

**Teaching Introduction to Acting at Bronx Community College:
From Shakespeare to SZA**

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To cite this article: Mareneck, E. C. (2018). Teaching introduction to acting at Bronx Community College: From Shakespeare to SZA. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 14(2), 1-15.

Abstract

Diversity has been the focus of countless books, articles, and conferences in higher education. Unfortunately, for many of us in the majority culture, this issue never required too much investment of time or concern because we were already benefitting from the existing system of racial and/or gender privilege. In this essay I recount my awakening as a teacher and theatre artist when I began teaching “Introduction to Acting” at Bronx Community College (BCC). At a majority minority institution, I came face to face with my own ignorance, complacency, and sense of entitlement. In order to engage students whose age, background, culture and perspective differed from mine, I needed to familiarize myself with the voices of youth culture, the theatrical traditions of Latinx, African-American, Asian, Caribbean peoples; as well as performance styles and acting methodologies outside the traditional Eurocentric repertoire. As a result, not only has my vision of theatre and theatre education transformed, but also my artistic and social consciousness.

Key words: diversity, teaching, theatre, acting, culturally relevant pedagogy, community college

As I stood in front of my students that first day of teaching Introduction to Acting at Bronx Community College (BCC) the City University of New York, I quoted theatre great Sanford Meisner on what acting is: “To live truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (Meisner & Longwell, 1987, p. 15). I was met with twenty-eight blank stares. I continued, “Of course he studied with the father of the modern acting method, Konstantin Stanislavsky.” Nothing. I started to sweat. “How many of you have seen a play?” I inquired. One student raised her hand.

“What play did you see?” I asked.

“I saw *The Lion King*.”

“What did you think?”

“It was okay.”

“Oh, I loved the *Lion King*, the opening made me cry.” Silence. I needed a new tactic.

“How many of you have seen movies?”

All the hands shot up.

“Which ones?”

“*Fast and Furious, Rush Hour, Men in Black, Love and Basketball, Scarface.*”

“Who are some of your favorite actors?”

The students’ list of Hollywood celebrities emphasized actors of color.

“Well, most of those actors trained in Stanislavski technique!” I told them. They didn’t seem impressed. This was going to be a long semester.

As it turned out, it was long, but also rewarding. Teaching acting at BCC has given me a broader vision of what theatre is, and has transformed my teaching methods to include cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. This paper is my journey from a culturally *biased* view of theatre education to a culturally *based* view, and one in which I am still actively involved.

I am from the Baby Boomer generation. I grew up white and female in an upper middle-class suburb of Chicago, went to an Ivy League university, and continued on to earn my MFA in acting. I made my professional acting debut at the Public Theatre in New York City in the mid-1980s. I spent 25 years acting professionally at many storied off- and off-off Broadway theatres, as well as regionally from Boise to Buffalo. I experimented in a variety of performance-based genres including improvisation, original one-woman shows, stand-up comedy, original song and musical book writing. I also briefly taught acting at the New School and SUNY Purchase. As such, I felt confident that teaching this basic acting course at Bronx Community College would be like second nature to me. However, it was clear from the first day that along with my professional and creative expertise, I also brought generational, cultural, socioeconomic and ethnic baggage that weighed more than I had ever considered. As it turned out, I was woefully unprepared to teach acting to students whose cultural references, priorities and positionality in society differed than my own.

When I told the students that they had to get up from their seats and come onstage, there was audible disappointment.

“UHHHHH”

“Come ON...”

“What the f....?”

Some students looked to each other and some to me with a “Do-we-really-HAVE-to-do-this?” face. “You can’t learn acting from your seat,” I told them. “You have to feel it in your body.” The stage was not big enough for all 28 students, so half of them stayed on the auditorium floor. I flashed back to acting classes at Brandeis where I received my graduate training: twelve students comfortably spread out in a studio with mats and sprung wood floors.

As we moved into a circle, the students started swaying, giggling and chatting with others next to them. I saw a few students looking at their cell phones.

“Put those phones away!” I cried.

Some reluctantly did. One male student acted as if he didn’t hear me.

“The body is the actor’s instrument through which the character physically, vocally, emotionally and spiritually comes alive,” I told them as I began the physical warm-up: moving first our hands, wrists, elbows, shoulders, neck, head, then the feet, ankles, knees, and hips. There was more than the usual giggling when we got to the hip circles, and a few students started dancing. I moved on to the vocal warm up: Rolling down the spine on an “aaaah” and back up on an “ooooh.” I heard a few groans and an audible yawn.

“Good, let the sound out!” I chirped. We started blowing out our lips, “like a five-year-old with a toy car... B-b-b-b-b-b-b-b.” Half the class began cracking up, their bodies collapsing in guffaws. “I know this makes you look stupid,” I said. “As an actor you have to be willing to look stupid on stage six nights a week!” I had all my usual pat lines down, but they weren’t landing as I expected.

Bronx Community College (BCC) is part of the City University of New York (CUNY) and is situated in one of the poorest Congressional districts in the country (Food Research and Action Centre [FRAC], 2016). Nearly 92 percent of students at BCC were awarded grant or scholarship aid from the federal government, state/local government, or the institution in 2014-2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015-16). BCC is an open access, majority minority, Hispanic Serving College (HSC). Over 60 percent of the students identify as Hispanic, 33 percent as African American, five percent Asian or Pacific Islander, and two percent are white (Bronx Community College, 2017). At CUNY Community Colleges in the fall semester of

2017, 40 percent of undergraduates were non-native speakers of English, and almost one in four were born outside the US (CUNY OIRA, 2017). At CUNY in general, and BCC in particular, students come from diverse communities and cultures, and there are many whose families are at or below the poverty line. Students living in poverty face another set of difficulties on top of their academic, social, familial and professional commitments, which include food scarcity, lack of childcare, lack of access to adequate medical care and housing insecurity. Many of our students attend college while holding down full-time jobs and juggling family responsibilities. BCC students include single parents, veterans, the homeless, the formerly incarcerated, the undocumented, and first-generation college students. These are students who come to college possessing powerful knowledge about performances of everyday life, and I tried my best to engender the atmosphere of trust and honesty so essential for an acting class, but how could I expect them to be honest when I wasn't? I judged them for their lack of familiarity with the world of commercial theatre. I wanted them to take time outside of class to read plays, write academic papers, rehearse with their scene partners, and memorize their lines. I wanted them to conform to a standard of behavior that I felt comfortable with. Here were these students who had learned to play transforming roles long before enrolling in a theatre class with amazing stories to tell, yet when they entered my classroom, I had no clue how to support, acknowledge and welcome them into academic discourse.

Since that first class, I have been actively revising and developing my curriculum as well as my teaching methodology in order to better serve the needs of these unique students. I have drawn from the theories of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995), culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010) and reality pedagogy (Emdin, 2016) as well as the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire and theatrical techniques of Augusto Boal and Jonathan Fox.

However, on that first day in class I was faced with a question: How do I spark interest in these students? I tried one of my favorite warm-ups, tongue twisters,

“Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”

Everyone repeated it, in unison, starting slowly and gradually speeding up.

“Faster!” I yelled as I ran around the circle, modeling and correcting articulation.

I wanted full participation, but by the end, three-quarters of the class had given up.

Next, we played a game called “zip, zap, zop.” Everybody stands in a circle, and one person claps their hands together and sends a “zip” to another person. The second person receives it and quickly turns to a third person to whom she passes a “zap.” This person sends off a “zop” and so it continues from there at lightning speed until someone zips when they should have zapped and they are out of the game. Play continues until only one person is left. We started off, but the first “zip” went to someone who wasn’t paying attention.

“Come on people, focus!” I hollered.

The second try was successful until someone issued a “zap” that sounded more like a “zop” and several people called foul. Just as we got started again, the zip went to two people, and they got into an argument, each claiming it was meant for them. After a few more false starts, we moved on to something else. Looking back, I can see why it might not have been the right icebreaker for these digital natives who are more used to watching screens than people; in the same way, I had never considered how difficult tongue twisters might be for non-native English-speaking students. My set of games and exercises, like my assumptions about college students, were outdated, shallow and geared for white, middle-class undergraduates.

By the time I finished class on that first day, one question loomed: how was I to make an introductory course on acting relevant to 21st Century African-American and Latino college

students? I began to explore four interconnected areas of inquiry: One was generational knowledge: I had to update my materials with new plays and performance styles to which my students could relate. In order to do that, I had to learn about youth culture. Hip-hop (whose birthplace is a stone's throw from our campus) remains a strong influence for young people because, as one of my students said, "it's a universal language...but it speaks about the issues of community." Another area was multicultural knowledge—I had to go outside the Western canon and increase my knowledge and appreciation of Latinx, Caribbean, African, and Asian theatre. Related to that was my experiential knowledge—I needed to explore the enormous body of theatrical and performative practices that were not limited to a script and a stage. Oral traditions, ritual practices, theatre used for healing, empowerment, resistance, change and social justice might have broad appeal to my students. The final area of inquiry was self-knowledge. In order to be an effective teacher, I had to examine my own ignorance, cultural bias, and privilege.

I had lived in New York City for 20 years before teaching at Bronx Community College and had had no idea how different this landscape was from the landscape I lived in 90 blocks away. I never realized how comfortable I was living in my homogenous world, where difference was tolerated because it didn't threaten my financial, social or personal stability—where I could pay lip service to democratic ideals from the comfort of my socially mobile, middle-class life. I had become aware that much of what I treasured about theatre had to do with a dividing line—between actor and audience, professional and amateur, the trained and untrained artist. I prized my professional acting credits and my academic credentials. They put me in an elite club over whose protected walls I could peer disdainfully at those "alternative" types of theatre and knowledge. However, acting classes are supposed to be about having a safe space to explore one's body, one's imagination and one's voice. How could I create this for my students while

hanging on to my old ideas of what that looked and felt like? Could I honestly imagine a space in which I expected my students to take risks, when I was afraid to? Slowly, it became clear that the obstacles I faced weren't my students' lack of knowledge and preparation, but my own. I was going to have to step outside my comfort zone as a teacher, an actor and a person.

My goal was to make my pedagogy more inclusive and my acting training more diverse. The theories of educators Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and Chris Emdin, center on the idea of teaching ethnically diverse students with culturally relevant material for their academic success. The basis for this belief is that students have more academic success when they can relate the material to their own lives. "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" was the term Dr. Ladson-Billings coined in the mid-1990s (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 143). Dr. Geneva Gay built upon this theory, adopting the term 'culturally responsive teaching' and explained it as, "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Dr. Chris Emdin's theory of 'Reality Pedagogy' goes even further and "positions the student as the expert in his or her own teaching and learning, and the teacher as the learner." (Emdin, 2016, p. 27). These theories intersect with student-centered or experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) where students' own frames of reference are used as problems to be solved and examples for learning academic skills and concepts. Harking back to Freire's (2014) idea of "problem-posing theory and practice [which] take the people's historicity as their starting point" (p. 60). What had become apparent in my own classroom, the more personally relevant the material, the more invested the students were in the learning experience. For example, one of my first assignments when working on Shakespearean monologues is to explore the text by translating Shakespeare's words into the actor's own vernacular. My students seemed mystified

by this assignment, so we worked on it in class. But even then, students kept asking me to clarify what I meant by “in your own words.”

“You mean we can curse?” One young woman asked.

“Yes!”

“For real?”

“Yes! I want you to use the kind of language that you would use if you were talking to a close friend *today*.”

“Word!”

The students who went all in were few and far between, but their performances took my breath away. They used fewer words than Shakespeare, but the emotional reality was true and powerful. In fact, the unique choices my students make in their portrayals of well-known characters like Hamlet or Juliet in Shakespeare to Troy or Cory from *Fences*, often make me feel as if I am seeing the piece for the first time.

One of the theatre practices I studied was Playback Theatre, which I brought back to my class. “Playback Theatre gives voice and visibility to especially those most often overlooked and ignored” (Fox, 2007, p. 91). In Playback Theatre, the performance is based on a story shared by an audience member. Members of the company without rehearsal or planning then enact this story immediately. At the end of the performance, the storyteller can ask the performers to replay the story if s/he feels it did not capture its essence. Playback is a communal event—the audience becomes part of the performance through interaction and observation. This form of dramatic storytelling reveals the invisible thread that connects people to one another through their stories. It is powerful in its simplicity. At the end of an evening of Playback Theatre both audience and actors feel transformed by the experience.

When I introduced Playback theatre in my acting class, we started with exercises that got everyone involved. Since Playback relies on physicality, sound and rhythm more than language, the students practiced enacting some short vignettes without words. Then it came time to tell a longer story, and no one stepped up. My prompt was to tell a story of something wonderful or terrible that had happened to them, but when I got no takers, I narrowed it down to just *any* event that had happened to them. Finally, one student volunteered to be the storyteller. He told of how he almost missed a math exam that morning because he overslept. The story was presented as an epic battle, which pitted the hero (the student) against the villain, (the student's alarm clock). This retelling ignited the room in laughter, and after that the momentum built until students were stepping over each other to tell and act out their stories.

Around the same time as I began teaching acting at BCC, a friend of mine told me, "People are changing the way they look at theatre from commodity to community." As I began to meet and study with practitioners of inclusive, multicultural, socially conscious theatre, the reality of her statement rang true for me. I met Drs. Sharell Luckett and Tia Shaffer whose book, *Black Acting Methods* (2017) presents "African-centered origin to theatre and theatre making" (Luckett & Shaffer, 2017, p.1), which I include on my reading list. I met Dr. Kashi Johnson whose non-traditional theatre course, *Act Like You Know: Hip Hop Theatre* empowers students "to create and perform original work" using Hip-hop elements and aesthetics at Lehigh University (Johnson, 2018).

I saw a musical collaboration by two community-based theatre companies: Teatro Pregones based in the Bronx (which in 2014 merged with Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre and is now known as Pregones/PRTT) and Roadside Theatre based in central Appalachia (Roadside Theater, 2018). The musical was *BETSY!* about a Bronx-born Puerto Rican singer who discovers

she has Scotch-Irish roots. I was introduced to the artistic directors, Dudley Cocke of Roadside and Rosalba Rolòn of Pregones, who told me the story of their nearly six-year collaboration on the project. They spoke of the many versions the play went through to emerge as the production I saw. I attended the production several times and brought my students to see it. The theme of identity was central to the story, breaking open stereotypes and demythologizing the American identity to show how we are all more interconnected than we think. At every performance before the show, Rolòn and Cocke came out to welcome the audience and invite them in to be “part of the show.” After every curtain call, company members and the audience joined to sing together as the theatre cleared out. This was not the kind of theatre that I was familiar with. Both Rolòn and Cocke have created theatres where the artists, musicians, and storytellers come together to celebrate, revitalize, and participate in their communities’ life and heritage. Both companies have been thriving for decades with a similar purpose: That art not be a static representation of ideas in a community, but rather an active *dialogue* with the community and its people. They are dedicated to creating theatre that speaks to everyone (Pregones Theatre, n.d.). These companies are not looking for fame and fortune, but freedom to tell their stories. Seeing *Betsy!* changed the way I saw theatre and taught me that there are many powerful ways to tell a theatrical story.

Next semester, I’m scheduled to teach Introduction to Acting again, as I have for several years now. Respecting student differences while creating a sense of unity and safety in the acting classroom remains my chief goal. I want mine to be an acting class that provides a fertile environment for students to explore, discover, express and experiment with the embodiment of their truth. As I include more material that relates to their experience, such as Hip-hop and Spoken Word, I witness the confidence and creativity in their work. I hear the hush that falls

over the class when someone gives a great performance and see the pride in the actor after he or she has given their all, made themselves vulnerable, and let the audience see their truth onstage. Whether the performer is acting a scene from Shakespeare or performing a song by SZA, when they connect deeply with the material, even the shiest person transforms into a confident performer.

Teaching at BCC has taught me not to expect everyone to agree on what is the best way to reach and teach students. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. My perspective on theatre, teaching, acting, and diversity has changed. Thanks to my students, words like community, freedom, and cultural pride are now embedded in my theatre vocabulary.

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