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### Methods of Teaching Acting

Eric Allen Frenck

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METHODS OF TEACHING ACTING

A RESEARCH PROJECT

PRESENTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN EDUCATION

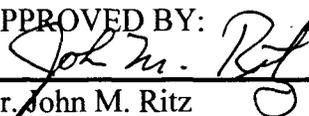
BY

ERIC ALLEN FRENCK

DECEMBER 1999

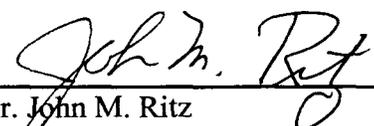
This project was prepared by Eric Allen Frenck under the direction of Dr. John M. Ritz in OTED 636, Research Problems in Education. It was submitted to the Graduate Program Director as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science in Education degree.

APPROVED BY:

  
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Date

12-5-99

  
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12-5-99

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| Signature Page.....                              | i    |
| Chapters   |      |
| I. INTRODUCTION.....                             | 1    |
| Statement of the Problem                         |      |
| Research Goals                                   |      |
| Background and Significance                      |      |
| Limitations                                      |      |
| Assumptions                                      |      |
| Procedures                                       |      |
| Definition of Terms                              |      |
| Overview of Chapters                             |      |
| II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....                    | 5    |
| In the Literature                                |      |
| Summary  |      |
| III. METHODS AND PROCEDURES.....                 | 10   |
| Population                                       |      |
| Instrument Design                                |      |
| Methods of Data Collection                       |      |
| Summary  |      |
| IV. FINDINGS.....                                | 12   |
| Mrs. Leslie Rutherford                           |      |
| Mrs. Eva Roupas                                  |      |
| Mrs. Nancy Curtis                                |      |
| Summary  |      |
| V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS..... | 18   |
| Summary  |      |
| Conclusion                                       |      |
| Recommendations                                  |      |
| Bibliography.....                                | 21   |

## TABLE OF CONTENTS CONTINUED

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Appendices.....   | 22 |
| A. Survey of Teachers' Method and Approach to Teaching Acting ..... | 22 |
| B. Cover Letter for Theatre Teachers .....                          | 23 |

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Theater is taught in nearly every Virginia Beach High School. For most subjects, there are classes that instruct one on the methods used in teaching. Due to the lack of such a class, the study proposed in this paper is an observation of drama teachers teaching acting to gain some insight into methods used and central ideas to be communicated.

There are books on how to act. Anyone may go to a bookstore and read about what one should think about, how one should prepare, and technical aspects of the craft. The downside is that reading gives only words to consider and not actual stage experience. To be an actor, one must act. To act, one needs an audience, and other actors to interact with (Monologues are for advanced actors, not beginners). Reading about acting and acting are two very different things. Individuals are trained in the technique and put through hours of practice in their respective disciplines, but if one aspires to teach, then one must plod through one's own knowledge of the art and find a way to break it down and explain it to beginners. This problem's solution lies in observation of current teachers in action.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem of this study involves obtaining information regarding the teaching of acting from Virginia Beach High School drama teachers through short, open questionnaires. These will allow the teachers to describe their methods of teaching and classroom management. Any dialogue with these teachers will also be helpful, and therefore, included, if possible.

### **Research Goals**

The objective of this paper is to find the critical attribute required to teach acting to beginner-level students, whether it is a specific method of teaching, innovative acting drills used, or the type of classroom environment one must foster. The latter is strongly suspected, as the first two options above are somewhat empirical and possibly, if not readily, available and therefore easily taught to anyone desiring to learn to teach acting.

### **Background and Significance**

In this researcher's experience, there are no "Methods of Teaching Acting" classes taught at Old Dominion University, James Madison University, and other local Virginia colleges. It is highly unlikely they are taught outside of theater conservatories. In every book and article this researcher has read on acting, no mention of how to teach is ever found. How to act is given in abundance, but how to show an aspiring actor that he or she may not be making the best artistic choice in a classroom or stage situation is not given. An aspiring acting teacher has no reference from which to begin, and as the arts are becoming more and more prevalent throughout school systems, a method for teaching acting needs to be outlined.

### **Limitations**

Due to time constraints, a minimum of two Virginia Beach High School drama teachers will be surveyed for this study, and the maximum number will be six. The schools that will be involved or observed are Salem, First Colonial, Bayside, Green Run, Princess Anne, and Ocean Lakes, as the researcher has at least a minimum amount of knowledge of the instructor's different styles at each of these schools.

### **Assumptions**

The “American style” of acting has grown out of Stanislavski’s teachings into Strassberg’s “method.” Therefore, no books on “Noh” or “Kabuki” theater of Japan will be used, nor will any books on other types of theater foreign to what is essentially the Western style. References will be as recent as possible. It is further assumed that the teachers being observed operate primarily from this style and will teach within it.

### **Procedures**

The researcher will send the respective instructors a survey asking about the critical attributes and essential tasks that should be reviewed in the teaching of basic acting. Books recommended by teachers as well as a select number (5 or 6) pre-picked by the researcher will be cited to explain what the teachers are attempting specifically to teach.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following are four terms which need to be defined for the reader:

Drama Teacher- one who teaches the study of theater (specifically acting) to high school students, in this case in six specific Virginia Beach High Schools.

Teaching Methods- the means of imparting knowledge from teacher to student, including lecture, assignment of group work, guided practice, independent practice, etc.

Critical Attribute- the most important part of a task analysis or the attribute most important and most central to a lesson.

Task Analysis- A means of breaking down a subject to be taught into its component parts that shows what must be learned before a student can comprehend the point of the lesson, the “critical attribute.”

### **Overview of Chapters**

The means of teaching acting are expressed in vague and uncertain terms, and that questioning different teachers will add clarity to these means. In the next four chapters, the reader will find specific methods and activities for directing students through the artistic wilderness of the theater from both teachers and literature.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The problem of teaching acting has little written on it. Nearly every book is designed to be read and digested on a one-to-one (author to reader) basis, not in a method that explains interaction between a teacher and a class. Four narrative-types of books described a group situation with a teacher and his students; these were the Stanislavski trilogy (An Actor Prepares, Building a Character, and Creating a Role) and a book by Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell (Sanford Meisner on Acting). These are not examples of “How to Teach Acting” books. However, the books do describe a teacher imparting knowledge of acting to his students, and this is what this study endeavors to explore.

#### **In the Literature**

In Stanislavski’s time, acting was a very different discipline. Some actors would use a hand gesture to indicate to the audience an appropriate moment for applause, laughter, pity, etc. This became known as a “claptrap.” By all standards today it is considered “bad” acting, or at the very least, dated. Stanislavski was the first to document and name important facets of the art. His trilogy of books is written from the perspective of Kostya Nazvanov, a young man going through an acting class with a famous fictional director named Tortsov. It is in these books that he describes such things as appropriate action, imagination, “concentration of attention”, muscle relaxation, “emotion memory”, “the unbroken line”, “the super objective”, etc. These are only some of the chapters of the first book. But, as stated before, these are aspects of acting, not aspects of teaching acting. What stands out in Stanislavski’s narrative is the difference in

his methods and the popular method of lecture. This is not to say that Stanislavski does not lecture; he simply asks the students to act before telling them anything about acting. He spends much of the book talking of preconceived notions that an actor develops either through acting or observing. To break his students of these habits, he employs a trial and error approach. The students act, and are told constructively what they have done right and what they have done wrong, and the greater concepts can be easily drawn out from their mistakes. This is usually because the students were unaware of these concepts, and instead of a teacher outlining a general situation (with which no student could truly relate) to illustrate these concepts in the books, the teacher lets the students either do or see a situation and evaluates it for them. This is not his only method, however. On a few occasions in the story, Tortsov, the director is explaining one of his concepts (such as the use of physical characterization in the second book, Building a Character) and as he speaks, the characterizations he is explaining (i.e., the curl of a lip to produce a negative effect from the audience to a character) seem to appear on his face. The effortlessness of this is mentioned with amazement by the student, Kostya. At times, the director takes the stage, and interacts with his students, but he never claims the stage on his own to demonstrate one of the concepts he describes. This comes from what is the author's main point; the actor should act from his own mind and in his own body, not as an imitation of a teacher on stage. In the later books, the director allows the students to act on their own, rather than simply copy what he has done, and recycle that over and over. This is so necessarily obvious that it is in all the titles - to act, An Actor Prepares, then "Builds a character", then "Creates a role". None of these acts involve any copying, but they all involve thinking for oneself.

Sanford Meisner was a student of Lee Strasberg's "method" of acting. He worked with such famous names as Sydney Pollack, Maureen Stapleton, Arthur Miller, and Gregory Peck. In his book, a chronicle of an eight-man, eight-woman acting class with a collaborative writer named Dennis Longwell, what Meisner says and does are clearly outlined by an outside (although obviously favorable) eye. There is a sense of honesty to this book that was not present in Stanislavski's trilogy. The author is not leading the reader by the nose now, and the terms are easy to understand and remember. What Meisner does is quite like Stanislavski, but his drills are reproduced in the text. This book is a better source for specific acting exercises not based on a script. However, the book begins with Meisner lecturing before any acting has taken place. Stanislavski's Tortsov never did this. He begins with a lecture on "really doing" something, explaining that he does not want his students doing "pirouettes up the stairs" or any other absurd choice often made by an acting student. The main point of the lecture is for the students to be themselves now, before they get on stage, in the hope that they will be themselves when acting in drills on the stage. This was a section from the first chapter, titled "Building a Foundation" and it is not unlike a condensed An Actor Prepares by Stanislavski.

In the second chapter, "The Pinch and the Ouch", Meisner outlines an exercise in which one of two students, back to back, react to an external stimuli created by the other (one drops coins, pokes the other in the back, etc). The stimuli generator repeats what the reacting student does, and this continues until one is able to read between the lines. This exercise generates creative thought and an attention to one's acting partner. An actor must seem as though he or she is reacting to something on stage; sometimes with rote

memorization of the lines, novice actors forget that. Later in the chapter, Meisner joins his pair on stage to demonstrate his “pinch and ouch” concept. When the reactions of either of the two is “forced” and it does not appear as though they are actually “doing it”, Meisner stands behind them and gives them a text - they may only say “Mr. Meisner.” Standing behind the boy, he pinches his back. He reacts very naturally, shouting his teacher’s name and leaping away from him. Meisner then repeats the exercise with the girl in the half of pair, only he slips his hand in her blouse. She giggles, says his name, and pulls away. The point of this exercise was to illustrate the critical attribute of his later lecture; “Don’t do anything unless something happens to make you do it.” This reacting is a basic tenet of acting, and this exercise illustrates it beautifully.

In the following chapter, Meisner adds a facet to his repetition exercise - one actor must have an activity which is very important to him or her outside of their interaction. The other is insensitive to that action, and in every exercise listed, annoys the actor with the activity. There is also much silence during the exercise, which Meisner likes. One of his mantras repeated throughout the book is “There’s no such thing as nothing.” To paraphrase, silence is an absence of words, not meaning. The concept of “public solitude” arises as well. Private solitude is what one does alone at home, whether brushing one’s hair or teeth, cooking a meal, or watching television. Public solitude is the ability to repeat such a state on stage with an audience watching. Meisner mentions this when he notices that a student is very “audience-conscious” during the exercise. He assures the student that comfort on stage will not come until he achieves the beginnings of “public solitude”. Meisner continues, adding to the acting drills for each lesson.

### **Summary**

The concept that continues to evolve from both books is the necessity of drills to teach the specifics of acting. For Stanislavski, the drills were greatly varied. Meisner, on the other hand, seems to add more and more conflict, yet only a slight variation, to each drill as he teaches a progressing lesson. Each lesson and drill feeds into the next. But both seem to be building something; the main point to all four books is that acting must be taught through trial and error, with the teacher being more of a guide than an instructor. As students act, mistakes should be corrected and good choices should be noted. Above all, students must receive more than one chance in class, because they will not receive more than one while on the stage.

### Chapter III

#### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This is a descriptive study, in which direct observation and an open questionnaire to theater teachers will provide the information. In this chapter, the following sections will be described: Population, Instrument Design, Field Procedures, Methods of Data Collection, and a Summary.

##### **Population**

Whatever surveys are returned will represent the population in the study, and that group will include any students who have been or currently are being taught in the respective classes of the theatre teachers. Surveys have been sent to First Colonial, Bayside, Salem, Ocean Lakes, Green Run, and Princess Anne High Schools in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

##### **Instrument Design**

To begin this study, a questionnaire will be designed and distributed to the six drama teachers. The questions will be very open to allow the drama teachers to be very thorough with their answers. The questionnaires will ask what the teachers assume to be the critical attribute that should be taught to beginning drama students about acting, and specific points about acting they wish to make in the task analysis of this lesson which will lead their students to this critical attribute. Also, a third question asking them to include any salient points the questionnaire may not deal with enough will be included.

The object of this research is to learn the teacher's objective and allow him or her to describe it in detail. From this, what is important about acting may be learned, and

how to teach that may also be found. A copy of the questionnaire is found in Appendix A and a copy of the letter sent out with the questionnaire is provided in Appendix B.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

Data will be collected through a small questionnaire mailed in January 1998. Mrs. Curtis, from First Colonial High has also invited the researcher to observe and discuss methods of teaching acting. This observation will show what Mrs. Curtis intends to teach, what it is observed that she teaches, and what it is observed that their students learn from their teachings.

### **Summary**

The questionnaire and the observations of the researcher will provide most of the facts of this paper. In the next two chapters, a list of objectives, methods, and responses will be generated from the procedures put forth in this chapter. From this, the researcher and the reader will be able to make a more informed choice when designing a lesson plan about acting, and executing the methods of conveying the facts of that lesson to the students.

## Chapter IV

### FINDINGS

Of the six original letters and questionnaires involving the teaching of acting sent out, two were returned. Another teacher responded to the questions by interview, speaking directly to the interviewer. As is likely often the case, the open questions asked have been responded to with an unexpected degree of clarity on the parts of the instructors, who completely disregarded any references to specific drills and discussed and provided more about what is necessary for a healthy acting classroom. In the researcher's opinion, this is much more relevant than a drill one can get from the outline of a book. The answers given provide an surprising insight.

#### **Mrs. Leslie Rutherford**

The first response was from Mrs. Leslie Rutherford of Bayside High School. Her responses were:

1. What is the critical attribute to teach to a student who is just beginning the study of acting? Why?

Answer: "Trust. Most students don't trust anyone enough to let go enough to create a character effectively. They don't trust their directors enough to, in their terms, "look stupid" or release their inhibitions. They don't trust their peers, although as they work together some inhibitions do fall away. However, they don't trust themselves, most of all. This creates huge problems mostly in the area of their individual creativity. It is much easier to "do" someone else they've seen - usually the most recent stand-up comic. The lack of trust creates difficulty in reaching uncomfortable emotions, so sophomoric comedy is the rule of the day, usually. No matter their level of talent, if trust is lacking in

student actors, their performances have trouble reaching beyond the superficial.”

2. What concepts or tasks do they need to grasp before understanding the critical attribute? For example, are there four factors one should focus on, or more, or less?

Answer: “The biggest concept is that everyone is valuable for the contribution he or she makes. For a student to learn this, they must do things they can’t or at least things that push their comfort zone. My students, over the course of a year, dance, build a set, improvise & write, as well as learn skills in physical & vocal character. One of the most interesting things I learn as a teacher is where each student is comfortable - and more importantly, where he or she is talented, but uncomfortable. I’ve had many technicians who stole the show when they took a role, and many actors who can manage a stage with barely a ruffled feather. Once students understand that the show can’t be without all of them, they begin to trust each other more.”

3. I feel certain my questions cannot cover all that one would wish to say on such a broad subject. If you feel that there are any other pertinent points or challenges I have left out, please feel free to list them here.

Answer: “Realistic expectations need to be addressed to all students, especially those in the arts. The child who has failed biology twice, but still wants to be a pediatrician needs a dose of reality before the next year. So with actors, singers, musicians, and artists.

Desire and talent are not always enough to ensure success in the field this is not to say students shouldn’t try for success. It does mean, however, that we, as teachers, must connect our arts to other vocations, and not allow them to be considered fluffy subjects that prepare students for hobbies only. The attorney trained in theatre has to have some

advantages over the one who wasn't. The architect who understands principles of visual art is more likely to build something pleasing to the eye. Attributes such as trust, acceptance, self discipline, creative problem-solving, and working with others are vital to the continued success of all students and to the continuation of our programs."

**Mrs. Eva Roupas**

The second response came from Mrs. Eva Roupas of Salem High School. Again, here are her responses, verbatim:

1. What is the critical attribute to teach to a student who is just beginning the study of acting in your opinion? Why?

Answer: "In order to learn anything, there needs to be discipline. Unfortunately according to the masses, this attribute isn't always equated with an arts class, especially at the lower level. But because one needs to meet deadlines (performance dates), be dependable (bring props, costumes), and attend daily rehearsals (which are incredibly repetitive) I can't imagine beginning to succeed without establishing this as the groundwork."

"Students also need to recognize that the director's/teacher's word is law. 'Anything' does not 'Go' on stage or in class. In some respects, theatre can be seen as dictatorial, not in crushing creativity, but in the filtering system necessary to get a clear, theatrical message on stage. And the younger the performer, the more tempted he/she may be in putting 'it' out there no matter how bold, inappropriate, or tasteless it is."

2. What concepts or tasks do they need to grasp before understanding the critical attribute? For example, are there four factors one should focus on, or more, or less?

Answer: “The major concept students need to grasp before they understand anything is that “the play is the thing.” It’s not about striving for the standing ovation, or the most, lines, or the lead role - it’s about an eclectic group of artists coming together, and trusting each other’s judgement while following the director’s lead. Even the director can’t afford to let his/her ego get in the way of the work.

Personally, I enjoy having the students work in an ensemble. This curtails much of the immaturity that goes with the egotism. Everyone’s roles are equal, they are only as strong as the weakest link, so instead of hoarding all the gimmicks that will enable only one to shine, they share the best of each other knowing that the whole performance will be enhanced.”

3. I feel certain my questions cannot cover all that one would wish to say on such a broad subject. If you feel that there are any other pertinent points or challenges I have left out, please feel free to list them here.

Answer: “I enjoy teaching and the students. But I also keep quite a distance from them and don’t share much of my personal life with them. It seems they create a much more interesting life for myself than the one I lead. This philosophy allows me to be much more objective with them and no one feels like they “own” me because he/she has befriended me. It’s easier for me to make decisions that are for the good of the group and not the individual. It also helps when they get ready to move on; letting go is a little easier for them. What they will never know is how difficult it still is for me.

Teaching is heartbreaking under the best of circumstances and when dealing with young artists, it makes teachers even more vulnerable. You work with them during and after school, you see them more than their parents do, they talk to you (and trust you)

more than they will with/to their parents, and they'll confide in you. They'll take you places you NEVER wanted to go - but you have, and the best you can provide is what you know, and, depending on the confidence, you (thankfully) may have never had experience with this dilemma before."

Mrs. Roupas brings up a completely new perspective on the teacher/student experience that has not been mentioned earlier - the relationship between a student and theatre teacher is different from any other teacher/student relationship, along with listing more specific ways to train the students in the art of theatre, such as ensemble acting and slightly more specific limits on what is allowed on stage.

### **Mrs. Nancy Curtis**

Mrs. Curtis opted to discuss these questions with the researcher in person, in hopes of providing a specific answer. The questions put to her were the same.

1. What is the critical attribute to teach to a student who is just beginning the study of acting in your opinion? Why?

"Despite the depth of the question, the answer is simple. What the students must learn is that the empirical idea of right and wrong does not exist in the theatre. There are only interpretations that can be argued as more valid or less valid. If we can give our students this simple lesson, they will then have the courage to do anything on stage that we ask of them. So many students fear to speak up in class because of a fear of embarrassment, specifically embarrassment born from being wrong. If we can eliminate this fear, the students will experiment, and therefore grow. If not, they will hide from a challenge in this the class the same as they would from any other."

2. What concepts or tasks do they need to grasp before understanding the critical attribute? For example, are there four factors one should focus on, or more, or less?

“The same answer applies. Because once you start them on this path of openness, you can simply use the drills found in books to teach the technical aspects; tongue twisters to teach diction, breathing exercises that show how to properly use the diaphragm, improvisation exercises to encourage creativity, questions to ask during text analysis, etc. Once they grasp that this isn’t right and wrong, that it is more than right and wrong, they can literally be taught to do anything on stage.”

3. I feel certain my questions cannot cover all that one would wish to say on such a broad subject. If you feel that there are any other pertinent points or challenges I have left out, please feel free to share them now.

“No. The answer really is that simple. They must learn to accept ambiguity, and they will be in a bigger world in which they can focus in the theatre.”

### **Summary**

According to the three responding teachers, classroom environment is the critical attribute in teaching theatre. The “ambiguity” mentioned specifically by Mrs. Curtis, and alluded to by all of the teachers, is likely the reason for such a unique and unexpected answer to the research goals. In an ambiguous atmosphere, students must feel comfortable to offer an answer which, even in his or her own mind, could be debated as wrong. Creating this atmosphere is the key to fostering the creativity required for the artistic pursuit of acting.

## Chapter V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECCOMENDATIONS

#### **Summary**

The goal for this study was to identify the most effective facilitation of teaching acting. Six theatre teachers in the Virginia Beach High Schools Green Run, Bayside, First Colonial, Salem, Princess Anne, and Ocean Lakes were sent questionnaires and three responded to these questionnaires. The research was to provide the researcher with data that would serve a future theatre teacher.

The responses were compared and contrasted for the purpose of finding a commonality between the respective teachers' philosophies. Based on the similarities and differences of said responses, conclusions and recommendations were made.

#### **Conclusions**

The purpose of the surveys was to discover the critical attribute needed to teach acting. This can be extrapolated from the answers given by the theatre teachers polled. The critical attribute is best summarized as "a good classroom environment." Is such a basic answer acceptable? The connection between the three answers involves "trust," "discipline," and a "willingness to take risks." All arise from proper classroom management. The difficulty here, therefore, lies not within the craft of theatre and the sub-craft of acting (at least no more than any other creative discipline), but with the difference in the classroom, whether it arises from content or the type of student it attracts.

As to the concept needed to be grasped before understanding the critical attributes, it is clear that all three concurred more specifically, saying that students must understand

that “they are all important to the production” or “the play’s the thing.” Both ideas describe setting aside one’s ego and inhibitions, and working for a common goal that is bigger than an individual and synergistic by its nature.

The last and most open concept generated very different responses, with both the craft as a whole and the teacher as an individual being described. Mrs. Rutherford discusses the responsibility to teach across disciplines, both to sustain artistic integrity and create true relevance to whatever life the student has planned. On the other side of the spectrum, Mrs. Roupas discusses the needs of an individual teacher, especially the distance imperative to teaching and letting go of students. Both stress through these points that how involved a theatre teacher is defines their ability to teach *whatever* they wish to teach. A good theatre teacher understands what a student needs as an actor, and how those skills are applied later in life, and is personally involved with the students, but with a reasonable distance. The two separate points almost sound redundant.

### **Recommendations**

If “trust,” “discipline,” and an atmosphere that “encourages risk” are all important parts of a theatre class, then an aspiring teacher must be good with people, must have a strong sense of self-control, and must model the kind of courage that trust and risk-taking require. Students can see through mendacity - this must be done honestly and completely or it can only fail.

In assuming, in Mrs. Roupas’ and Shakespeare’s words, that “the play’s the thing,” one must provide students with a broad range of experiences that demonstrate each separate and integral part of a play. Acting cannot be taught in a vacuum - to study

acting alone will create an artistic elitist - only one with a true love and at least minimal understanding of the entire craft can ever truly concern oneself with the play as a whole.

Finally, in terms of relating to students, a teacher must be open and well-informed on the relevance of theatre within other disciplines. At the same time, a distance that does not break the trust and discipline so delicately created with a student must be maintained for the teachers comfort and stability. They must be allowed to grow and enter the world in a healthy, informed, and relevant way, and as teachers that do become very close to them, we must be prepared to lose these students as part of our world.

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## Appendix B - letter

Ms. Leslie Rutherford  
Bayside High School  
4960 Haygood Road  
Virginia Beach, VA 23455-5299

Dear Ms. Rutherford,

I am very interested in becoming a teacher of theater one day. In working towards this goal, it has occurred to me that I am ignorant of the craft of teaching acting. It is my purpose to discover more about the methods one might use to move towards that end. Therefore, I would like to ask three questions of you, those who have faced this question and learned from classroom experience. It has occurred to me that standing on the "shoulders of giants" is not exactly fair to you, but I am compiling many opinions for a paper and would gladly share this information. If you would rather I not use your name in my paper, please tell me in your response and I will honor your request.

Be as brief or as broad as you wish. If you would rather not write out your answers, you may e-mail me at [frenck@visi.net](mailto:frenck@visi.net). I have also added a self-addressed stamped envelope so that you may send these directly back to me at your convenience.

As a drama teacher, your opinion on teaching this unique subject is vital to me. Teaching acting is different from teaching anything else, and I would like to get more information on the methods used and the objectives that one teaches towards.

Sincerely,

Eric A. Frenck  
encl