

Stuffing One's Pockets: A Teaching Philosophy for Dramatic Arts

Eric S. Kildow, MFA

"A person with only one theory is lost. He must have several, four, many! He must stuff his pockets with them as if they were newspapers, always the latest, one can live nicely among theories, one can be snugly housed among theories. If one is to get on, one needs to know that there are lots of theories."

--Bertolt Brecht

In approaching the teaching and training of theatrical artists, the above words that a young Brecht copied into his diary forms a cornerstone to successful teaching. Artists today must be strongly grounded in the theories and history of their discipline not for its own sake, but to develop an understanding of contemporary practice by tracing the initial impulses behind a movement. A beautiful work such as *Waiting for Godot* makes little sense unless one understands the existential ennui that underlies it.

As such, I work with students to begin "stuffing their pockets" by introducing theories through lecture and discussion to ensure that students have a full understanding of the tools that are being put at their disposal. A wide variety of theories and approaches to drama give the students a set of tools to begin applying to work they begin to encounter.

Aside from simply focusing on dramatic theories and history in isolation, however, I set these theories in the context of the wider political and cultural world of the time. As Agne Beijer pointed out in her lecture to the Stockholm City College, the artistic and intellectual winds of an era blow most strongly through the theatre. As dramatic arts do not exist in a vacuum, but instead are logical outgrowths of their times, I seek to ground student's theoretic knowledge in historical context, both of the theatre and the world at large.

Following this, I then encourage students to begin experimenting with these theories in their own creative work. In pedagogical terms, students not only develop this knowledge cognitively, but are taught through application to value this knowledge and become curious to obtain more. This affective domain development helps to generate artists who value their history and seek to cultivate a deeper understanding of both their art and their world.

In theatre education today, there is a split between those who champion generalist, "liberal arts" development and those who favour a professional training, "conservatory" approach. However, an either/or approach is not sufficient. Theatre artists, even the most intellectually inclined, must be able to apply the theories they learn while professionally inclined students must have a deep understanding of their practice. With the current state of the American Theatre industry, neither approach is sufficient.

Student must not only be taught material, but also the value of that material. I take a dual approach of theory and practice to successfully teach and inspire students to share my passion.