

Building Artists From the Ground Up

By George Contini

My specialization in teaching acting is the characterization technique of the master actor Michael Chekhov. I am drawn to his work because he urges the actor, when building a character, to create and embody a new person “from the ground up”. Chekhov takes the actor past the artifice of the stage to a truly ontological journey of spirit and being. In my classes I dare students to “be somebody other than themselves” and “to take on a new and exciting life”. I push my students to use their art to explore their own definition of humanity. Whether I’m teaching acting, playwriting, theory, or history there are many points throughout the semester when I ask my students to put themselves, literally, “in another person’s shoes”. I will bring different pairs of shoes to class and ask them to put them on, walk around in them, let their bodies respond to change in their center of gravity, and feel how that “other person” navigates space. Once they are comfortable with walking as this new person, I will begin to introduce objects into the space with which they need to interact. Finally, I will urge them to find the “voice that wants to come out of that new body they now inhabit”. Ultimately, my hope is that the lessons learned through the process of becoming a new character “from the ground up” may have some resonance in their personal life as well.

I am a firm believer of blending theory into practice. My interest in the Chekhov Technique is not limited to teaching in the classroom. I am a personal adherent to what I teach as is proven by the wide range of characters I undertake on the professional stage. Every character is an exploration in a new physicality, vocal pattern, dialect, and emotional arc. Over the last four years, working under Equity contracts, characters have ranged from a Victorian Herpetologist in *The Explorer’s Club* to a Southern Outsider Folk Artist/Preacher in *Hidden Man* to an early 20th century female impersonator in my own show *Put It in the Scrapbook*.

My work as a teacher feeds, and is fed by, my work as an artist. I consider each classroom encounter a creative collaboration of an artistic ensemble in which, as professor, I am also the leader, a collaborator, and a witness. Being able to fill those roles on a daily basis fills me with a profound joy. My passion is clearly in igniting the passion of the students and getting them excited to delve into aspects of themselves and, in turn, aspects of their surroundings, society, and community. My creative urge is drawn from my need to better understand human interaction and develop stronger compassion for others. In turn, I believe in nurturing the personal artistic voice of each student and in providing them with tools so that they may make choices that not only serve the best interest of a class or production; but also aid them upon graduation in their ability to function as arts leaders and entrepreneurs. I stress the importance of their liberal arts education and how being exposed to the varied arts and sciences will only make their personal sense of aesthetics stronger. In the end, my pedagogical aim is that each student experience the power and transformational eloquence that can come from performance and; most importantly, deepen their understanding of what it means to be compassionately human at the beginning of the 21st century.

I am particularly drawn to drama that allows for the examination and definition of community and how that may be reflected in the work of an acting ensemble. My excitement for a theatre piece is directly linked to discovering its ability to resonate to the community in which it will be performed. Although each play I have directed has been very different in style and presentation, it is my hope that the sense of ensemble always shines through. My experience as an actor guides me in nurturing finely tuned and expressive performances from the students. My work as a playwright assures that I will respect the text and the playwright’s intent. My roots in political theatre serve me in discovering parallels between the characters portrayed, the actors portraying them, and the audience receiving them. This sense of ensemble doesn’t involve only the cast. I wholeheartedly embrace the collaborative process with designers and colleagues and

feel gratefully rewarded when a production is able to showcase the brilliant talents of all involved.

I strongly adhere to the university's mission regarding teaching, research, and service. I believe that the UGA University Theatre must be seen as a vital part of the institution's success in broadening a student's worldview and life perspectives. It should be committed to serve as an artistic center for the UGA and Athens community by providing compelling dramatic presentations that serve to awaken emotions, reflection, or public discourse. I strive for excellence in all university theatre productions that I am involved with and ask the students working with me to do the same. They are reminded to be audacious and to create a theatrical event that the audience will always remember---otherwise, why bother doing it? It is through such spotlighting of the commitment, talents, and diverse lives of the students involved that we are also making an investment in UGA's growth and future.

Finally, I believe that mentorship, advising, and assistance in career planning are crucial in my role as teacher for; there is no doubt that a professor's passion, guidance, and respect for a subject will often be what inspires and sustains a student after they exit UGA and embark on their subsequent career. In the end, this is what drives me to be the best teacher I can be---seeing a student's character, artistic sense, and professionalism grow "from the ground up"; and then proudly watching as they place both feet firmly on that ground and, once again, "take on a new and exciting life."