

A Revolutionary New Kind of Acting Training

By Jim Meskimen

For some time, my wife Tamra Meskimen and I have been on a path of supporting and establishing safe places where actors and students can pursue their craft without abuse from invalidative gurus who dominate the performing arts.

In New York for many years, after having enjoyed improv classes that had the goal of eliminating criticism from acting instruction, we were staff at the National Improvisational Theatre (N.I.T.) and shepherded hundreds of would be improvisers onto the stage, and into new levels of self confidence and professionalism.

Many of these students have gone on to be major figures in theater, film and television.

We made many lifelong friends and did innumerable improvised shows, which left behind a trail of laughter which still occasionally resounds from an appreciative former patron with a good memory.

Later on, in the 1990's, Tamra founded a new company of players in Los Angeles from the ranks of actors who had trained together in New York. and relocated west.

Called "The Really Spontaneous Theatre Company", we were chiefly dedicated to performing totally improvised one-act plays, what's known as "Long form" improv. The group shared the original goal of spontaneous creation without criticism, as in their training, and audiences were generally delighted with the result.

In 2004, Tamra began work on another, even more ambitious undertaking. With friend and successful artist/businessman Bill Kilpatrick, she began to explore what it would take to establish an acting school in Hollywood that would avoid all trappings of the typical acting schools around which, in one way or another, all depend upon the evaluation of the student's artistic choices by an instructor.

It was the same purpose as the earlier training in New York at N.I.T. but with even more dedication and, of course, experience. And it had the strength of being a philosophy which (though completely at odds with the current agreed upon way of instruction) was a much more empowering and ultimately more effective method than other disciplines, even the oft spoke of and little understood "Method".

The idea of teaching art of any kind without someone acting as a judge of the relative goodness and badness of the student's work is hard for modern students to grasp. Indeed, many feel a misconceived desire to BE judged, and sometimes harshly, for their missteps along the path of knowledge.

But the grim joke is, the more this kind of instruction flourishes and operates as the status quo, the less really self determined art gets produced, and the entire culture sags and grows more ossified.

The school that has emerged from the pursuit of the philosophy of non-criticism/evaluation is called The Acting Center, and it's founders, Tamra, Bill Kilpatrick, Christopher Smith and Eric Matheny have worked diligently for years to develop a full acting curriculum that does more than any other to completely cancel out the influence of the invalidative, judgmental "Guru", and bring about understanding and skill in the student.

Now they offer an excellent curriculum in Improv, as well, with the same emphasis as in the regular Acting classes.

It took no small bit of work, either. Drills were researched and created that allowed a student to gradually test out the relationship between emotions, actions, moods and character, etc. and the courses were piloted, evaluated and revised. (Indeed, the polishing continues, and drills are continually reviewed, taking into account reports from the students themselves, to remove all barriers to making the student responsible for their own artistic judgment, which they then can own and express at will.)

Acting can be a sort of mystical subject; it is so wrapped up in fundamental questions of identity, expression and one's personal taste. It has suffered, as have all the arts, by an invasion of a kind of materialistic thinking that stressed result over integrity, and often devolved into an effort to please a mentor, or "be the same as" someone else's idea of what was right and proper.

So this new school is actually quite revolutionary, and so are the results. The actors I have seen come out of the classes at The Acting Center are confident individual creators, uncomplicated, honest, skilled and consistent. They do not toady, nit-pick, lord over others or destroy themselves in the service of their art. They seem... confident.

And why not? Nobody is going to force them to admit they are wrong for what they have figured out is right for THEM.

Perhaps, you might say, someone WILL tell them soon enough that what they are doing doesn't please.

True. That will happen enough out in the professional world, but THAT is another environment entirely; the workplace. The environment in which one undertakes to LEARN an art MUST be one of good positive control, uncritical support of the student who, after all, just wants to learn how to be a more able entertainer.

This is the gift that The Acting Center offers. I've been privileged to watch it grow, and I'm a student myself.

You know what? This stuff works!

For more information, visit www.theactingcenterla.com.

The End