

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Amy Chaffee

“In your choice, lies your talent.” - Stella Adler, Teacher, Actress, Founding member of The Group Theatre.

My earliest memories are being read poetry before bedtime. By 5, I had adopted the family unabridged dictionary with pedestal (too heavy for me to carry alone) for my bedside reading. By 7, I was writing my own plays. My love for all sounds, languages and their particular music is catholic. I hope to impart that love to my students, giving them a broad palette of colours with which to paint their stories.

My mission as a teacher is to invite forth the voice that is great within each of us. I want to free both the literal, physical voice as well as the artistic, storytelling “Voice” that each of us has. I believe they start at the same point – the impulse and desire to connect with others.

As a teacher, I guide my class to become an ensemble through improvisation, clowning and contact improv, exploring the edge of verbal necessity and discovering why we speak. Bodies are moving from day one, engaging our breath and releasing ourselves on sound.

Breath is the basis of our thought and behavior. I want the students to have a clear notion of their own sensation of needing to speak, where that need comes from and physically experience the need for language. Before translating psychology into action, we first give breath to the thoughts, feelings and emotions that embody our psychology. The mouth and body are perfect sound-making instruments. I believe my job is to help students discover any physical habits that inhibit free breath or vibration and help them develop a conscious use of their physical self.

“Be A Person, in a Place, Having an Experience.” – Milton Katselas, Director, Teacher

While freeing the breath, we open and invigorate the resonating chambers; develop a playful and exploratory relationship with vibration, inflection, rhythm, percussion and melody. We hum, massage, roll across and around the floor, get good and sweaty with our songs and text.

My students find their own personal relationship between their breathing and the desire to express a thought. I get my students out of the classroom to explore their voices in other venues, outdoors, in acoustically interesting spaces. They learn to trust that their voices meeting the writer’s words will support the story, and that they as actors are more than enough to meet the task for which they will be hired.

“The only thing heightened about heightened text is the amount of energy it takes to say it.” – Actor, Richard Easton, 1997 on the set of Jack O’Brien’s “Othello”

Since I work on set as a voice/dialect coach simultaneously with teaching, I try to bring that reality to the classroom. In the competitive field of acting, every working actor must have command of rhetorical or ‘heightened’ language. ‘Heightened’ can mean anything from

Shakespeare's "Cymbeline" to Bukowski's "Blue Bird" or Guirgis' "Motherfucker with the Hat." I believe it takes courage to speak, to reveal thought on breath, to allow our spirit out in the world, no matter what the words are. My students discover that structured language gives them a scaffold to climb to those daring heights of human vulnerability. As they learn to trust the text and how it stimulates the emotional triggers within, a new understanding is born of the psycho-physical relationship with sound and thought. Students kinesthetically experience exactly what it means "to suit the word to the action" and vice versa. Once students have worked on the heavy lifting of these rhetorical devices they inevitably have greater command and freedom with less structured text, such as film or television scripts.

"We are in Golden Hour in People. Everyone is earning their day rate, each hour. So, let's work really slowly!" – Kurt Sutter, Exec Producer, Writer, Director, Actor "Sons of Anarchy" 2009

From the first day, I encourage students constantly to challenge the status quo and their own beliefs about their own abilities; to overcome their shyness or desire for perfection, I encourage them to "do it wrong." So many of the great artists whose work I admire either didn't realize they were bucking the perceived wisdom of the time, or deliberately went around the system to create their art. The chaos created within with Fitzmaurice Voicework is much like this sense of "making your own rules."

My approach to dialect/character work starts with the external mechanics needed for this process. I rely heavily on IPA and group work. Additionally, my students develop their "ear" and build the precise physical shape or sensuality of a sound and placement of the sounds on the body before linking them together. Dialects and accents are storytelling, as much as scenery, costumes or props. Giving the actors a sense of "game" with the sounds allows them to feel in command of the reins of the story, instead of "wearing the costume" of borrowed sounds. Once the correctly formed sounds are linked in words and sentences, great gifts of free emotion and in-the-moment behavior come to them unbidden and unforeseen, simply as a result of the connection. Often an actor discovers for the first time how to arrive organically at the internals of a characters story from outside behavior.

"Technique is anything that works." – Milton Katselas, Founder of the Beverly Hills Playhouse

A multiplicity and diversity of voices and techniques is crucial to my approach. For example, in Australia and South Africa, Speech, as a part of acting training is no longer included in curriculum. This elimination came about because the proscribed methods were tied to the social, racial and economic hegemony of imperialism – namely "good speech" was "white/anglo speech". In my classroom, all sounds that a human can make are part of storytelling whether it is clicks, buzzes, small chirps or great gobs of gorgeous glissando. We play with it all from the 4 voices of Roy Hart/Richard Armstrong's Extended Voice Technique to classic Clifford Turner Tongue Twisters. Language is our playground; judging sounds as "ugly" or "not right" is akin to saying, "I will paint a landscape but I don't care for blue. It is 'not right'."

“Why am I hiring you again? Aren't the actors supposed to know how to do this stuff already?” – Grant Goodwin, Line Producer on the set of “Main Street” to the Dialect Coach for Ellen Burstyn and Colin Firth.

Always with an eye to the practical, the diverse and the “incorrect”, my students and clients are encouraged to be bolder, more powerful with their creative points of view while still retaining flexibility and a sense of play. Once out of school, a solid knowledge and comfortable understanding of their own sounds, vocal range and a love affair with language and text makes working with a new director or group of fellow actors infinitely easier. Actors who can work with foreign sounds and complex technical languages are more capable, flexible and efficient in rehearsal and on set. Thus, they are more quickly rehired and have greater ease navigating the straights of our industry whether on set, on stage and in auditions. However, even after an Academy Award and all the accolades a young actor dreams about have been bestowed, I find that often actors need to touch base with their sense of play, their curiosity and their love of storytelling and sound. From the first day in class with my students, I encourage my young artists to have a healthy relationship with their bodies, their talent and to develop their own technique so that they may have greater self-determination as artists, leading them on a healthy, prosperous path of lifelong growth.