

Breaking Down the Fourth Wall

Thoughts on master class teaching for CAMP BROADWAY by Justin Greer

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Camp Broadway is aiming to set quality criteria for its master classes. The following is meant to be a helpful tool to suggest how you might go about framing your creative content for master class teaching.

It is important to know for whom you are teaching. These classes are taught for groups of beginners with an interest in theatre. As CB is a non-auditioning, interest-only program, we must tend to their abilities, which may not be very advanced. The students will mostly be non-movers, non-singers, and non-actors. As Broadway professionals, we walk in the room with the respect and attention of these kids. There is no need to prove that we know what we are doing. What we do want to do is give these kids an enhancing experience that will empower them, and not alienate. It is our job to find ways to **humanize the creative experience for them**, thereby giving our students a look into our world...a shared experience.

Camp Broadway feels that there are four headings to think about with regards to master class teaching: **AUTHENTICITY**, **COLLABORATION**, **CREATIVITY** and **ACCESS**.

AUTHENTICITY

- In theatre, whether dance, song, spoken word or physical movement is your medium, the most important aspect of the performance is **WHAT YOU ARE SAYING**. Students need to have a point of view, an opinion, emotion or thought behind what they are doing, to give their learned techniques value in the theatrical realm.
- In Musical Theatre, we tell our stories using three main techniques—dance, music and character acting... the “Triple Threat”. A student of Musical Theatre must hone their techniques in all three genres, if he or she wants to be commercially viable. The economics of commercial theatre these days limits cast size, so everyone has to do everything...at the same time.
- Linking physical action to lyric makes the piece easier to memorize. It also eliminates unmotivated dance steps, which can look typical and cheesy.

- It isn't about SMILING (although that helps). It's about POINT OF VIEW. What each individual student has to bring to the work is what will make THEIR work SPECIAL and different from everyone else...and we WANT that.
- Throughout the combination, the plot of the show is explained, and the primary ideas of **story telling through movement and music** are expressed. The students base their performance on various characters from the show, and the exploration of those characters involves moving their bodies in ways they aren't used to.

COLLABORATION

- I believe very strongly in curricular connections in this work, which is why I challenge and question the students throughout about vocabulary, history, and cultural relevance. In working with your students, try to remember that our art comes out of current events, societal tastes and cultural norms. Art is what a civilization gives to history. Use your classes to open up dialogues into time periods, historical events, emotional journeys, mores and customs of days gone by, or cultural differences. All these and more can be fully explored (and indeed SHOULD be fully explored) while working on a piece of art, regardless of its genre.
- The use of cultural images while teaching will also give the kids helpful landmarks for memorization of the piece.
- Don't let it be a competition (there's plenty of time for that in the real world). Let it be a learning experience by challenging them to see what catches their eye, and then ask WHY does it catch their eye?? The kids learn from each other, as well as from the teacher. It's a good thing.

CREATIVITY

- Using images to which the students can relate helps them find their "in" to the piece. It is important to come to the work from a place that is personal.
- The idea for these classes is empowerment of the student to use their own creativity and imagination to freely form the primary shapes for whatever number you are presenting. Through this contribution, the students feel a sense of ownership of the choreography, which is as easy as the students themselves create...plus it looks cool.

ACCESS

- Through your classes, you provide the kids important access to the world of Broadway, to the show you are teaching, and to YOU, the individual. This is a really important thing to remember. Yes, they are singing and dancing and acting, but they are learning from YOU. There is a veil of mystery that covers us and what we do, and through your teaching, you lift that veil just a little bit.
- Build in time for questions and answers at the end of your session. It is as much a part of your students' experience as the content of the class. It gives the kids a chance to know you as a person, which further lifts that veil.
- With the grind of performing eight shows a week, we sometimes forget what an exciting experience it is for these kids to see a show, yes...but to see YOU (someone they KNOW) in that show... is an incredibly powerful experience. One thought might be to come up with a secret gesture that you share with the kids from the stage. It enlivens your show, and is more special than you can imagine for your students.
- Think about things that kids might not know about your show, whether that is vocabulary, backstage stories, or unknown backstory for various characters or scenes in the show...and find ways to make that accessible and relevant to their lives.
- How does what we do on stage relate to real life? We always play roles, no matter what we are doing.

When you are in the business of illusion, there is a kind of mystery that does enshroud us...a gilded pedestal. When we allow kids to be present with us in our world of illusion...THAT's the hook. Yes, your master class should challenge your students to think outside the box, follow directions, work as a team, creatively solve a problem, move with rhythm, understand dynamics of music and movement, learn new specialized vocabulary, and gain further exposure to an art form that the students already love. But Camp Broadway proclaims that we create future audience goers, not future performers, and we the master class teachers can truly create a challenging creative experience while combining this ineffable celebrity. It is a powerful combination, and can make for a magical class, that will remain with these kids for the rest of their lives.