

Professionalism within the Theatre Rehearsal Process

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### Professionalism within the Theatre Rehearsal Process

As a senior entering the theatre workforce, professionalism stands as the lesson from the BSC theatre department I will hold closest when departing Birmingham. Theatre develops from bodies working towards a common goal over an extended timeframe. Professionalism provides the structure for this ambition by recognizing the interdependent collaboration of the company, upholding that a production advances as far as its most lagging member. As a result, professionalism acknowledges the production as bigger than any individual but also as requiring the best effort from every individual. Recognizing theatre's hyper contingency, professionalism creates an environment that enables all to do their best work in pursuit of a shared priority.

Note to the reader: Because the majority of my BSC theatre experience stems from acting and because I am female, this paper approaches professionalism within the rehearsal process from the female actor's perspective, resulting in exclusive feminine pronoun usage. Though perceived from the female actor's perspective, the claims on professionalism also apply to the masculine gender and to other roles within the theatre company. In addition, professionalism transcends theatre, finding application in outside work and collaborative environments.

Professionalism derives from respect grounded in humbleness. Through respecting the group, the process, the craft, and oneself, professionalism allows a company to develop a shared goal. This respect stems from viewing the production as bigger than the individual but also from regarding the individual as an essential component of the production. With the production paramount, the individual puts the production's needs before her needs. This prioritizing separates the actor from entitlement; the actor owes nothing but respect, and the actor owes nothing but her best effort. As Uta Hagan writes in *Respect for Acting*, "We must accept the fact that the theatre is a communal adventure. ...[T]he more we need each other's professional

comradeship, the better the chance we have of making theatre. We must serve the play by serving each other” (Catron 25). This collective approach allows all to do their best work by creating an environment of respect and shared priority.

The first lesson in professionalism is showing up. Physical presence matters. Work takes existence through the body. Theatre, a collaboration composed of many bodies, upholds this claim, relying on the coordinated presence of the company. If one person fails to show up, the operation weakens, thus progress slows. If enough bodies do not show up, progress ceases. For example, an actor’s absence at rehearsal causes the scenes in which the actors appears to either not be rehearsed or to be rehearsed deficiently with the absent actor’s contrived presence. Furthermore, this absence later leads to a schedule alternation, taking time that would have be spent rehearsing another scene to informing the absent actor of the missed rehearsal’s progress. Valid absences exist such as illness or loss of a loved one just as invalid absences exist such as a hangover or not setting an alarm. Nevertheless, valid or invalid, absence hinders progress.

Showing up is not enough. *When* one shows up also holds importance. For that *when* to be professional, it means arriving early. First semester freshman year, theatre upper-class students told me to arrive 15 minutes before call. I have repeated the same information to freshmen over the years. When the schedule states rehearsal begins at 7:00p.m., it means rehearsal begins with each person in ready position at 7:00p.m. The responsibility falls to the actor to arrive in proper time. For many actors, 15 minutes offers a safe duration to arrive and to situate oneself. Arriving past call or being unprepared at call is an absence; one is not present and is therefore hindering progress and disrespecting the company’s time. As Tom Markus writes in *An Actor Behaves*, “You owe it to your fellow actors to be prompt. If a play has a cast of twelve and you’re five minutes late, the loss is sixty minutes of collective rehearsal time” (65).

Furthermore, just as the actors are expected to begin on time, the directors at BSC, whether faculty or student, return that regard and end rehearsal on time.

By beginning and ending at scheduled times, both the company members' time and the rehearsal's time receives equal value. People lead full lives, especially on a college campus. A reliable schedule allows people to better manage those lives and to coordinate their multiple schedules around a shared goal. In addition, busyness carries an inclination towards stress, and college departments contain ultra busy people. When someone's time is disrespected, such as a student losing an hour of planned studying due to a captive event extending past its allotted time, resentment follows. By the rehearsal process respecting the individual's time, the individual can better respect the rehearsal process and her fellow individuals within that process.

When and how a person arrives communicates where rehearsal falls on her priority list. Arriving early and prepared states, "This rehearsal is a valued priority." Arriving late and unprepared states, "I have more important things to be doing, and my time is more important than yours." BSC President Gen. Charles C. Krulak wrote in *Inside Higher Education*, "You can pretend to care but you can't pretend to be there." In theatre, neither care nor presence can be faked, no matter how talented the actor. Both are communicated by when and how an actor arrives at rehearsal. The actor continues relaying the rehearsal's relation to her life through her conduct during rehearsal.

Just as *when* one shows up holds importance, *how* one shows up— physically, mentally, and emotionally— also bears significance. Due to the interdependency of theatre, arriving unprepared distracts and impedes not only the unready actor but also her fellow actors, degenerating the progress of the scene and the production as a whole. In contrast, arriving prepared enables all to do their best work. Physically an actor must be well rested, properly feed,

suitably dressed, not hungover, and in proper physical shape for her role. Mentally an actor must be focused on the task at hand. Emotionally she must be prepared to undertake the task.

Collective readiness places the company in focused neutrality, a state of pure potential energy, from which they can go anywhere, optimally towards the director's vision.

Arriving physically prepared indicates forethought and equips the body to step into character. An actor attempting to get into character in an unprepared body mirrors fitting her character's shoes over her personal shoes; a failed endeavor. The character's shoes cannot fit, and the actor's foundation for the rehearsal lies incompetent. This physical restriction extends to the actor's scene partners, digressing the progress of the scene and, by association, the production as a whole. As Markus explains, "[Y]our poor work will affect those you work with and the collective work suffers as well" (74-5). Just like threads in a length of fabric, each actor is bound to all other actors. For one thread to move forward, all threads must move forward or the material shreds.

Arriving emotionally and mentally prepared allows the actor to be fully present in the rehearsal space. If an actor is emotionally sorting out an argument with her parent or mentally in the library writing an essay, she erects a barrier between actor and character and also one between actor and scene partner, blocking communion and progress. . Carrying mental and emotional baggage into the theatre equals tracking in mud. It is mucky, disrespectful, and everyone steps in it, making one person's mess everyone's problem. As Constantine Stanislavski wrote in *Building a Character*, "Leave your dust and dirt outside. Check your little worries, squabbles, petty difficulties with your outside clothing – all the things that ruin your life and draw your attention away from your art" (251-52). Baggage must be left outside the theatre, not brought in as clutter for all to trip over.

How one achieves readiness remains the responsibility of the individual. Physical preparation derives from tangible labor, running the gamut of wearing suitable clothing to rehearsal to regularly exercising in order to fulfill the demands of an active character. Mental and emotional readiness requires subjective methodology, a psychic conditioning that allows an actor to partition her personal life before entering the theatre. As Markus states, “Respect your work enough to prepare yourself for it” (74). These preparatory procedures are not exact sciences, especially the mental and emotional priming; instead, they are practices particular to the individual learned over time. When collectively enacted, these preparations enable all to do their best work, thereby allowing the production to encounter its potential.

Theatre obligates multiple people with varying personalities and backgrounds to work together in amity. This cooperation requires effectively and tactfully dealing with people, a task often aggravated by theatre’s limelight attraction that evokes the best and the worst from people: creativity and empathy, egomania and drama. Combined with human nature’s general dissonance, these qualities bond and polarize companies. Conflict is the essence of theatre, but for a production to function, this conflict must remain within the scripted staging, not within the company.

Division degenerates theatre by dissembling the cogs of theatre’s interdependent gears, the company members themselves. An actor must steer away from spawning exclusion derived from frustration and insulation produced from favoritism. Both perpetuate division through instilling an “us” and “them” mentality. For a united production to emerge, a united company must exist. Markus writes, “The theatre is a cooperative art form in which everyone must find ways to coexist and contribute. Civilities are the lubrication that helps the workplace run smoothly, and they create a working environment in which openness, mutual respect, and

cooperation are the norms” (64). Everyone does not have to be best friends. In fact, some people will never like each other, but for the sake of the production, each person must value and respect all others as colleagues and as artists.

At BSC, I have worked with both headaches and joys. I have worked with people who I prefer to be in separate buildings from at all times, whose being reduces me to a body holding in a scream, and whose presence blinds me to why I choose theatre as a vocation. Many more times, I have worked with people at who excite, inspire, challenge and humble me, who wow me with fearlessness and discovery, and who reinforce my decision to dedicate my life to the boards. I have learned to work with both ends of the spectrum with the awareness that personalities and work ethics spark wherever two people meet. Whether those sparks flash from clicking or clashing, both people must treat the other with respect in order to make room for the production.

Minding ones boundaries aids in considerably dealing with others. Actors act. They do not direct, and they do not manage. Those responsibilities belong to the director, stage manager, and company manager. For these reasons, actors do not govern others’ behavior but are instead responsible for themselves. These boundaries give each actor personal space in which to grow according to her pace and to the director’s vision. By restricting focus to the individual, an actor can pour her undivided energy into her character with the discernment that her acting process is where her responsibility begins and ends. In addition, remaining within one’s boundaries reduces the risk of stepping on another person’s toes and spurring unnecessary conflict. As Markus states, “Respect the actors you work with by letting them do their work while you do yours” (87). Of course, the cardinal rule persists that an actor never gives another actor notes. She instead restricts judgment to her own progress.

In addition to courteously interacting with others, an actor must remain supportive of the company and of the production in order to sustain commitment. Creating a production within a college theatre department requires months of long rehearsals after long classes followed by long nights of schoolwork. This commitment requires perspective and enthusiasm. Perspective reminds people why they signed onto the project, and enthusiasm provides stamina for completing the venture. As I often tell people in regards to theatre, “You have to love it, because it takes too much out of you if you don’t.” Dismantling perspective and draining enthusiasm separates company members from the production’s purpose and from their purpose within the project, removing the foundation of the undertaking. A supportive outlook sustains perspective and enthusiasm. Remaining supportive means believing in the production and in the company. It means trusting the production’s pursuit and its company members. Being supportive also means taking pride in the project despite one’s opinion on the quality of the work or of the people involved. An actor’s response to “How is the show going?” should be an unwavering “Great.”

As a creative craft, theatre survives and flourishes through positivity. Theatre is creation. Creation, a positive force, moves outwards and upwards, filling the space, fueling the production’s growth. Negativity is not only creativity’s opposite; it is also its antidote, cancelling and digressing growth, jeopardizing the production. For this reason, actors must enter rehearsal with a positive attitude in order to achieve forward motion instead of regression. A positive attitude connects to leaving baggage outside the theatre, reducing the risk of carrying in negativity. A positive attitude also links to tactfully dealing with company members to avoid dividing the group and degrading company members. Furthermore, because theatre transmits empathy, actors are usually highly empathetic people, which incline them to absorb surrounding



emotions. This transferral heightens the need for positivity; one negative vibe can sour the entire rehearsal.

Theatre's aliveness requires adaptability and flexibility. Theatre exists in the present through the bodies of breathing people. This aliveness subjects theatre to the forces of the moment. Despite plans, schedules, and rehearsals, things will not consistently run according to design. Rehearsal times will shift. Cast mates will take ill. Sets will break. Staging will alter. As situations adjust so must the actor, keeping the shifting current flowing smoothly and the production's progress alive.

Ultimately, professionalism offers structure and common ground, but we are humans living unpredictable lives, making professionalism an ideal, a fiction, a work-place fairytale. We will miss rehearsal. We will arrive unprepared. We will lash out at cast mates. We will hold zero faith in productions. Life will punch us in the gut, leave its fist in our stomach, and even after years of emotional conditioning, we will carry that baggage into the theatre. Though we strive for professionalism, we never consistently enact it. Nevertheless, the pursuit remains worthwhile. Through reaching, we stretch ourselves, closing the gap between fairytale and reality, and for brief, rare moments, we do make contact with the ideal.

Theatre requires breath, freedom, exploration, fearlessness, and vulnerability. Professionalism provides the structure for this movement to develop by enacting respect, humbleness, accountability, preparation, positivity, support, and adaptability— qualities derived from regarding the production as bigger than the individual but also as requiring the best effort from every individual. Though professionalism may never be consistently reached, its pursuit enables all to do their best work and allows the production to encounter its potential. With this

education in professionalism, I will graduating from BSC with the training to enter the theatre workforce as a professional collaborator and artist.

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