

Mik Kuhlman: Teaching Philosophy

Le Jeu. The game. It's the first foundational cornerstone in the world of clown and in my approach to teaching performance. I believe in nurturing individuality through positive reinforcement. It is our quirks that are our actually our strengths. I teach students to embrace their fool and own the whole of themselves. Clown is unrelenting in finding 'game' with an unbridled desire to entertain, to make us laugh. Always to entertain. Always in relation. And although firmly rooted in the idea of laughter, it is not necessarily the clown's job to make us laugh, but rather to stir the soul.

Clown is not a noun. To say "my clown" is to say *Me*. It is to be human. To reinforce human intelligence, in the age of emerging artificial intelligence, is now a necessary step in educating our youth.

Clown teaches us how to fail but not have failure, to risk in order to delight, to be the most raw (honest and vulnerable) and to be in full relationship to the audience. Clown embraces what it means to be human.... And actors? We have to play a lot of humans!

As a society we are in the midst of owning our American complexities and embracing the diversity that actually defines us. I love the swirl we are in as we welcome new voices and new narratives bringing the whole of humanity forward. The most important thing I teach in clown, is how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

APPROACH

As a teacher I not only strive to train actors - I strive to transform them into artists. I believe in the power of the actor's individuality and diversity as necessary engines in the ecosystem of theatre.

I guide students to cultivate their breath as a life force to shine and develop presence. I encourage my students to start with personal stories anchored in deep honesty. I then ask them to share their stories while remaining open and vulnerable through guided rigorous play and experimentation.

I teach with love and tenacity. I guide my students to fall in love with each other, with themselves and the delicious fools that live within each of us.

The goal is to find connection to themselves, their partners, and their audience.

PROCESS

I introduce a bit of chaos in my beginning games to help students let go of control of their analytic minds. The goal is to learn to play, for students to trust themselves, to trust each other... and to risk. We observe, we witness, we reflect. It's a practice, not an end result we seek.

Physicality is what delineates the clown from the comedian. And truth is what delineates a good clown from a bad clown. Both physicality and truth are absolutely essential when playing clown.

I begin with the body, encouraging spatial awareness into one's posture and vulnerability with insight into their own movement signatures, then move into giving and taking weight, partnering and communication. These are all foundational tools in the physical arts. I combine classic physical comedy techniques with a study of the subtle quality of "back-brain thinking" to give my students the tools to innovate, entertain, and transform.

By cultivating our five senses and the sixth sense of intuition I provide additional cornerstone teachings of deep listening and empathy. This provides students with insight and understanding into character development, ever deepening their actor's toolbox. I next introduce the concepts of status, tension levels, escalation in emotions, in actions, and in object manipulation.

I also juxtapose the horizontal line between the clown and the audience and the Bouffon's vertical line between the sacred and the profane in order to illuminate the counter mask.

We work with the fourth wall and what it means to drop that wall. My students gain understanding of when to go deeper, when to back off, and to parse when they are creating magic and mystery, and when they are being invasive. This speaks directly to the question of consent through a performative context.

My teaching also includes study of the relationship artists have with our technologies, looking at pioneers and past masters. These include: Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, for their long-lasting innovations and influence as film began replacing Vaudeville; Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz breaking ground for women and minorities in television; and studying the extreme physical expressions of Robin Williams, Jim Carrey, Melissa McCarthy. All of these 'comedians' (and more) fall under the word 'clown.' I offer us to look at the history of Vaudeville and Variety and introduce the nuances between circus clown, hospital clown, corporate clown, and theatre clown.

And finally, I am a mentor. Once a student enters my classroom, I am invested. I help them to forge a strong foundation and invite them to seek guidance from me at any point in their future. Because they *are* our future and I want great art infused in the world. That is why I teach.