have matriculated back into our lives/institutions/etc, the natural temptation is, of course, to completely overhaul our syllabi and incorporate every single thing we learned into our lesson plans. “How can I create a warm up that includes some of Fay’s archetype work, Hugh’s psychological gestures and one of Danielle’s games? Or channel Peter Jay’s approach to scene work while the actors wear neutral masks on-camera while performing one of Welker and Damian’s wordless scenes?” But that, of course, would be folly. I want to let all of this rattle around in me for a while without controlling or codifying it and see how and where it lands. I want to stay away from what I think any of this should mean for my teaching and wait to see what it could mean. I want to embrace the paradox, the uncertainty, the “I don’t know”, because on the other side is possibility and potential. And I’m excited to have no idea what that might look like.