
Regional

Teaching acting – not as simple as it looks

Acting is one of the oldest professions. The ancient Egyptians and Greeks were very fond of it. In today's society actors are seen not only as professionals but also as celebrities. Yet acting has evolved over time and the art of acting that we see on stages and in films today is quite different than what was being done in the time of Shakespeare.

"Actors are both born and taught," said Chuck Harper, a professor in the department of theater and dance at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "The technique of acting underwent a significant revolution in the early 1900s when the Russian director and acting teacher Constantin Stanislavsky taught that you have to look and act in a recognizable fashion to your audience, like someone they can see at home or on the streets."

Another historical event that transformed the technique of acting was the movie industry. Movie actors have the advantage of the use of close-ups and editing techniques that enhance the conveyance of emotions. On stage, actors are much more dependent on the traditional techniques of voice and movement to project emotion.

Despite the glamour that can be a part of acting, it is a profession that requires a lot of training to do well. Harper obtained his bachelor's in theater and dance from Western Washington University and his master's of fine arts in stage direction from the University of

Dr. Aldemaro Romero College Talk

Washington School of Drama in Seattle. Born in St. Louis, Mo., Harper said that he knew since he was a child that he wanted to be an actor. Yet, he explained, he still feels as if he's continually learning.

"I think that stage performers are very much a writer's medium. Actors will speak the words verbatim," said Harper. "But there are actors that discuss their ideas with directors and generate improvisations. I am terrified of improvisations but to be a good actor you have to know how to improvise." Interestingly enough Harper said that many actors do get stage fright.

"The older you are, the more afraid you become of improvisation. Experience tells you that things can go terribly wrong during a live performance, particularly at opening night.

"There is not a single way of teaching acting," said Harper, who has taught hundreds of students not only in the classroom but also by directing plays.

You have, for example, the British approach (from the outside in) and the American approach (from the

inside out). The "method acting" in which the actor tries to internalize the feelings he or she has to display on stage epitomizes the latter. "I think both works," added Harper.

One historical anecdote that illustrates the different approaches actors can take took place between Laurence Olivier and Dustin Hoffman during the filming of the movie *Marathon Man*. Olivier, probably one of the best actors who ever lived, told Dustin Hoffman, who deprived himself of sleep for days to create a more accurate portrayal of a man being persecuted. "Son," Olivier is purported to have said to Hoffman. "Why don't you just act? It is easier."

A champion of the "method acting" technique was Lee Strasberg. He was an influential – and controversial – American actor, director and teacher who most people probably remember for his role as the Jewish mafia character in "The Godfather Part II." "He was a polarizing figure," said Harper. "Some think that the way he handled actors was reprehensible and manipulative. Others idolized him by saying that all they learned was because of him."

Harper, who teaches several courses on acting and stage direction at SIUE, is known as a much more eclectic – and gentle – teacher. He said that he loves to work on experimental theater.

"There is a small but enthusiastic audience for experimental theater," Harper said. Still he is worried that theater audiences are shrinking. One source of concern is that the more technology is employed in movies, the less the full capabilities of an actor will be noticed. He gave the 2009 film "Avatar" as an example of this phenomenon.

"New technologies are already impacting acting," Harper said. "There is still a sense that even the best computer animations come from groundwork using actors. It is a matter of emotional range. I don't think that live actors will be completely replaced."

Harper said that he believes that the fundamentals of theater will survive. "Acting has been very important from early cultures. We find direct correlations in early theater to the modern one in the same political and cultural issues of our times," Harper said. "The best actors provide not only entertainment but also convey ideas that make us think about bigger issues."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.