

COMING BACK TO TEACHING

Thomas Ouellette

Permission: excerpt reprinted from Fiat Lux: Teaching in Paradise, edited by Maurice J. Sullivan, Angel Valley Press, 2004

Teaching theatre is my passion because I take seriously my calling to pass on the theatre's rich heritage. The liberal arts environment provides me an ideal platform from which to expose students in the classroom to the history of theatre, in the rehearsal room to the rigor and discipline of rehearsal, and onstage to the joy and release of performance.

Last year I took a leave of absence from Rollins to re-immense myself full-time in professional performance—directing and acting. I directed two companies of Equity actors. I appeared in *Othello* at the Folger Shakespeare Theatre, and in *Shear Madness* at the Kennedy Center for a 14-week run. It was an exhilarating, challenging, self-actualizing year. But it wasn't it. It was not enough. I missed teaching.

This year away from teaching was significant in other ways. I turned 45, an opportunity to take stock, to look forward and back. Then the events of September 11, 2001 precipitated a jumble of feelings that in turn led to hours of introspection, prioritizing, and dread.

These two events helped me remember clearly that teaching is my first passion and my greatest gift. And the year away gave me time to revisit ongoing questions about my work at Rollins: What am I teaching? How am I teaching it? Am I serving my students and my profession?

What am I Teaching?

In many senses, what I teach is neither revolutionary nor earth shattering. After all, Stanislavski essentially codified the tenets of the modern craft of acting in 1909. But during my years at Rollins I have learned to articulate basic acting methodology in ways that are simple, direct, and immediate. These techniques are practical and broadly applicable, and they need not be jettisoned when the Acting II or III student is ready to take on a deeper, more sophisticated exploration of the craft.

Many Rollins students, even many Theatre majors, arrive as freshmen having read only two or three plays, and with limited or no exposure to live theatre. Most incoming would-be actors think that being believable and spontaneous onstage is all that is required. Their ideas about acting come almost entirely from their exposure to movies and television. Coupled with the American deification of Method acting, these ideas frequently translate into self-indulgent emotionalism, often at the expense of the text.

Students rarely appreciate that acting is a disciplined craft for which specific tangible, intellectual tools must be learned and honed. My pedagogical approach is determined by one fundamental tenet:

COMING BACK TO TEACHING

Thomas Ouellette

The actor is responsible to serve every dramatic situation by making choices that create the best possible story for his character, while at the same time serving the overall story of the play, the scene, at every moment.

This means that acting first requires head-work. Actors must be able to articulate their relation to the plays in which they perform. They must learn how to analyze and synthesize the content of a script. They must develop a clear understanding of what theatre is, what it was, how it works, and why it matters.

How am I Teaching?

My yearlong re-immersion into professional theatre made me eager to return to the classroom where I can redouble my efforts to produce articulate, well-rounded, well-read actors and thinkers. I am more convinced than ever that a solid, balanced liberal arts background provides the best foundation for a life in the theatre. This merciless yet rewarding profession is filled with disciplined and hardworking people because those without these skills are simply and cruelly culled.

College students often are not particularly disciplined and hardworking. Many Theatre majors have talent and a few have the requisite determination. But despite the continued efforts of the Theatre and Dance faculty, many talented and bright seniors matriculate without the drive and focus they will need if they are to succeed in graduate school or professional theatre.

This returns me to my ongoing questions: What am I teaching and how am I teaching it? As a young teacher, I looked forward to teaching subjects to undergraduates. Now my primary motivation runs deeper than development of academic skills and transfer of intellectual knowledge. I now see myself as working to develop the whole person. This can get tricky, even icky. By working with students in a more holistic way I risk becoming sidetracked in the realms of values clarification and character building.

However, after six years of full-time teaching of undergraduates, I am convinced that I need to go there. I believe true education springs not just from seeking good grades and achievements but from establishing a commitment to building character, attitude, and sense of purpose.

Discipline and Responsibility

These ideas represent a dramatic shift in perspective for me. When I arrived at Rollins I was angered and disappointed by students' habits. I found too many of them glib, lackadaisical, and late—almost always late! I met this frustration head on, I believed at the time, with a myriad of rules—from clear non-negotiable guidelines for assignments and exams to policies about wearing hats in the classroom.

My syllabus ballooned from five pages to ten in order to accommodate my expanding list of rules. These rules worked well in the short term. My teaching and my classes became more

COMING BACK TO TEACHING

Thomas Ouellette

enjoyable for me and more substantive for my students. I was acclimating myself to the dizzying range of issues our students face—drugs and alcohol, anorexia and eating disorders, depression, pregnancy, and suicide. But I began to think that I was inculcating the wrong motivation for being disciplined, accountable, and hardworking. And I worried that I was not actually teaching anything enduring about these principles.

These concerns led me to reflection and study in my year away from the classroom. I now believe strongly that I won't teach my students about character or attitude or purpose by posting a list of rules and ideals, warning them to pay heed and punishing them when they don't. This strategy was reasonable and appropriate for a new professor, but I realize that I boxed myself in by my tendency to focus entirely on rules. My challenge now is to define more clearly what and how I teach, to determine which tools are the most important ones I can make accessible to young theatre artists so that they can live by their own rules and supply their own motivations.

Too much of my teaching had centered either on getting students to do what they were supposed to do (as defined by me) or on keeping them safe from the distractions that proliferate at Rollins. I am not abandoning discipline, or even rule making—far from it. I still feel rules are important, but I now realize they produce limited results.

In his book *Dumbing Us Down*, John Gatto offers as a metaphor for good teaching the contrast between the painter and the sculptor. He observes that a painter begins with a blank canvas and transforms it by adding patterns of color to create art. Conversely, he points out, a sculptor begins with a mass of stone and transforms it by subtracting material to reveal a shape that was always waiting to be exposed to the world. Gatto maintains that great teachers are sculptors rather than painters.

A teaching approach which fosters self-determination and critical thinking has much to offer theatre artists. Talent may be buried under a lack of confidence, the rubble of Frat Boy and Rollins Girl peer pressure, or a heap of family dysfunction. I believe I must work harder and more incisively to empower students to confront these barriers and to ignite confidence so that they might be prepared for the world that awaits them.

How do I accomplish this? Well, slowly, and by not relying on rule making. I know that if I am not diligent, once a class veers off course I'll immediately and emphatically assert control via my habitual channels. I need to stop living in such a righteous fantasy about how things should be, and have the courage to face how things are. Effective teaching does not mean always being right. In fact, much of what I've learned presented itself as I got off track and stopped to fix it.

COMING BACK TO TEACHING

Thomas Ouellette

Theory Becomes Practice

My professional scholarship fuels my classroom enthusiasm. It strengthens the professional context in which I position my pedagogy. It enhances my credibility and currency in the classroom, and it invigorates my creative life. My year outside the classroom reinforced this, and it also provided the distance I needed to conclude that teaching theatre at Rollins College is what I want to be doing now.

My return to the field produced other results. I had two opportunities this year to mentor recent Rollins graduates, offering a bridge from academic to professional theatre.

In January 2001, Rosie Brownell (Rollins '00) served as Assistant Director for *I Hate Hamlet* at the Orlando Shakespeare Festival. She worked alongside me as I met with designers, technicians, and the Artistic Director. Rosie attended every rehearsal and preview performance through opening night. She was exclusively responsible for two scenes—one involving elaborate swordplay and the other a waltz—in collaboration with a fight captain and a choreographer.

Rosie went on to direct her first full-length production in Boston this summer. She now makes her living as a theatre artist, working for TheatreWorks, an Equity company in Palo Alto, California.

In March 2002, I cast Casey Carroll (Rollins '99) as the female lead in *Barefoot in the Park* at Foothills Theatre. She worked with a full Equity company and added an important professional credit along with union membership to her resume.

Casey returned to New York City, Equity card in hand, with greater opportunities open to her. These two successes—and they were their successes not mine—brought me great satisfaction. They provide important first steps in an extension and application of academic work for our students and, in fact, our faculty.

I return to Rollins after this extended year of scholarship with a renewed commitment to developing ongoing partnerships with the world of professional theatre in order to extend and deepen our theatre training program.

Truth from the Text

It was a terrific challenge to immerse myself in *Othello* last spring for six weeks of rehearsal and five weeks of performance. This work places considerable demands on the actor's instrument: breath control, articulation, heightened passion, bold physicality. Hearing good actors speak Shakespeare gracefully and naturally is an elevating experience. There is a satisfying fullness to the spoken word that the printed page cannot convey.

COMING BACK TO TEACHING

Thomas Ouellette

Upon my return to the classroom, what shall I tell students is the most vital thing about acting in general, and in playing Shakespeare specifically? My year behind and in front of the director's table has reinforced plenty:

Be among the first to learn your lines.

Don't bring the irritations of your outside life into the process.

If you're not the director, don't direct unless it's absolutely clear that rehearsals are meant to be a shared process. And then still don't do it.

When speaking to a director, questions work better than statements.

Rehearsal is a group activity; don't take up more than your share of the director's time.

Do your homework. Think about the work outside of rehearsal. Bring new choices to each rehearsal.

Always check your fly.

There's a point where the actor knows more about the character than the director. A great director will reach that point with you.

Don't waste time trying to make it "different"—it's always different.

If there is laughter every time you say or do a particular thing in rehearsal, be suspicious.

It's probably only because they know you.

Steal, steal, steal from the best. Watch the great actors and "store."

Work with the best directors and best actors you can find. They will make you look good.

When you have a play to rehearse, be grateful and excited.

Above all, work. Find work. Chase work. Acting isn't waiting for the big phone call.

Acting in class is not working, it's practicing. Get onstage. Acting is doing.

My particular advice for playing Shakespeare is less poetic than Hamlet's "trippingly on the tongue" soliloquy, and almost too simple: the most important thing is to play the truth—the truth of reality, the truth of poetry, and the truth of character. Shakespeare requires the fusion of these truths, and an actor must keep all three in balance simultaneously. If he concentrates on only one, the other two disappear. That is what I find so difficult about playing Shakespeare—and so exhilarating—and what I will bring back to my students.

COMING BACK TO TEACHING

Thomas Ouellette

I tell my students that acting onstage is not just about what you feel, it's about what you get the audience to feel; it's not merely emoting, it's evoking and provoking. I understand now more than ever that the secret to achieving all this lies not simply in performing in front of, but participating with; not in what one says or does, but in what one gives; not in showing, but in sharing; not in what goes on inside oneself, but in what transpires between actors and the audience.

A Life Worth Living

An important moment in my most recent professional work will find its way into my storytelling repertoire.

After a matinee performance of *Othello*, the cast at the Folger was involved in a talkback with about two hundred audience members, half of them students. Several good, if predictable, questions were asked and answered. Though the acting profession has not changed fundamentally in hundreds of years, among the general public there remains a mystery about how and why actors do what they do.

An *Othello* cast member, a young woman fresh out of a classical acting conservatory, grew defensive when outlining for those assembled how draining and difficult acting is. "People have no idea what actors go through," she said, her eyes moist with emotion. I couldn't take it. She was not describing my experience of the profession. Before I could check myself, words tumbled out. I turned to the audience.

"I have to tell you," I said, "I absolutely agree that acting is a challenging, demanding, profession, but most of the time I don't find it especially hard—and if I did, I'd do something else. Something that I loved. To me that's key: it is not about the sort of work that a person does, rather, one's connection to that work."

"I went to McDonald's on my way to the theatre today. It's actually part of a little known Stanislavskian pre-show warm-up exercise that I endorse called The Quarter Pounder with Cheese. Anyway, the woman who took my order was dealing with a cranky supervisor, a bleating fryolator, and five or six disgruntled patrons behind me in line. She bagged my order, and I came to the theatre and performed *Othello*. For nearly three hours I traversed from Venice to Cyprus, speaking five hundred year-old poetry all the way. I fought two duels, and I saw a good man make a tragic mistake and a bad man get his comeuppance. Even now, while I sit here talking to you, that McDonald's woman is still saying 'Would you like to super-size that?' to a line of people."

"Now, working at McDonald's is honest work. Many under-employed actors have filled the ranks of the food service industry. Lord knows I have. Dozens of my former students and talented colleagues are waiting tables right now. Standing behind a cash register for eight hours

COMING BACK TO TEACHING

Thomas Ouellette

a day: to me, that's hard work. I just don't see acting that way. I consider acting a noble, even sacred profession. It is joyous. It offers me far more than I can ever give it. And yes, I appreciate the difference between art and show business. The profession itself is tough: but no one enters it without an idea of the inherent rejection and humiliation. If you get past the difficulty," I concluded, "if you surmount the odds, there is, for my money, no better way to make a living, to have a life."

When actors arrive at rehearsal or set foot onstage, and when audiences congregate to see a play, they participate in a venerable tradition so powerful it has inspired riots, fomented civil disobedience, and undermined tyranny—often beneath said tyrant's nose. Theatre has established national identities and changed the course of history. Theatre provides solace in times of distress.

And theatre's link with the sacred makes sense. Stanislavski, the father of modern acting, used the word communion to describe the vital relationship between the performer and the audience. In the Middle Ages, morality plays were performed in churches. The first actor in ancient Greece was a priest of the god Dionysus.

I am committed to furthering theatre's powerful legacy, which is to illuminate, to uplift, to transform. I have chosen to study and practice theatre because I am passionate about the art form. I want to participate in passing its rich heritage to the next generation of actors, directors, and teachers.

This principle of participation is intrinsic to art itself. Even in painting and sculpture, art is not an object that is, but rather an act which does; art becomes art only with the experiencing of it. The most astonishing work of art, if locked away, would cease to be art and would become at best a work of artistry, at worst just paint or stone. And so it is with the performing arts: the spirit of theatre exists within the flow of impulses from stage to spectator and back again. This is why theatre is unlike radio and television, the cinema, and the 3-D Blu-Ray player. This living, two-way current affects everyone in the hall and leaves them changed forever. This is the magic of theatre.